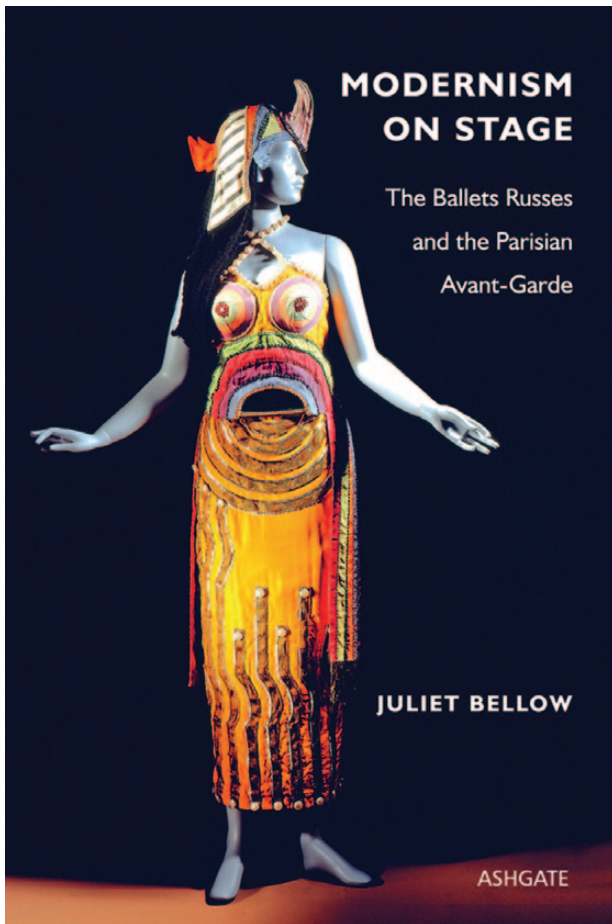


Book Review



Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde

Juliet Bellow, Ashgate, 2013. 280 pp., 67 b&w and 18 col. illus, cloth, £65.00. ISBN: 9781409409113

When Serge Diaghilev, the great Russian-born impresario, died in Venice in August 1929 it was a twist in a story that not only had echoes of the eerie death of the fictional composer Gustav von Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912) but also that of

one of Diaghilev's heroes—Richard Wagner, who had died in Venice in 1883. Like Wagner, Diaghilev believed profoundly in the integration, rather than the separation, of the arts—from the aural and textual to the visual and corporeal. However, unlike other proponents of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), ranging from French Symbolists and Viennese Secessionists to Bauhausian theorists, Diaghilev placed actual bodies—in the form of ballet—at the centre of his project. This new book, *Modernism on Stage*, by the American scholar Juliet Bellow, aims to look closer at how Diaghilev's Ballets Russes achieved a new type of integrated and innovative artwork that revealed a profound, if now largely ignored, dialogue between ballet and modernism.

As a thesis this is no easy task, as the Ballets Russes' principal media, dance, is a form of temporal performance that has been rendered all the more ephemeral by the fact that there are no known recordings of the ninety or so ballets created and performed from the company's inception in Paris in 1909 to its descent into chaos and collapse following Diaghilev's death. In some ways this makes the Ballets Russes all the more easy to marginalize, if not efface, in the grand narratives of modernism. However, Bellow, like many Ballets Russes scholars before her, tackles this by turning her attention to the surviving remnants, from the costumes and choreography to the music and marketing, which she argues created 'a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* truer to the original concept than Wagner himself did' (p. 13). Her underlying aim to mitigate Diaghilev as being the 'ultimate arbiter of the troupe's aesthetic' (p. 14) is argued through a close reading of four major ballets of the 1910s and 1920s, designed by the 'canonical modernists' Pablo Picasso, Sonia Delaunay, Henri Matisse and Giorgio de Chirico, which 'tested painterly modernisms by recontextualizing those styles within a total artwork—thus initiating a complex, dialectical process of self-definition through dialogue with other media' (p. 3).

Bellow's book is part of a wider scholarly reclamation of the Ballets Russes over the past decade or so that has sought to relocate the company's significance beyond the annals

of dance history. Indeed, since the advent of the Ballets Russes centenary in 2009 there has been a tidal wave of exhibitions, publications, performances, films, documentaries, symposia, conferences and merchandising opportunities. Blockbuster exhibitions including the Swedish Dansmuseet's 'Ballets Russes: The Stockholm Collection' (2009), the Victoria and Albert Museum's 'Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909–1929' (2010) and the National Gallery of Australia's 'Ballets Russes: The Art of Costume' (2011), like the slightly smaller exhibitions in Paris, Monte Carlo and Moscow, have all been accompanied by lavish publications.¹ This supplements the recent plethora of new biographies, and critical studies, of the composers Stravinsky, Ravel and Debussy, and the choreographer-dancers, Nijinsky, Balanchine, Massine and Lifar. The centenary was also accompanied by everything from a Hollywood-style biopic of Stravinsky and Chanel, *Coco et Igor* (2009), by the Dutch-born French film director Jan Kounen, based on Chris Greenhalgh's fictional novel of 2002, to a special scent created by master perfumer Roja Dove, based on Guerlain's Mitsouko (1919), Diaghilev's favourite, which he apparently spritzed onto the company's drop curtains before performances.

Like many of the recent publications on the Ballet Russes, such as Alston Purvis' *The Ballets Russes and the Art of Design* (The Monacelli Press, New York, 2009) and Mary E. Davis' *Ballet Russes Style: Diaghilev's Dancers and Paris Fashion* (Reaktion Books, London, 2010), Bellow's *Modernism on Stage* looks closely at how the Ballets Russes intersected with design.² The cover of Bellow's book shows a stunningly beautiful image of the costume designed by Sonia Delaunay for the principal dancer in the 1918 production of *Cléopâtre*. Although highly modern in some ways, this design also seems hardly original, in that it continued the 'exotic and erotic' *femme fatale* style that first had appeared in Leon Bakst's own designs for *Cléopâtre* in 1909, and more memorably for *Schéhérazade* a year later. Indeed, it was Bakst's designs that started the Orientalist craze in the pages of Parisian fashion journals such as *L'Art et la mode*, *Le Gazette du bon ton* and *Femina*. However, Bellow argues that, set against the privileged central roles given to male dancers, which 'presented a conflict with heteronormative viewing conventions' and generated a cult of 'homoerotic self-pleasure' (p. 137), Delaunay's liberating designs of semi-veiled, free-flowing and highly suggestive dress for female dancers were redolent of women's burgeoning emancipation.³ She posits that Delaunay deliberately played on the new spectatorship inherent in commodity culture, treating the stage like a shop window, to engage the subjective identities of the women in the audience.⁴

As Bellow argues, 'Providing a model for her later fashion photographs, *Cléopâtre* allowed Delaunay to see whether the abstraction and dematerialization of female bodies she had envisaged in drawings and paintings could be achieved in reality. We can safely say that this style does, at least to some extent, attract attention to the female body whilst resisting its objectification.' (p. 154).

With its radical rejection of the conventional Petipa systems of choreography and static traditions of stylised decoration for the stage and costume, prevalent in imperial Russia and throughout *belle époque* Europe, Bellow successfully argues that the Ballets Russes, in employing avant-garde artists and designers as diverse as Picasso, Delaunay, Matisse and de Chirico, 'transposed the hermetic visual language of high modernism to the stage' and created a new 'dialogue with elements long held to be anti-modernist: duration and dimension, figuration and embodiment, kinesthetics and empathy' (p. 246). And she postulates that as such the four ballets at the centre of this book can be read as redefinitions of 'our understanding of the interconnected worlds of the visual and performing arts, elite culture and mass entertainment in Paris near the beginning of the twentieth century' (p. 7). She is right; Diaghilev's company 'stood both inside and outside mainstream modernism' and has been, and remains, grossly undervalued in wider histories of modern design (p. 245).

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Notes

- 1 See E. Näslund (ed.), *Ballets Russes: The Stockholm Collection*, Dansmuseet in collaboration with Langenskiöld, Stockholm, 2009; J. Pritchard & G. Marsh (eds), *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909–1929*, V&A Publishing, London, 2010; R. Bell & C. Dixon, *Ballets Russes: The Art of Costume*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2011; M. Auclair & P. Vidal (eds), *Les Ballets Russes*, Les éditions Gourcuff Gradenigo, Paris, 2009; and J. E. Bowlt and Z. Tregulova (eds), *A Feast of Wonders: Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, Skira, Milan, 2009.
- 2 Bellow focuses on four ballets—Pablo Picasso's designs for *Parade* (1917), Sonia Delaunay's designs for *Cléopâtre* (1918), Henri Matisse's designs for *La Chant du rossignal* (1920) and Giorgio de Chirico's designs for *Le Bal* (1929); she suggests earlier scholarship has focused much more exclusively on Russian designers such as Léon Bakst, Alexandre

Benois, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov and Nicholas Roerich.

- 3 For this line of arguing see also J. Bellow, 'Clothing the Corps: How the Avant-Garde and the Ballet Russes fashioned the Modern Body', Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2005; and J. Bellow, 'When Art Danced With Music', in *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballet*

Russes 1909–1929, J. Pritchard & G. Marsh (eds), expanded edn, V&A Publishing, London, & National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 2013, pp. 186–203.

- 4 This is underscored further by the fact that Delaunay's designs for *Cléopâtre* were in fact made in the theatrical *atelier* of Paul Poiret, the couturier who dressed many of the women in the audience.