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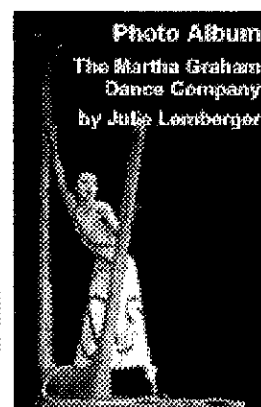
Flash Film Review, 10-26: Russe(s) Reunited  
 "Ballets Russes" Opens Memory Box, with Gaps

By Aimee Ts'ao

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For me, it's not easy being a dance critic, for many reasons. While some of my colleagues seem to get a lot of mileage out of dismissing choreographers, directors and dancers with a few nasty words, I cringe at the sight of those artists in public after I have given them a less than thrilling review, or they cringe at the sight of me for the same reason. There are also a lot of internal difficulties that I rarely bother to make public. Not all critics share my concerns, but I personally feel a distinct obligation to be enthusiastic about what deserves to be praised, as well as to break bad news as gently as possible. Perhaps it's because I was once a dancer and know from experience how painful it is to be dissected under the microscope.

But I come to my current position because, besides having been a dancer, I have been an avid reader of dance history for 40 years and have a broad view of the field. And I have a real passion for it in all its many forms. This is all by way of saying that I feel very conflicted in my opinion of Dayna Goldfine and Dan Geller's documentary film "Ballets Russes," which opens today at the Film Forum in New York and November 4 in the San Francisco Bay Area. (See the note at the end of this article for more national dates.)

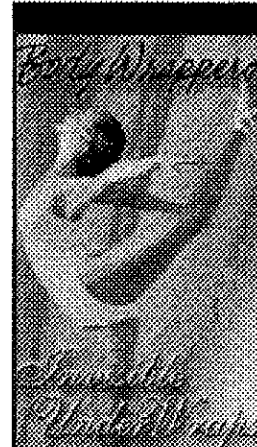


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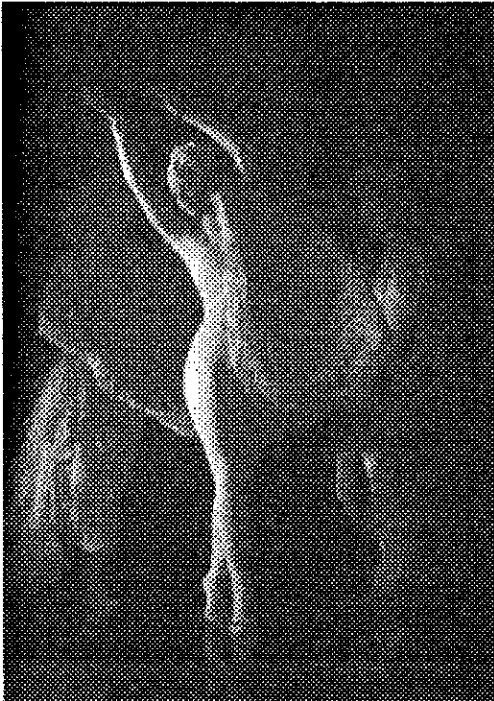
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It is, of course, impossible for me to view this mostly wonderful documentary as a member of the general public, or even a balletomane. Not only am I a picky Virgo, I'm also far too knowledgeable about dance history to let details slide. (Unfortunately, since most of my applicable dance history books and 50- to 70-year-old Ballets Russes programs remain inaccessible in boxes after a complicated move, I must rely on my memory and my editor's skill at ferreting out the details.) I am truly grateful for the opportunity to see the many interviews of former Ballets Russes dancers and the archival footage, much of it shot by amateurs -- dancers and fans -- that miraculously surfaced during the making of this film. I am genuinely touched by the obvious love that went into this project and the love of dance that those interviewed convey through their personal stories. For these reasons "Ballets Russes" is definitely not to be missed by anyone who cares about ballet or dance in general.



Nini Theilade as Venus in the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo's "Bacchanale," choreographed by Leonide Massine, with scenery and costumes by Salvador Dali, circa 1939. Photo by Maurice Seymour and courtesy Zeitgeist Films, which also supplied photo captions for this article.

"Ballets Russes" begins with the narrator poetically introducing the subject of the film: "It is the nature of dance to exist for but a moment, yet once there was something called the Ballets Russes which for more than 50 years created some of the most

extraordinary ballet the world has ever seen, performed by some of the most legendary dancers ever to have taken the stage." For the sake of clarity, it might have been a good idea to explain that there were at least three separate companies (depending on which sources you are consulting) that used the phrase "Ballet Russe" or "Ballets Russes" in their names. That 50 years encompassed 20 years of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company and about 15 seasons of relatively interesting new work by the subsequent companies, but the last 15 years were hardly on par with the first 35.

After the curtain rises on a reunion of former Ballets Russes dancers held in 2000, the narrator continues: "They were called the Ballets Russes. They were Russians who had never danced in Russia, refugees in Europe who became international stars, and in the end, they were Americans who created audiences for dance where before there were none. Theirs is the story of the birth of modern ballet, ballet as we know it today. The story that begins in the late 1920s in Paris with a group of little Russian girls who dreamt of a life in dance." This would be fine except that it excludes Sergei Diaghilev's original company, les Ballets Russes, who WERE Russians who had received their training and had been dancing in Russia. That company began to perform in Paris in 1909 and continued until Diaghilev's death in 1929. Without this first company, the others would never have existed at all. Diaghilev's brilliant talent in bringing together the best visual artists, choreographers and composers to create groundbreaking work has never been surpassed in the history of 20th-century ballet. The film does go on to mention him and his work but without really showing the entire artistic and social context which lead to his forming his company and the subsequent influence it had on dance, music, art and society in general, laying the foundation for Rene Blum and Colonel Wassili de Basil's company, the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, founded in 1932, and subsequent companies, respectively headed by Blum; de Basil; and Leonide Massine and Serge Denham.

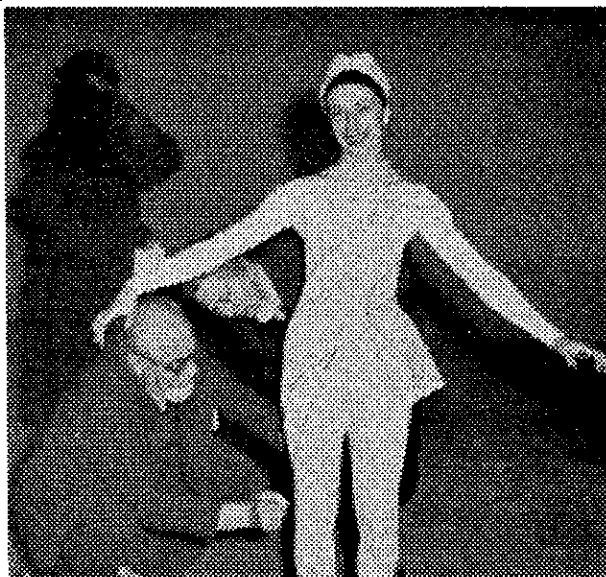




The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo performing "Rouge et Noir," choreographed by Leonide Massine, with scenery and costumes by Henri Matisse, 1939. Pictured: Frederic Franklin (top), George Zoritch (middle), Alexandra Danilova (bottom center) and corps. Photo courtesy Zeitgeist Films.

A few minor annoyances, probably not particularly noticeable to most of the audience for this film, are the music and the use of still photos. Some of the archival footage has no sound, and I am assuming that the correct music could have been found to accompany some of those sections, though understandably, there were some for which it would have been too difficult to find suitable recordings. However, there is a scene of Sugar Plum's variation from "The Nutcracker" with some other music. And then there is the sequence of stills of George Zoritch in Nijinsky's "Afternoon of a Faun" jarringly accompanied by an Offenbach can-can. Of course, when many short clips are shown together, there needs to be a continuous musical bridge to tie them into a smooth sequence and that is well done for the most part.

As for the use of photos, I find that the repetition of the same pictures over and over is irritating. Given the enormous amount of photos available, I fail to see why different shots couldn't have been used to liven things up, and show different facets of the same people, unless the cost of permissions for use was prohibitive.





Alicia Markova with Henri Matisse as Matisse designs his costumes for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo production of "Rouge et Noir." Choreography by Leonide Massine. Photo circa 1939 and courtesy Zeitgeist Films.

On the other hand, the interviews with such dance luminaries as Alicia Markova, Irina Baronova, Frederic Franklin, Mia Slavenska, George Zoritch, Nathalie Krassovska, Maria Tallchief, Nini Theilade, Marc Platt, Yvonne Chouteau and Raven Wilkinson are absolutely riveting. Not only are these past performers extremely articulate, but they give us a chance to see into their hearts and souls, to understand what it means to be a dancer, and to have been dancing with the Ballets Russes.

*"Ballets Russes" plays tonight through November 8 at the Film Forum in New York, and opens November 4 at the Embarcadero Center in San Francisco. The film opens November 11 in Berkeley, San Rafael, San Jose, Beverly Hills and Santa Ana, CA, and in Washington, DC; November 18 in Chicago and Highland Park, IL, Bethesda, MD, Boston, and Seattle; November 25 in Waltham, MA and Oklahoma City; December 2 in Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City; January 27 in Atlanta and St. Louis; February 3 in Pleasantville, NY; and February 17 in San Diego.*

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