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Pirouette power

by *Rupert Christiansen*

On the history of ballet and politics.

History books will inform you that ballet properly begins in the late sixteenth century, with the elaborate marriage and birthday celebrations at the French court, drawing their imagery from the cabalistic and astrological geometry of Neoplatonic humanism. This may be true in terms of aesthetic theory, but in executive practice ballet also reflected more immediately the discipline of the military parade ground, with its insistence on straight lines, regular steps, and peremptory commands emanating from a central figure. For Louis XIV, courtly ballet at Versailles was, in the words of the historian and critic Jennifer Homans, "a matter of state" and yet "more than a blunt instrument with which to display royal opulence and power, a symbol and requirement of aristocratic identity." And even when courtiers weren't dancing, every move and gesture, every bow and curtsey in the royal presence was choreographed according to a strictly elegant etiquette.

Ballet has since remained an art form uniquely favored by authoritarian regimes, its silent orderliness flattering to an absolute ruler and its content safe from the politically inflammatory potential of words and rhetoric. The layered auditoriums of theaters and opera houses where ballet has been traditionally performed minister to a concept of social hierarchy, too, with a royal box strategically placed near the stage, allowing an audience of subjects to contemplate their masters from a safe distance.

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In the nineteenth-century era of liberal revolutions and enlightened monarchies, the glories of five-act French grand operas such as Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* and Verdi's *Don Carlos*—with their celebration of freedom fighters, national self-determination, and anti-clericalism interspersed with magnificent parades and tableaux—seemed the most appropriate material with which to mark formal state occasions. But as reactionary governments exerted a tighter grip, such works seemed to carry a

dangerous endorsement of resistance against tyranny, and Louis Napoleon's Second Empire and Tsarist Russia felt safer at evenings of full-length ballets. With their fantastic plots, focused on the fate of village maidens or fairy-tale supernaturals and thus neutered of any political import, they could cause no offense or alarm. A telling example is the first production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, to a magnificent score by Tchaikovsky, unveiled in St. Petersburg in 1890 and framed by rococo splendor and ancien régime ceremony. Tsar Alexander III considered it "very nice." This has been interpreted by some as a sneering brush-off, but "very nice" is precisely what protocol required.

This was the infantilizing of ballet, and the great achievement of the impresario Serge Diaghilev was to nurture it out of this phase into adulthood. Based in Europe between 1909 and 1929, his Ballets Russes explored a wider range of artistic possibilities throughout the period of the Russian Revolution. Diaghilev's political sympathies were an unstable and undefined mix of liberal and conservative—although he had a keen sense of the injustices perpetrated by the Romanovs (and a brother who fought for the White Russians and later died in the Gulag), he felt romantically nostalgic for lost Russian glories after being exiled from his homeland in the wake of Lenin's success. In Paris in 1917, Diaghilev sanctioned that a red flag be waved in triumph at the conclusion of *The Firebird*, but this piece of virtue-signaling was swiftly dropped after protests. In 1921, he shocked his radical supporters by reviving *The Sleeping Beauty* with all its reactionary pomp; six years later, in *Le Pas d'acier*, he presented in contrast an aggressive paean to the power of Bolshevist collectivism and the industrial proletariat. Ultimately, however, Diaghilev's colors were nailed to the mast of aestheticism—art for art's sake.

The most overt political statement in the history of ballet came at the end of the Weimar Republic in 1932, on the eve of Nazi victory, when the German choreographer Kurt Jooss dreamed up The Green Table. Opening with the image of grotesquely masked and black-suited diplomats arguing at a futile conference, it goes on to portray a figure of Death as a merciless soldier devastating the wretched of the world. Owing as much to Expressionist mime and silent cinema as to classical ballet, The Green Table was performed continuously and globally in several versions into the 1990s, serving as a beacon for pacifist movements. But it stood alone for a time: the success of the Ballets Russes meant that the influence of the Russian tradition, which put aesthetics before overt symbolism, permeated British and American efforts in the 1930s to establish independent enterprises and develop their own artistic identities.

Yet the idea of British or English ballet played a significant role during the Second World War. It did so, first, through an adventure story that grabbed headlines: a tour of unoccupied Europe by the Sadler's Wells Ballet in 1940 came to a swift end when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands and the company was forced to make a last-minute dash to freedom, avoiding enemy parachutists and cramming themselves into a cargo boat. Second, the tradition of symbolism was carried on by a few English ballets such as Frederick Ashton's barefoot *Dante Sonata* (1940), which followed *The Green Table* in depicting a struggle between good and evil, darkness and light, in abstract, absolute terms. The third and most important factor was the simple determination by English ballet

companies to keep going throughout the Blitz. Several troupes toured nationwide continuously; male dancers serving in the forces returned to the stage during their furlough; performances often took place three times a day, with air-raid warnings ignored and the dancers keeping at it regardless.

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Ballet had powerful advocates in the press bolstering this effort, George Bernard Shaw among them. He described "the birth of British ballet as one of the most astonishing artistic developments in the theatre of our time" and went on to propose that male dancers be exempt from armed service—an argument that some people accepted on the grounds that ballet was doing sterling work in maintaining domestic morale and that it had come to represent something fundamental to national values, something worth defending.

With the Cold War, ballet became more sensitively weaponized. The Soviets had appropriated the major tsarist ballet companies and made them key to their claim to be respectful guardians of the best of bourgeois culture, while also creating new ballets, known as "dramballet," exemplary of socialist realism and carrying simplistically underlined representations of idealistic proletarian energies triumphing over their decadent, obsolete, or capitalist counterparts. Visits of Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet to London in 1956 and New York in 1959, showing both revered classics and dramballet novelties, were propaganda coups during the first "cultural exchange" phase of the Khrushchev thaw. The sheer muscular power and raw emotional conviction of Russian dancing communicated an alarming message of indomitable strength of purpose and brutal physical might.

This blow had to be countered, and high-level diplomacy arranged return visits to Russia of the Royal Ballet in 1961 and New York City Ballet in 1962, allowing the West to demonstrate its own more elegantly supple and freethinking aesthetics—which ironically owed everything to pre-Soviet Russian inspirations. Led by George Balanchine, who was born and schooled in St. Petersburg, nycb was in Moscow at the peak of the Cuban Missile Crisis—a story that ranks in tension with the Sadler's Wells Ballet's escape from the Netherlands in 1940.

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Both sides were excited if unnerved by these aesthetic encounters, but the highly publicized defection of three of Russia's brightest stars—Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, and Mikhail Baryshnikov—between 1961 and 1974 poisoned the atmosphere and made future

dialogue cautious and suspicious. This remains the case fifty years later: one of the first casualties of Vladimir Putin's spring invasion of Ukraine was the Bolshoi Ballet's summer season in London, canceled by its hosts. The Kremlin will smart at this: its pride in the quality of the nation's dancers and choreographers remains intense—they are regarded as cultural icons alongside its chess grandmasters and classical pianists, and the first sign of peace will doubtless be the export of Russian ballet companies. The fact that so many of the finest Russian talents—Alexei Ratmansky, Natalia Osipova, and Olga Smirnova among them—have based themselves in the West is inconvenient, to say the least.

Ballet has suffered much less than opera from the fashion for deconstructive stagings aimed at subverting pretensions or demythologizing fictions. Its audiences' tastes remain broadly conservative and sentimental in relation to the repertory of classics. (The "modern dance" movement—Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Mark Morris—follows its own trajectory, less bound by order, more receptive of spontaneity and the individual.) In both East and West, ballet continues its alliance with the existing social dispensation. It may be regarded as less elitist than its troubled cousin opera, but it still leans on a reputation as escapist entertainment, providing world leaders and power brokers with agreeable opportunities to parade themselves and have their photographs taken shaking hands backstage with deferentially smiling girls in tiaras and tutus. Ballet is "very nice"; it can't ask awkward questions.

Yet it has value. As demonstrated by *The Green Table* or *Dante Sonata* (or Crystal Pite's recent *Flight Pattern*, a moving meditation on the passage of refugees), the language of ballet naturally lends itself to the expression of generalized symbolic statements—peace versus war, victim versus conqueror, black versus white. It doesn't comfortably accommodate detailed narrative or psychological nuance, and it can't argue dialectically. But gestures can be as meaningful as words, and ballet's symmetries and patterns have their own power as a positive celebration of order and harmony.

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