

Richard Buckle

DIAGHILEV

Atheneum New York 1979

dances, were interrupted by terrifying arpeggios, squawks, shrieks and glissandos, intended to represent spurts of growth, vegetable birth-pangs, convulsions of nature or the explosion of sap, and I doubt whether Nijinsky tried to find a parallel for these in human movement.

Of course, there were young people – artists, students and ‘fans’ – who were prepared to align themselves with Diaghilev on his boldest charges into battle against the old guard. Counting on their support, he had given them free tickets – standing passes. It was the presence of these bloodthirsty enthusiasts in the middle of the elegant occupants of the boxes which was partly responsible for the battle which took place in the theatre on 29 May. On the first night of Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* at the Comédie Française in 1830, of which we have his own description, and at the first performance of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* at the old Opéra in the rue Le Peletier in 1861, the young aesthetes who supported their rising heroes against the academic reactionaries had been isolated in the upper section of the house. [The

Théâtre des Champs-Élysées was constructed in a novel way. Between the loges avec salon and the fauteuils and loges de corbeille<sup>70</sup> there was an ambulatory, and it was here that Diaghilev’s favoured young friends of the avant-garde were standing to applaud and defend Stravinsky and Nijinsky. Cocteau thought the reaction of two sections of the public to the ballet and to each other was inevitable, almost as if Diaghilev had planned the juxtaposition of diverse groups. ‘All the elements of a scandal were present. The smart audience in tails and tulle, diamonds and ospreys, was interspersed with the suits and bandeaux of the aesthetic crowd. The latter would applaud novelty simply to show their contempt for the people in the boxes. . . . Innumerable shades of snobbery, super-snobbery and inverted snobbery were represented. . . . The audience played the role that was written for it. . . .’<sup>71</sup>

Nothing that has ever been written about the battle of *Le Sacre de printemps* [Valentine Gross later recalled] has given a faint idea of what actually took place. The theatre seemed to be shaken by an earthquake. It seemed to shudder. People shouted insults, howled and whistled, drowning the music. There was slapping and even punching. Words are inadequate to describe such a scene. Calm was briefly restored when the order was suddenly given to put up the house lights. It amused me to see how certain boxes whose occupants had been so noisy and vindictive in the dark quietened down when the lights went on. . . . I saw Maurice Delage [the composer], beetroot-red with indignation, little Maurice Ravel truculent as a fighting-cock and Léon-Paul Fargue [the poet] spitting out crushing remarks at the hissing boxes. I cannot think how it was possible for this ballet . . . to be danced through to the end in such an uproar. Standing between the two middle boxes, I felt quite at ease at the heart of the maelstrom, applauding with my friends. I thought there was something wonderful about the titanic struggle which must have been going on in order to keep these inaudible musicians and these deafened dancers together, in obedience to the laws of their invisible choreographer. The ballet was astoundingly beautiful.<sup>72</sup>

## THE FOKINE-NIJINSKY PERIOD

Stravinsky was sitting in the fourth or fifth row, on the right of the stalls.

The image of Monteux's back is more vivid in my mind today than the picture of the stage. He stood there apparently impervious and as nerveless as a crocodile. It is still almost incredible to me that he actually brought the orchestra through to the end. I left my seat when the heavy noises began – light noise had started from the very beginning – and went backstage behind Nijinsky in the right wing. Nijinsky stood on a chair, just out of view of the audience, shouting numbers to the dancers. I wondered what on earth these numbers had to do with the music for there are no 'thirteens' and 'seventeens' in the metrical scheme of the score.<sup>73</sup>

Diaghilev had ordained a pause between the two scenes; during this the lights were turned up and police were called in to eject the most violent demonstrators; but no sooner had the curtain risen on the trembling group of girls in Part II, with their in-pointed toes, their bent knees and their right fists supporting their sideways-bent heads, than a voice called out, 'Un docteur!', then another, 'Un dentiste!', followed by a third with 'Deux dentistes!'<sup>74</sup> A lady slapped the face of a man in a neighbouring box, gentlemen challenged each other to duels, Comtesse René de Pourtalès declared that she was sixty years old and that nobody had dared to try to make a fool of her before,<sup>75</sup> Florent Schmitt shouted at the boxes, 'Taisez-vous, les garces du seizième!' (the *seizième arrondissement* being associated, like Kensington, with the upper middle class), someone called Ravel 'a dirty Jew',<sup>76</sup> and Carl van Vechten, the Paris music critic of the *New York Times*, became conscious that a young man standing behind him was, out of excitement, drumming with his fists on top of his head.<sup>77</sup> Astruc leaned from his box and implored, 'Ecoutez d'abord. Vous sifflez après.'<sup>78</sup> Rambert, dancing in a group of girls, heard Diaghilev's voice, coming from very far away, calling, 'Je vous prie. Laissez finir le spectacle!'<sup>79</sup>

Nijinsky had to get dressed for *Le Spectre de la rose*, which followed, and the evening ended with *Prince Igor*.

After the performance [Stravinsky remembered] we were excited, angry, disgusted, and ... happy. I went with Diaghilev and Nijinsky to a restaurant. So far from weeping and reciting Pushkin in the Bois de Boulogne as the legend is [spread by Cocteau], Diaghilev's only comment was: 'Exactly what I wanted.' He certainly looked contented. No one could have been quicker to understand the publicity value and he immediately understood the good thing that had happened in that respect. Quite probably he had already thought about the possibility of such a scandal when I first played him the score, months before, in the east ground [floor] room of the Grand Hotel in Venice [on the Lido].<sup>80</sup>

Except for the perceptive Gaston de Pawlowski, editor of *Commedia*, who saw in the galvanized movements of Nijinsky's dancers a kind of reflex action,<sup>81</sup> for Louis Schneider in *Le Gaulois*, who reserved judgement on the audacities of Stravinsky, wonderfully embodied by Diaghilev's astound-

ing dance  
the chor  
critics di  
it 'le mas  
the fact t  
express t  
admirers  
was rath  
its mirth  
different  
ing the :  
but abst

Diagl  
as anno  
Fauré's  
in *Boris*  
on the tl  
and the  
(In Lor  
both Po

We f  
sky at t  
He had  
that as  
to the t  
his wif  
to dinr  
Ravel  
had pa  
whole  
*china c*  
day, b

The  
Churc  
the str  
palace  
drama  
Schne  
... a p  
soul o  
conta  
the *L*  
and re

ing dancers,<sup>82</sup> and for Auguste Mangeot in *Le Monde Musical*, who found the choreography 'grotesque and absurd' but 'oddly impressive',<sup>83</sup> the critics dismissed *The Rite* and ridiculed Nijinsky. The stock joke was to call it 'le massacre du printemps'.<sup>84</sup> The horrible Quittard in *Le Figaro* resented the fact that 'this frantic beginner', Nijinsky, had supporters who dared to express their adherence. 'This new art form, such as it is, already has its admirers. If only their enthusiasm were less noisy! *Le Sacre du printemps* was rather badly received yesterday and the public was hard put to restrain its mirth. It would therefore have been in better taste if those who thought differently – and there were not many of them – had refrained from applauding the authors on stage in a way everybody found not only impertinent but absurd.'<sup>85</sup>

Diaghilev had found that he could not put on *Khovanshchina* on 30 May as announced. It was postponed till 5 June and an extra performance of Fauré's *Pénélope* substituted. To atone for this, as it were, the Inn scene in *Boris*, omitted by Diaghilev in 1908, was given for the first time in Paris on the thirty-first. In subsequent performances, it was announced, this scene and the Polish Fountain scene would be sung at alternate performances.<sup>86</sup> (In London, in June and July, the Inn scene would always be given, and both Polish scenes omitted.)

We have seen how Ravel was attacked for his partisanship of Stravinsky at the first night of *The Rite*. Frederick Delius had also been present. He had been unable to attend the rehearsal, and wrote to Stravinsky, saying that as he had no ticket for the *première* he would pick him up on the way to the theatre, 'so as to get in with you, as I did last time'.<sup>87</sup> Debussy and his wife wrote vainly (on 31 May and 4 June) to press Stravinsky to come to dinner, but received no reply, as Igor had developed typhoid fever.<sup>88</sup> Ravel wrote (on 5 June), reporting that the third performance of *The Rite* had passed without interruption, and that it had been possible to hear the whole work.<sup>89</sup> But Stravinsky missed the first performance of *Khovanshchina* on the fifth, through illness. Diaghilev went to visit the invalid every day, but would not go into the room, through fear of infection.<sup>90</sup>

The sets of Feodor Fedorovsky for *Khovanshchina* – the exterior of the Church of St Basil the Blessed, whose turbaned towers loom threateningly, the street hillside of the Streltzy quarter, the interior of Prince Khovansky's palace and the wooden monastery of the Old Believers – were far more dramatic than Yuon's for *Boris*, and they were called 'magnificent' by Schneider.<sup>91</sup> 'Superb spectacle ... powerful work ... considerable success ... a page of history ... music based on popular songs which breathes the soul of a country.' The score was 'less idiosyncratic' than that of *Boris*, but contained 'superb pages'. The critic named the sunrise, the soldiers' songs, the *Lied* of Marfa (Petrenko), the chorus of pleading (which was acclaimed and repeated), the dance of Persian slave girls (arranged by Bolm), the scene