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# ORIENTALISM AND THE BALLETS RUSSES

## ABSTRACT

In its twenty seasons of performances (1909 – 1929), the Ballet Rousse of Sergei Diaghilev presented before the eyes of cultivated Europeans an evolving figure of the female dancer. On the one hand, there was the ballerina in the style of *ballet blanc*; on the other, the “harem dancer” in a fashion envisioned by the notions of “Orientalism.” The romantic ballerina symbolizing the “soul” of the West rose on her toes, as the “harem dancer” representing the “body” of the East sank to the floor. The development of this figure is traced chronologically in three pairs of contrasting ballets: “La Sylphide” (1832) and “Le Corsaire” (1826); “Giselle” (1841) and “La Bayadere” (1877): “La Sylphide” (1909) and “Scheherazade” (1910). This distinction supports Theophile Gautier’s division of the ballet dancer into two types—the “Christian” and the “Pagan.”

## I

Although Orientalism is a popular and even fashionable topic in academic studies, certain aspects have been neglected. In the simplest definition Orientalism is the re-presentation of ideas about the East based not on European experience and memory but on fantasy and pre-conception. This approach has proved fruitful in delineating the gap between the European construction and the Oriental reality ; but the emphasis has been on the social sciences, or to some extent, literary studies--the arts, especially the performing arts, have been slighted. And among the neglected ballet has proved to be the orphan.

There is a further complication. Unfortunately, for most cultured people, ballet since the 1920's has proven a moribund art form, even more restricted in its appeal than opera, perhaps something like Latin—or Greek! Apart from a seasonal “Nutcracker” for children, or another production of “Swan Lake,” many would be hard pressed to name any other work. As a picture of the Orientalist East the ballet goes virtually unacknowledged, occasionally mentioned in an obscure dissertation. But in the period roughly extending from 1820 – 1930 ballets inspired by Orientalist notions held stage center for an enraptured public. Among those with means the ballet was as popular as the movies, The high point of this celebrity came with the annual visits to Paris of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, from 1909 – 1929, and especially in the pre-war years of 1909 – 1914.

In the early years of the twentieth century Sergie Diaghilev's (1872-1929) company undertook to initiate Parisian audiences into the latest developments of Russian culture. Diaghilev felt himself to be a man without talents, but with a knack for getting the best out of others. In a letter to his step-mother the dazzling impresario had described himself as “a charlatan, though rather a brilliant one.” There were exhibitions of painting and staging of opera; but it was the ballets that stamped these visits as milestones. The critic Valerian Svetlov (1860-1935) wrote ecstatically: “the first season of the Diaghilev Ballet must be commemorated in letters of gold in the annals of Russian Ballet. To say it was successful is to say nothing. It was a revelation, a major event in the artistic life of Paris”

(Grigoriev 25-26). Among the composers providing scores were Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel and Prokofiev; among the designers such painters as Picasso, Matisse, Utrillo and Miro. George Balanchine, perhaps the greatest choreographer of the twentieth century, remarked that Diaghilev's Ballets Russes provided a center of artistic endeavor such as Europe had not known since the Medici courts of the Renaissance" (Balanchine II 339). In the terms of Ezra Pound, Paris at this time was "the Vortex"—the world center for high culture. Diaghilev may have been something of a con man, but he delivered the goods.

The ballets presented by the company were not the full-length story ballets audiences had come to expect, but short, one-act spectacles lasting ten to thirty minutes in which music, dancing, décor and costumes all united to play a role. (They were largely unacknowledged as instances of Richard Wagner's "*Gesamtkunstwerke*"—total art works which combined music, narrative, singing and design). Choreographers, casting about for terms to label their novel creations, came up with such hybrids as "*poeme-danse*" and "*esquisses-choreographic*," "*ballet-pantomime*" and "*tableau choreographic*" (Grigoriev 263-272). Diaghilev had urged them to "astonish" and they did their best.

The ballets of this period fell into two styles, each determined by setting. Those set in Europe (such as "*La Sylphide*" in Scotland and "*Giselle*" in the Rhineland) belong to a fairy tale style; those set in the Orient ("*Le Corsaire*" in Turkey, "*La Bayadere*" in India, and "*Scheherezade*" in Arabia) follow the Orientalist mode. Ballets with a European setting were instances of the "ballet blanc" or "white ballet," while those with an Asian exemplified Orientalism. It should be understood that at this time the East or rather the Near East was a well-established literary convention, mingling indiscriminately elements from Arabia, Persia, Egypt, Turkey and Greece (Russell 114-115). The "ballet blanc" or "white ballet" is easy enough to define—it's the first picture that comes to mind when people think of ballet: a stage full of ballerinas in diaphanous white, on their toes in a nebulous setting someplace like a moonlit glade. But the "Orient" and "Orientalism" are of course much more complex. Edward Said, a renowned scholar of the subject, provides a daunting definition: "the Orient is a re-presentation of canonical material guided by an

esthetic and executive will . . . “(177). In a more basic approach, “Orientalism” is the way in which the West imagines the East, with stress on “imagines.” The “reality” of the Orient and its “representation” in Orientalism seldom coincide. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the lotus, the flower of the Orient, is after all just a humble vegetable—namely, the onion.

The general shift in the arts from Classicism to Romanticism had a profound effect on the ballet. Indeed, it may be said that ballet was transformed. In broadest outlines Classical mythology was replaced with transcendence; heroic conflict with occult fantasy; and Classical decorum with Romantic expressivity (Dance Research 23). Within this context there was a specific change of paramount significance. Until the 1820’s the roles of males and females in the ballet were on a par; but as the century progressed the male dancer or danseur was reduced to a support for the female; his task was to lift and support the ballerina in various picturesque attitudes, interspersed with bouts of his own leaping about the stage. He was a “crane.” But the evolution of the Romantic ballerina transformed the dance and redefined the future of ballet.

This development may be traced in two distinct roles. On the one hand, there was the figure of an ever more ethereal creature symbolizing “the Soul,” specifically “the European Soul.” On the other, there was the “harem dancer” ever more carnal and licentious, steeped in depravity. These two roles are neatly epitomized in the familiar distinction between the White Swan (Odette) and the Black Swan (Odile) from Tchaikovsky’s “Swan Lake.” Gradually the ballerina assumed the postures and costume which became standard: the pointe technique, or dancing on the tips of the toes; the bouffant skirt called the tutu; the desire to create an illusion of weightlessness and effortlessness; and the association of the female dancer with such ethereal creatures of fantasy as sylphs and fairies. The dance scholar Cyril Beaumont has sketched the Romantic Ballerina as “that elusive, fascinating, mocking vision, half woman, half goddess, which haunted the imagination of so many poets, painters, writers and musicians of the last century and became their muse.” All these elements conspired to create an image of an otherworldly figure, a celestial creature suspended only for a little while

between heaven and earth. All earthiness had been purged from the figure of the Romantic ballerina; but with the residue a counter-figure had been formed—“the harem dancer”—replacing the ideal of chastity with the practice of illicit sex.

The development of these contrasting figures may be observed in some detail by contrasting three pairs of ballets in chronological order. In each pair, one ballet is domestic, set in Europe; the other is exotic, and set in Asia. (It should be kept in mind that the number of ballets in the standard repertoire is exceedingly limited—no more than a dozen or so. Each of the ballets on the chart belongs to this canonic repertoire. There have been hundreds of other ballets, but after a season or two they dropped out.)

**EUROPEAN SETTING**

“*La Sylphide*” (1832)  
Scotland

“*Giselle*” (1842)  
Rhineland

“*Les Sylphides*” (1909)  
Moonlit glade

**ASIAN SETTING**

“*Le Corsaire*” (1826)  
Turkey

“*La Bayadere*” (1845)  
India

*Scheherezade* (1910)  
Arabia

In the left column we have the setting of an idealized Europe; on the right the carnal Orient.

**II**

Few parts of Europe entranced the Romantic imagination more than Scotland—the craggy misty scenery, the Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott, figures such as the tragic Mary, Queen of Scots. One has only to turn to the music of Mendelssohn, in such works as the “Hebrides Overture,” or the Fourth, the “Scotch Symphony” to hear the gentle windswept melancholy. All these contributed to a setting both exotic and domestic. Though remote, Scotland was European, a part of one common civilization.

Appropriately enough, it is Scotland that provides the locale for “*La Sylphide*” (1832) the first Romantic ballet.

Set in a Scottish farmhouse (of baronial dimensions) the plot revolves around the intrusion on their wedding day of a sylph into the lives of James, a farmer, and Effie, his fiancée. (We must realize that in romantic ballets rustics are decorative—their days on stage devoted to character dances, not farm labor). The first act is concerned with the Sylph flirting with James and attempting to snatch his wedding ring: a supernatural creature she wants to engage in a mock marriage ceremony between a mortal and a sprite. The central number in Act I is a hauntingly ambiguous “pas de trois” (dance for three) of James dancing on his wedding day simultaneously with both women (his betrothed and the sylph). Their dance is a fusion of two planes of being—the Ideal and the Real. At the end of Act I the Sylph snatches the wedding ring and lures James into following her into a forest as the lawfully betrothed Effie collapses. The first act ends with the Sylph, visible to none but James, luring him into a wood after he abandoned his fiancée.

The second act, set in a moonlit, sylph-haunted glade becomes the prototype of the many Romantic ballets in which the Real is juxtaposed with the ideal. James and the Sylph cavort in the wood until he attempts to capture her with a magic scarf, but succeeds only in stifling her. As she is borne aloft by a flight of sister-sylphs, James hears the distant bells of Effie’s wedding procession. He is left alone having abandoned his human fiancée and inadvertently stifled the Sylph. It may be seen that the plot is a standard Romantic one, much like Keats’ “*La Belle Dame sans Merci*”—the Sylph has James “in thrall” and luring him into a forest where he is later abandoned. But for our purposes, the point to stress is the institution of marriage. The ballet opens and closes with a celebration of marriage, an institution more durable and more worthy than any illicit affair, even with a sprite.

Turning from “*La Sylphide*” to the contemporaneous “*Le Corsaire*” we leave the European world of Sir Walter Scott for the Asian one of Lord Byron’s “*Turkish Tales*” (1814), from which “*Le Corsaire*” is drawn. The work is set in Turkey and introduced

such words into English as “shah” and “harem.” Scotland with its enamored rustics, bucolic settings and ethereal sylphs has been left behind for a treacherous sea-coast plagued with pirates and flourishing slave markets. The social center appears to be a harem. Although the plot of “*Le Corsaire*” is notoriously convoluted with multiple kidnappings and bands of lecherous Turks a terse summary may be attempted.

Conrad and his fellow corsairs (pirates) shipwrecked on an island are discovered by Medora with her maiden friends. Conrad falls in love with Medora; but she and the other maidens are kidnapped and added to the Pasha’s harem. Rescuing the women the pirates take them to the Corsaire’s treasure cave, where he is drugged and the women recaptured, only to be set free and sail off . . . (It has been remarked that in “*Le Corsaire*” even the dancers are uncertain of the plot). As with “*La Sylphide*” there is a symbolic dance at the end of Act I, but it is a “*pas d’esclaves*” (a dance of the slaves) not of lovers.

The chief distinction however is that “*La Sylphide*” is firmly centered on the wedding day. The plot is entirely concerned with the violation of the wedding vow. In the last scene Effie and Gurn (a rustic admirer) admirer are joyfully espoused; but James and the Sylph, characters who attempted to slight or violate the marriage vow, are expelled from society—James left alone in the moonlit glade, the Sylph ascending into higher regions. Monogamy is maintained from start to finish.

In “*Le Corsaire*” questions of monogamy and polygamy make little sense. Among the Turks sexuality is based on ownership of property, and the slave maidens picked up at the market are most definitely property. A woman belongs to the last man who bought her and the convoluted plot reflects the dizzying rate at which sexual partners are exchanged. In Europe the marriage vow determines plot; in the Orient, it is the slave market.

Sexually the Sylph is inaccessible. One may flirt with her, pursue her, engage in tantalizing play, but never possess. The instant there is any hold on her liberty she wilts and perishes—this is in marked contrast with the slave girls whose accepted social status is bondage. Thus, the hero who lusts after slave girls may possess them; but the Sylph is

inaccessible. The only feature maintained by both styles is the costume of the ballerina—tiaras and tutus, jewels and pointe slippers. Regardless of setting, the costume has become a “uniform” serving to identify the work as a Romantic ballet.

Scotland and Turkey provide settings diametrically opposed. Scotland with its yearnings for the transcendental embodies European ideals, while Turkey with its promiscuity portrays the lecherous East. “The Lustful Turk or Lascivious Scenes from a Harem,” (1828) an epistolary pornographic novel published in the same year as “*Le Corsaire*,” has remarkable affinities with the ballet. Both share one plot. In the novel two English maidens sail to India to join their families. They are captured and taken to a harem where they are subjected to daily bouts of sex until they too crave the abuse. At last each is ready to be “the slave of a luxurious Turk” (200).

Although “*La Sylphide*” set the pattern for all future romantic ballets, it was another, namely “*Giselle*,” that gained pre-eminence. The libretto by Theophile Gautier (1811-1872) was devised for his beloved ballerina Carlotta Grisi. Like “*La Sylphide*” its setting was in the German Rhineland, a forested craggy landscape dense with Romantic is associations, renowned for such legends as the tragic love of Roland (the son of Charlemagne). It was from this region that Wagner gathered the materials for his Ring Cycle operas. “*Giselle*” swept Europe, playing Paris, London and St. Petersburg within a year and reaching the United States in five.

Although the Sylph is the first of the romantic ballerinas she lacks certain characteristics to make her the prototype. Too flirtatious and playful to engage the sympathies of the audience—she is, in short, a tease, lacking in gravitas. We never witness her human aspects, only the semi-human. But *Giselle* is ideal. In the first act she is the innocent maiden who goes mad, dying of a broken heart (or in some versions a suicide). After her death *Giselle* is transformed into a “Wili,” a melancholy spectral maiden in Germanic mythology dying of a broken heart inflicted by a faithless lover. Her phantom-like body seems a part of the air. Even after death *Giselle* rises from a grave marked by a large Christian cross to rescue her faithless lover. She leads that long train of betrayed maidens

whose sufferings fueled nineteenth-century opera and ballet. There is also a gain in dramatic intensity. The Sylph had no particular motive beyond mischief for engaging with humans; the Wilis on the other hand are motivated by revenge. They seek to capture men leading them to their destruction in a mortal dance. It was Eugene Scribe (1791-1861), a fellow playwright of Gautier, who laid the dictum that the function of every dramatic plot is to “torture” the female.

“*La Bayadere*” (the temple dancer) is closely related to “Giselle”—in fact, critics referred to it as “Giselle, East of the Suez.” Set in India “*La Bayadere*” is a pastiche of an Oriental setting with a European ethos. By featuring two contrasting heroines the ballet develops both European and Oriental notions of love. Nikiya (the temple dancer) although clothed in harem raiment is entirely European—she is faithful to Solar, her lover, and spurns the advances of the High Priest. But at the end of the first act she is poisoned by Gamzatti, daughter of the Rajah and her rival, and appears in the next two only as a spirit. Gamzatti is the direct opposite. She is a lecherous and scheming villainess who introduces a poisonous serpent into a bouquet presented to Nikiya. So great is her treachery that the gods avenge Nikiya’s death by destroying the temple and burying everyone, except Solar and Nikiya, beneath the ruins. The couple escapes and Nikiya guides him into higher ethereal regions. In simplest terms, the double plot is resolved by having the European Christian-like couple ascend to heaven, as the Orientals are crushed by the collapsing temple. In his dance criticism Gautier established a valuable distinction between the “Christian” dancer and the “Pagan” one. The first, chaste and modest in her dancing, the second carnal and voluptuous. To intensify the conflict the two figures may be juxtaposed in a single ballet.

The most famous scene in “*La Bayadere*” is commonly known as the “Kingdom of the Shades.” After Nikiya has been poisoned, Solar, in despair, smokes an opium pipe and beholds a celestial train of thirty-two ballerinas descending down a ramp to earth. The scene is visionary; it is the ultimate “white ballet.” Petipa (1822-1910), the choreographer, is said to have based the vision on illustrations by Gustave Dore (1832-1883) for the Paradiso cantos of the Divine Comedy. Solar is granted a vision of Nikiya—but a vision

realized in Christian iconography. The Christian or European revelation, even for Orientals, takes place in the Christian heaven. “The Kingdom of the Shades” is generally regarded as a touchstone of taste. Those who are not entranced are said to lack a taste for ballet.

In the third pair of ballets—“*Les Sylphides*” and “*Scheherazade*”—the distinction between ballets in the “white” style and those in the Orientalist are presented most intensely. Both are essentially plotless, focusing entirely on decor and atmosphere. In “*Les Sylphides*” the scene is immediately identified since the figure of “the Poet”, ( i.e. Chopin) surrounded by the Muses, would not be found outside Europe; on the other hand, harems, licit ones, are not found in Europe. In action, “*Les Sylphides*” is no more than a sequence of dances unfolding in some balletic heaven, but the basic situation is soon recognizable. It is, ironically enough, an etherialized harem with a single male among a bevy of diaphanous ballerinas. It is a sanitized seraglio. Balanchine has remarked, “Here, instead of characters with definite personalities and a narrative, we have simply dancers in long dresses and a danseur in white-and-black velvet, whose movements to music invoke the Romantic imagination to a story of its own” (II, 243). Without a plot there is no longer any need for the two-act structure of the traditional Romantic ballet. Instead of setting the first act in the real world and the second in the idealist, “*Les Sylphides*” commences in the ideal world. Along with a few other ballets, it established the structure of the modern one-act ballet presenting the audience with a single situation and setting to appreciate. The dancers on stage are within a state, not a plot; they are suspended.

“*Scheherazade*” on the other hand is set in an opulent harem, crowded with dancers, concubines and guards. Based as it is on “King Shahryar and his Brother,” the first tale of the “Arabian Nights,” one might expect a strong plot. But in the ballet, the plot is but pretext for an orgy and general mayhem. The Shah tests the fidelity of his harem only to discover the minute he leaves the concubines begin to cavort with the men, especially Zobeide his favorite who is smitten with a passion for the Golden Slave. Returning to discover his harem in rampant orgy, the Shah slays the Golden Slave and the concubines, as Zobeide commits suicide. It is a ballet of violet sensations not of coherent plot. There

is however one alteration between tale and ballet of great significance. In the original the wife's lover is not, as in the ballet, "a Golden Slave," but a black cook with crude features, smeared with kitchen grease and grime" (Zipes, I, 4). The ballet has expurgated the tale with some racial shuffling. It may further be proposed that lurking behind some of the Oriental characters there is a negroid ancestry--that the "orientals" are in fact "people of color." It is evident that there is a racial hierarchy with white Europeans on top, Blacks at the bottom, and Arabs in between. We may note the Europeans cast their "people of color" as Arabs, who in turn cast theirs as African blacks.

Early audiences were scandalized by the overt sexuality of "Scheherazade." Carl Van Vechten, an American esthete, witnessing an early performance, suggested that the ballerina dancing Zobeide, the Shah's unfaithful concubine, was a suggestive picture of "languorous lust" and Nijinsky, the legendary dancer, as the Golden Slave, engaged in "most lascivious gestures" (Balanchine II 152). And the designer Leon Bakst (1866-1924) urged on stage slaughter: "the Shah's retainers should cut everyone to pieces, everyone: his wives and above all their Negro lovers" (Grigoriev 29). Slaughter of black lovers in a harem is a far cry from the Poet among the Muses, but a telling measure of the distance between the "white ballet" and the Orientalist in the first decades of the twentieth century.

### III

**T**o break the rigid mold into which ballet had fallen at the end of the nineteenth century, Diaghilev proposed each single piece be set in its own distinct world. The scenario, the music, décor and choreography all were to be created anew for each unique ballet. Fokine, Diaghilev's choreographer, went further. He laid it down as a dictum that a new movement style should be created for each ballet. Since the goal was to "astonish" the audience, fulfilling this demand for three or more new ballets each season was a tall order, but those ballets which "astonished" had an unforgettable impact on the audience.

Each ballet was to develop a sustained image. Gautier had remarked that a ballet was to be a picture before it was a drama. Up to now we have considered only two “pictures”—the moonlit glade of the Romantic imagination; and the Orientalism of the Middle East. But there were several others such as the Golden Age of Greece, seen as rational, ordered and pleasantly pastoral (*L’apres midi d’un Faun*” and “Daphnis and Chloe”); Russian fairy tales (“Petrouchka” and Firebird”); Modernism, cubist and *tres chic* (“*Le train blue*”) and most intriguingly, another brand of Orientalism (“The Nightingale”), this time the Far East via Stravinsky. In all cases there was to be a “look”—and to appreciate this term fully we may think of it as used in fashion. Orientalism with its promise or allure of on-stage violence and sex was one of the most popular. With “Scheherazade,” the designs of Leon Bakst were not only applauded each evening when the curtain arose, but their impact spread beyond, inspiring new designs in fashion and interior decoration. It was a “look” that caught on.

But it is possible to extend the notion of a “look” to a subtler plane. One of the most popular ballets of the 1911 season was “*Le Spectre de la Rose*,” a brief Romantic pas de deux based on a poem by Gautier. A maiden is asleep in a chair holding a rose from her first ball. The setting is a moonlit boudoir with high open windows. Suddenly the specter (or scent) costumed entirely in the color of the rose leaps through her open window and engages her in a half-somnolent dance. After some minutes she drifts back to sleep as the specter wafts out another window. The story is slight, more lyric than narrative and the ballet is of course “white.” But the “astonishment” lies in personifying scent. In a superb instance of synesthesia the maiden dances with the scent as she recalls the ball. The audience “sees” smell evoking memory. The most spiritual and evanescent of the senses is materialized. It is known as the “Proust effect.”

In its ballets, such as the *Orientalist*, Diaghilev’s company engaged in an analogous enterprise. Rather than merely putting “Orientalism” on stage as a captivating spectacle it was presented as the “scent” or the “soul” of the Orient. In the early years Diaghilev’s composers, choreographers and scenarists worked as team, and in going over the scenario for “*Cleopatre*” (1909), Bakst listed what he looked forward to—“a huge temple on the

banks of the Nile. Columns; a sultry day; the scent of the East and a great many lovely women with beautiful bodies . . .” (Grigoriev 8). We may note that Bakst takes the “scent of the Orient” for granted, as something familiar to his colleagues. Yet, it may well be asked what this “scent” might be and how it is conveyed to the audience. A few joss sticks burning on stage is not the answer. But a slight detour into perfumery may help. “Orientals” is one of the four families of perfumes and is considered the “exotic queen of perfumery.” “Shalimar,” an oriental from Guerlain, was directly inspired by the Ballets Russes in 1925 and named after the gardens an Indian Shah created for his beloved. In the advertising copy “Shalimar” is evoked as the perfume of “carnal seduction at the frontier of the forbidden. Wearing Shalimar means surrendering control of the senses.” This is extravagant, even hysterical, advertising but accurate as a description of the ballet “*Scheherazade*” or any number of Orientalist ballets—“*Cleopatre*,” “*Le Dieu Bleu*,” “*Thamar*,” “*La tragedie de Salome*,” titles of ballets that could well serve as names of Orientalist perfumes. And further, the “scent of the Orient is assumed to be feminine. Only in 1965 did Guerlain come up with “*Habit Rouge*,” an Oriental scent for men.

Since a “scent of the Orient” is taken for granted, the seeming absence of any corresponding “scent of the West” may puzzle. Were there such a scent, what might it be? The lack of an answer indicates no such scent exists. The West is sanitized. The standard setting for the “white ballet” is the immaculate, unsullied moonlit glade, and not the luxurious sensuality of the harem.

In broadest terms, we may say the “scentless Christian dancers” of the “white ballet” participate in the scheme of salvation. Their external purity is a symbol of their redeemed souls. They are saved. The costume of the Romantic ballerina—the pointed shoes, the white tutu, the diamond tiara, even the pair of elfish wings—all are the costume of an earthly angel. The ascent into a heaven with the woman leading the man follows the Christian pattern of redemption; we are inevitably reminded of Dante and Beatrice. In direct contrast to Christian salvation, we have the destiny of “Orientals,” of those beyond the pale of redemption. They are damned. In the tableau closing the Orientalist ballet there is only the mire of the harem. As the lights dim on stage and the “scent of the

Orient” suffuses the air, the audience is no longer able to distinguish individuals, or even couples, in the tangle of limbs, enacting what Freud designated as the “polymorphous perverse.” In the words of Susan Sontag from her seminal essay on “Camp”—Voilà! the Orient!

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Ballets Russes is an intimate portrait of a group of pioneering artists -- now in their 70s, 80s and 90s -- who gave birth to modern ballet. Directors: Daniel Geller, Dayna Goldfine. Storyline. For many, modern ballet began with the Ballet Russe of Monte Carlo, originally made up of Russian exiles from the Russian Revolution. This film tells the story of this landmark company with its stars and production as well as its power games, rivalries and tribulations that marked its turbulent history. The famous Ballets Russes took Europe and the U.S. by storm during the early 20th century. It was the brainchild of one man, Sergei Diaghilev, who surprisingly wasn't a talented artist, composer, or choreographer himself. Despite this, his influence spread to every corner of the art kingdom and he possessed the gift of being able to spot talent and develop it in a way that still resonates today.