



'Michael Meylac's book does an exceptional favour to dance history, bringing all the participants in the Ballets Russes story together.'

— ISMENE BROWN

'A fascinating series of interviews with dancers, choreographers and teachers of the diaspora of Russians following the Revolution and subsequently based in America, Australia and Europe ....

To hear their voices is revealing.'

— JANE PRITCHARD, AUTHOR OF *DIAGHILEV AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE BALLETS RUSSES*

ISBN 978-1-78076-859-5



9 781780 768595

**I.B. TAURIS**  
LONDON · NEW YORK

www.ibtauris.com

BEHIND  
THE  
SCENES  
AT THE

BALLETS  
RUSSES

*Stories from  
a Silver Age*

MICHAEL  
MEYLAC



BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE

BALLETS  
RUSSES

*Stories from  
a Silver Age*

MICHAEL MEYLAC



Rosanna Kelly would like to thank Michael Meylac for introducing her to the captivating world of the Ballets Russes. She is most grateful to Helen Atkinson, Caroline Brooke-Johnson, Sophie Corke, Justin Kelly, David Nice, Jeremy O'Sullivan, Sergei Reviakin and Jan Usvyat for their help and encouragement and especially her husband, Anthony Gardner, for his tireless support and editorial guidance.

We are both grateful to Linda and Laurence Kelly for solving many problems, particularly for their help in narrowing down the overabundant original material; to Ismene Brown for her acute observations and for having kindly agreed to write a Foreword; to our editors Joanna Godfrey, Sophie Campbell and Paul Beaney; and to I.B.Tauris, for publishing the book.



## FOREWORD

**T**HE STORY of the Ballets Russes' explosive arrival in Europe in the early twentieth century is one of the most powerful narratives of modern Western culture. At the company's helm was a boldly open-minded Russian, Sergei Diaghilev, whom we might consider an honorary Englishman, as well as an honorary European and American, so essential was his bequest to the revitalisation of Russian classical ballet and theatrical art by its second, Western wave. In his gourmet choice of choreographers, dancers, composers and musicians, painters and dramatists, Diaghilev planted in the heart of Western Europe a cornucopia of orientalism that, having astonished its foreign audience with its elaborate strangeness, immediately collaborated with the continent's most modern arts. The Ballets Russes became synonymous with eclectic innovation. Immediately after Diaghilev's death in 1929, inspired acolytes set about founding new platforms in the West – schools and companies – to advance his agenda of high academic tradition exploring contemporary expressive arts.

And thus the Ballets Russes, within barely 20 years, became the West's precious inheritance – while in their own country, under new management from 1917, they were brutally excommunicated. The Soviets would develop their own narrative in ballet, a nationalist counter-argument to Diaghilev's multidisciplinary, chameleon multiculturalism.

What is missing between these two well-known strands of the story is a third narrative: that of the forgotten ones, those who danced with Diaghilev's descendant companies, carrying the consequences of the Ballets Russes in their bodies and hearts. There were tantalising glimpses of that third strand in Sir John Drummond's book of interviews, *Speaking of Diaghilev*, Faber & Faber, published in 1997 in London, which elaborated on the influence of the Ballets Russes on Britain's ballet by presenting

## THE BALLE

most iconic ball  
tieth century. Fo  
founder Sergei  
company disper  
the Ballets Russ  
in turn branche  
Russes compani  
century – partic  
tuous years of V  
troupes kept the  
Russian ballet a  
extensively in N  
Europe and Au

This ground  
tains previously  
with some of th  
dancers and ch  
their own word  
what life was r  
the Ballets Rus  
setbacks, rival  
doing so, he pr  
of the most int  
cultural figure  
impresarios R  
Serge Denham  
to the choreog  
George Balanc  
Nijinska. Meyl  
of the greatest  
including Ale:  
Toumanova a  
members of th  
who kept the  
the scenes.

Providing  
the greatest r  
dance, this bo  
for all ballet

discussions with key figures of the original Diaghilev generation. In 2006, a more global picture was sketched by Daniel Geller and Dayna Goldfine's US film *Ballets Russes*, which caught up with some of the surviving members of the various successor companies, vivacious veterans who enchanted a worldwide audience with their personalities and memories.

But every day brought fresh obituaries and there remained an urgent gap of witness. What was the story from those dancers who populated a fractured postwar world with their Russian values? And how do post-Soviet Russians assess that period today? Had the country's seismic overturning of its Soviet identity in 1991 enabled a native rediscovery of this globally disseminated history? Could the aftermath of the Ballets Russes be discussed with Russian tongues and evaluated through Russian eyes?

Fortunately, in Russia another tale has been unfolding over the past 20 years. Michael Meylac, one of the country's most eminent literary professors and a scholar of linguistics, grew up infused with a passion for ballet. His work on foreign-published dissident writers had brought a brutal intervention in his life; in 1983 he was arrested by the KGB and imprisoned for four years. After his release he left the dying Soviet Union and settled in France and – as homesick foreigners do – sought out older compatriots, aware of so many untold stories that the USSR had censored. He encountered Ballets Russes dancers everywhere in the world, the relics of a flaming artistic community circling the planet, the migrant Russians who 'flitted like a bird from one branch to another', to use Colonel de Basil's phrase. They told him of the wartime adventures, outbreaks of ego and logistical accidents that had washed them up in the ports of South America or the Antipodes, where, simply by having to find a dance class and continue their daily discipline, they had dropped the seeds of Russian ballet to sprout anew.

He asked them for their opinions on the developments that had resulted and the effect of their wanderings on their sense of self and their art. The result is an archive of interviews with Ballets Russes dancers as dramatically human as it is historically valuable: a whirl of personalities, dramas, comedies, tragedies and provocative artistic judgments. Some are interviews that could only have been conducted by a Russian questioner with Russian interviewees for Russian readers – between compatriots, lips could be unbuttoned, confidences shared, antagonisms aired and candid opinions given about rival dancers or impresarios. The Western seedlings, such as Marjorie Tallchief, Jean Babilée, Frederic

Franklin and Maina Gielgud, testify to the fertility of Ballets Russes multiculturalism. Today, great ballet companies with Diaghilev's genetic material are found not only in Britain, France and Germany, but right through the Americas from Canada to Chile, in Cuba, South Africa, Holland, Hungary, Lithuania, Turkey, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand.

The life experiences are fascinating tales in their own right: much courage in the face of gigantic events, loneliness, and a gallows humour peculiar to that generation of Russians, many of them aristocrats, whose imperial-era lives were ripped apart by the Revolution and then by the nomadic life of dancing. Fate and time have gathered for Meylac a cast of voices where hierarchy and rank do not dictate the selection. There is important witness for history in the reminiscences about the competing contenders as Diaghilev's heirs, the impresarios René Blum, Serge Denham and Colonel Wassily de Basil; and the voices from the *corps de ballet* and secretary's office are often more illuminating than those of the stars.

But what is novel and challenging is that 'our' legacy is discussed from the point of view of the givers, rather than the receivers. The questions are framed differently and answers come with new dynamics and value judgments. The development of world ballet in the postwar period looks very different through a Russian, British or American lens – eyes focus on different objects and facts; and specific cultural traditions, emotional habits, references and tastes shape each person's perspective on a shared experience. Now, thanks to the initiative and dedication of its English translator, Rosanna Kelly, the Anglosphere can access a stimulating, sometimes surprising perspective on what we consider our artistic identity. Professor Meylac's book does an exceptional favour to dance history, bringing all the participants in the Ballets Russes story together just in time. He has built up the family tree of twentieth-century Russian ballet and shows how its branches reach from one end of the Earth to the other. The story of the Ballets Russes phenomenon, this book demonstrates, is in the plural. The stories belong not only to Western ballet but to Russian cultural history, too, and they open doors to penetrating new conversations about Diaghilev's legacy.

Ismene Brown, 2017