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Annual International Young Researchers Conference

Echoes of Empire: Russian Self-Representation in *Petrushka*

The imperial Russian ballet at the turn of the twentieth century reflected the society in which it was performed. In this paper, I argue that the ballet served two conflicting projects of empire and nationalism. On the one hand, the imperial ballet was an ideal vehicle for strengthening Russia's monarchy: the history, staging, and theatrical setting of the ballet reinforced centralized court power and social hierarchy. In addition, the popularity of processions and character dances attested to Russia's multi-ethnic empire. On the other hand, the ballet responded to nationalist trends with its attention to "authentic" Russian themes, folklore, and folk dance. The early twentieth-century ballets are in many ways characterized by retrospection and nostalgia for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the art-for-art-sake's philosophy of court ballet inspired *World of Art* (*Mir iskusstvo*) members including Sergei Diaghilev and Alexander Benois, who described the 1909 invasion of Paris by the "barbarian" Ballets Russes as the exportation of Russian culture to Europe.¹ How did a form of dance originating in the seventeenth-century French court and influenced by the French, Italian, and Danish schools in the nineteenth century become a representative product of Russian culture in the twentieth century? This paper explores the Russian self-representation of the Ballets Russes, who integrated both folk dance and imperial court spectacle into Benois' ballet *Petrushka*. The premiere of *Petrushka* in Paris on 13 June 1911 marked the appearance of Russian

¹ Alexander Benois. "Vospominaniia o baletе." in *Moi vospominaniia v piati knigakh*. Moscow: Nauka, 1993. Vol. 4-5. 497.

ballet as a recognizable product on the European stage.² With its depiction of 1830s St. Petersburg, *Petrushka* evoked nostalgia for a fading empire as well as revitalized and remade the tropes of the Russian imperial ballet in the twentieth century.

My theoretical framework for the imperial signification of the ballet is informed by Norbert Elias' treatment of court culture in *The Court Society*.³ Elias discusses the "prestige-fetish" of etiquette, "an indicator of the position of an individual within the balance of power," and the "mechanism of ceremonial" in the court of Louise XIV.⁴ Elias reads the daily rituals of the French monarch as a mechanical ceremony in which the courtiers' roles are important only in the signification of their relationship to the royal body as a symbol of the power of the state. I use Elias' notion of the symbolic body as a point of departure for my interpretation of the ballet, which began to develop its modern form under the reign of Louis XIV, as an ideal representation of imperial power in two regards. First, the ballet developed as a mode of social interaction amongst members of the nobility, in which the etiquette of dance reinforced social structures within the court. Secondly, in the subsequent era of the theatrical staging and professionalization of dance, the ballet body no longer signified the power of the performer but of the spectator.

I argue that the ballet reflects the social shift from "subject" to "object" of power that Michel Foucault observes in the military body in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Foucault discusses Louis XIV and Grand Duke Mikhail's examinations of their regiments: "Discipline, however, had its own type of ceremony. It was not the triumph,

² Vera Krasovskaia. *Russkii baletnyi teatr nachala xx veka*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1972. Vol. 1, 372.

³ Norbert Elias. *The Court Society*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

⁴ Elias. 85, 89.

but the review, the ‘parade,’ an ostentatious form of the examination. In it the ‘subjects’ were presented as ‘objects’ to the observation of a power that was manifested only by its gaze.”⁵ Foucault’s “gaze” as a manifestation of the observer’s power provides the basis for my analysis of the social hierarchy within both the ballet company and the assembled audience.

Finally, I draw on Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “official nationalism” in the Romanov dynasty as the “willed merger of nation and dynastic empire” in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.⁶ My discussion of the system of patronage in ballet culture highlights a significant tension in the early-twentieth-century Ballets Russes productions. The very imperial theatrical system that created the dancers and choreographers of Ballets Russes did not fund their productions under the direction of Diaghilev. Following the theatre reform of 1882 in which the imperial monopoly was dissolved and private theatres were permitted, the Ballets Russes performed in Paris with private financial support. Their self-representation as a cultural export of Russia was more telling than they imagined. In the “Russian Seasons” (“*Saisons russes*” or “*Russkie sezony*”) in Paris, the “grand” (“*bol’shoi*”) ballets of the nineteenth century, a product and reflection of imperial court culture, were replaced by the one-act ballets of the twentieth century, in which high and low culture mixed in stylized “folk” (“*narodnyi*”) dance and even imperial funding was a vestige of the past.

The History of Ballet in Russia

⁵ Michel Foucault. “The Means of Correct Training.” In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1979. 188.

⁶ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. 83.

Although ballet first appeared in Russia as early as 1673, historians mark its initial flourishing with the establishment of the first imperial ballet school by Empress Anna in 1738.⁷ From its origins until its incorporation into the imperial theater system created by Catherine II in 1756, ballet acquired social acceptance through aristocratic dancing at balls and assemblies.⁸ Yet the pupils of the first school in St. Petersburg were the children of house serfs,⁹ and the theatrical school founded in Moscow in 1809 admitted students “chosen if possible from the families of theatre employees,” most likely serf descendants.¹⁰ In Russia perhaps even more than in Europe, the ballet mirrored Foucault’s mechanized military as a highly “disciplined,” visually “examined,”¹¹ sexually segregated¹² display of the tsar’s power. Indeed, during the reign of Paul I, the military and ballet merged in Paul’s propensity for parades, prohibition of male dancers, and decree that ballerina Nastenka Birilova don men’s clothes to play male roles.¹³ While the ballet under Paul I was characterized by military pomp, the ballet of Alexander I,

⁷ Aleksandr Pleshcheev. *Nash balet (1674-1896)*. St. Petersburg: Tip. A. Benke., 1896. 29-36.

⁸ Pleshcheev 30-33. Iu. A. Bakhrushkin. *Istoriia russkogo baleta*. Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1973. 17-23. Tim Scholl. *From Petipa to Balanchine: Classical Revival and the Modernization of Ballet*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 2.

⁹ Bakhrushin 27-28. Sergei Lifar. *A History of Russian Ballet From its Origins to the Present Day*. Trans. Arnold Haskell. New York: Roy Publishers, 1954. 25-26.

¹⁰ Lifar 70. See Richard Stites for the historical context of the serf actor. *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 238-242.

¹¹ Foucault 188.

¹² Pupils were segregated by sex in the imperial theatre school. For an account of the imperial theatre school in the mid-nineteenth century, see A. P. Natarova. “*Iz vospominanii artistki*.” *Istoricheskii vestnik*. 1903. No. 10, 25-44; No. 11 420-442; No. 12, 778, 803.

¹³ Pleshcheev 51. Pleshcheev also notes that Paul enjoyed dancing himself, and Richard Wortman suggests his similarity to Louis XIV as “the all-seeing, all-controlling image of power. . . the sovereign [who] remained the center of attention even as he looked out upon his subjects.” *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. Vol. 1. 184.

portrayed as “a divine angel” by Nicholas Karamzin,¹⁴ was defined by the “flying” ballets of Charles Didelot, the dancer Istomina, and their immortalization in the works of Alexander Pushkin.¹⁵

By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the imperial ballet faced a critical crisis and the relationship between ballet and literature became more polemical. Although balletomanes filled the theatres and the press with their praise, the halcyon days of Pushkin, Didelot, and Istomina were long gone. Nikolai Gogol reflected the literary shift away from the Romantic idealization of the ballet in his “Petersburg notes of 1836” (“*Peterburgskie zapiski 1836 goda*”). Gogol describes ballet, together with opera the “tsar and tsaritsa of Petersburg theatre,” as crippled by the French influence, the lack of anything “new” in the choreography, and the inauthentic homogeneity in the character dances: “a Russian [doesn’t dance] like a Frenchman, like an Asian . . . a northern Russian doesn’t dance like a Ukrainian . . . like a Pole, like a Finn.”¹⁶ Gogol’s criticism came during the height of the Romantic ballet in Europe and Russia: his review followed the Paris premiere of Marie Taglioni in *La Sylphide* (1832) and preceded Fanny Elssler’s Petersburg performance of *Giselle* (Petersburg premiere 1842, Elssler’s performance 1848).¹⁷ The decadence of the ballet was especially striking in the 1840s and 1850s, when balletomanes dined on Taglioni’s ballet slipper and guards harnessed themselves to

¹⁴ Nikolai Karamzin. “To His Imperial Majesty Alexander I, All-Russian Autocrat, On His Ascension to the Throne” (1801). In *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*. Moscow, 1966. 261. As quoted in Wortman. Vol. 1. 193.

¹⁵ See, for an example of how Didelot and Istomina were inseparable in cultural memory from Pushkin’s depiction of their art, Pleshcheev’s preface with its quotation from *Eugene Onegin*: “*To stan’ sovet’, to razov’et’, / I bystroï nozhkoi nozhku b’et’.*” ii.

¹⁶ Nikolai Gogol. “*Peterburgskie zapiski 1836 goda.*” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1952. Vol. 8. 180, 184-5.

¹⁷ Iurii Slonimskii. *Giselle: Etiudy*. Leningrad: Muzyka, 1969. 95, 97.

Elssler's carriage.¹⁸ This period, dominated by the tours of foreign stars performing ballets from the "'international' repertory,"¹⁹ also inaugurated the call of Realist writers for nationalist themes in the imperial ballet.

From the 1860s through the 1890s, the ballet continued to flourish onstage in varied forms, from full-length "grand" ballets, to benefit concerts, to ballet divertissements and character dances in opera. The tsars' patronage of the ballet secured famous European choreographers and dancers as well as cultivated talented Russian artists at the imperial theatre school. The theatres of St. Petersburg and Moscow were frequently full, and the newspapers debated the virtues and shortcomings of each new production. Yet in the era of Alexander II's Great Reforms, intelligentsia writers and critics increasingly dismissed the ballet as a retrograde and frivolous art form. Realist writers Nikolai Nekrasov and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedin even satirized ballets and their audience in *The Contemporary* (*Sovremennik*). Most supporters of the imperial ballet, who in contrast composed dedicatory verses to favored dancers, were members of the balletomane subculture, which included in its ranks ballet critic and historian Alexander Pleshcheev as well as ballet scenarist and editor of the *Petersburg Gazette* (*Peterburskaia gazeta*) Sergei Khudekov. During this period, the popularity of "national" ballets attested to this political shift in Russian society and to the emergence of an intelligentsia marginalized by aristocratic court culture and its cultivation of the ballet.

The Little Humpbacked Horse and Fin-de-siècle Nostalgia

¹⁸ Ronald John Wiley. *Tchaikovsky's Ballets: Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Nutcracker*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. 11.

¹⁹ Scholl 3.

Beginning in the 1880s, the future organizers of the Ballets Russes came of age and were educated as spectators in the imperial theatres of St. Petersburg. Benois famously records his memories of the ballet in his *Memoirs* as well as his *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*.²⁰ In both works, Benois cites the impact of Arthur Saint-Léon's nationalist ballet *The Little Humpbacked Horse* (*Konek-gorbunok*). This 1864 ballet represents a response to the political climate of the 1860s and the critical call for Russian themes in the ballet. From his first arrival in St. Petersburg in 1859, Saint-Léon expressed an interest in folk dance and national character dance.²¹ It is not, therefore, surprising that the choreographer would adapt Piotr Ershov's 1834 Russian folk tale into a national ballet. Sources vary in their accounts of the origin of the ballet. Khudekov claimed that the balletomane M. Lopukhin suggested the tale, both rich in Russian folklore and familiar to children,²² while the comic actor Timofei Stukolkin recalled the conceptualization and writing of the libretto as the spontaneous and organic development of an artistic circle that gathered on Saturdays at Saint-Léon's apartment.²³

²⁰ Benois. *Moi vospominaniia v piati knigakh*. Moscow: Nauka, 1993. In English translation *Memoirs*. Trans. Moura Budberg. London: Chatto & Windus, 1960. *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*. Trans. Mary Britnieva. London: Putnam, 1947.

²¹ Krasovskaia 67-69.

²² See S. Khudekov. "Peterburgskii balet vo vremia postanovki 'Kon'ka-gorbunka' (vospominaniia)." *Peterburgskaia gazeta*. No. 20 (1896: 21 January).

²³ See T. A. Stukolkin. *Vospominaniia*. In *Artist*. 1895. No. 46. 123. As cited in I. A. Boglacheva. "Materialy k biografii Marfi Nikolaevny Murav'evoi." In *Zapiski Sankt-Peterburgskoi teatral'noi biblioteki*. Ed. P. V. Dmitriev. St. Petersburg: Giperion, 1999. 119.

In the libretto of the ballet, Saint-Léon made significant changes to Ershov's text.²⁴ The ballet sets the action in Krasnovodsk, a fortress on the Caspian Sea from which the Russian imperial armies carried out operations against Khiva and Bukhara in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And Saint-Léon replaces Ershov's despotic tsar with a Kazakh khan. Thus Ershov's criticism of feudalism in the reign of Nicholas I becomes an allegory of imperial expansion that projects tsarist power.²⁵ Ershov's protagonist, Ivan-the-Fool (*Ivan-durak*), is aided in his folkloric quests by the little humpbacked horse, who remains a magical mythological creature akin to the Fire Bird (*Zhar-ptitsa*). Yet in Saint-Léon's ballet, the horse assumes the ethnic identity of "an old hunchbacked Jew" and acts as a mediator between the Turkic khan and the Slavic peasant.²⁶ The ethnographic tourism continues in the dances of the animated frescos featuring a South-American Indian, an Algerian Jewess, an Asian Indian, a "black Egyptian," a "white-faced daughter of the Swiss Alps," and, the most beautiful of all, the Tsar-Maiden (*Tsar'-devitsa*).²⁷ While the verse folktale of Ershov concludes with a celebratory meal of social leveling in which Ivan, the former peasant, outwits the cruel tsar, marries the Tsar-Maiden, and shares wine and honey with the boyars; Saint-Léon's ballet culminates in the proclamation of Ivan as the new khan and a "general dance of representatives of all the peoples of the Russian empire."²⁸

²⁴ Piotr Ershov. *Konek-gorbunok: Stikhotvoreniia*. Ed. M. K. Azadvoskii. Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1961. For the published libretto of the ballet, see Ronald Wiley's translation. "Libretto of *The Little Humpbacked Horse, or The Tsar Maiden*." *A Century of Russian Ballet: Documents and Accounts, 1810-1910*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. 238-250.

²⁵ See V. G. Utkov. *Dorogoi Kon'ka gorbunka: Sud'by knigi*. Moscow: Kniga, 1970.

²⁶ Wiley 243.

²⁷ Wiley 245.

²⁸ Wiley 249.

Khudekov chronicles the furor surrounding the premier of *The Little Humpbacked Horse* in Petersburg on December 3 1864 in his retrospective “Petersburg ballet in the time of the performance of *The Little Humpbacked Horse* (memoirs)” (“*Peterburgskii balet vo vremia postanovki ‘Kon’ka-gorbunka’ (vospominaniia)*”)²⁹, and even the conservative critic and *raznochinets* writer Apollon Grigor’ev was converted from an avowed “enemy of ballets” into a fellow worshipper by the “poetry” of ballerina Marfa Murav’eva, the Tsar-Maiden.³⁰ The ballet remained in the repertory under the reign of Marius Petipa as ballet master, and the dramatist Alexander Ostrovskii recalls its popularity with, but ambiguous moral influence on, children in a letter from 1885.³¹ It was during this period that future *World of Art* members (“*miriskussniki*”) viewed *The Little Humpbacked Horse*, and Benois remembers seeing the performance “four times” between 1878 and 1883, a number which “would correspond, I should say to seeing something forty times as a grown-up.”³²

Benois discusses *The Little Humpbacked Horse* not only with nostalgia but also with a retrospective reading of revolutionary themes in the ballet:

The Hump-Backed Horse was at that period our only national ballet. . . [I]ts great popularity . . . may be partly due to Pugni’s music, with its . . . gay march of *The Peoples of Russia*. . . The ballet used to end with an apotheosis of Russia. For

²⁹ Khudekov. As published in *Peterburgskaia gazeta*. No. 20 (1896: 21 January).

³⁰ Apollon Grigor’ev. “*Khronika spektaklei (o poesii v akterskom isskustve)*.” In *Teatral’naia kritika*. Ed. A. Ia. Al’tshuller. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1985. 327-337. Originally published with the *podpis* “*Nenuzhnyi chelovek*” in *Iakor*. 1864. No. 1. 12-14.

³¹ In 1885, Alexander Ostrovskii writes that ballet has fallen, and that it is difficult to choose a “light” repertoire for Christmas and Maslenitsa, as children like old ballets such as *Konek-gorbunok*, with brilliant decorations, but afterwards at home they ask their nannies about the naked arms and legs of the dancers: “*Ochen’ korotkie iubki—effekt dovol’no sil’ny*” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. Moscow: Gos. Izdat. Khudozh. Lit-ry, 1953. Vol. XVI, 186.

³² Benois. *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*. 49.

some unknown reason the background consisted of the Thousand Year Jubilee Monument at Nijni-Novgorod. An enormous procession of all the different nations inhabiting the Russian Empire filed past make obeisance to the fool who had become their ruler. In sign of their loyalty the warriors raise the fool and his bride and carry them round the stage—just as is done in almost all Lifar’s ballets nowadays. It is surprising how much flagrant free-thinking was passed by the theatrical censors, and actually on the stage of the Imperial Theatre! Probably the keepers of orthodox views never imagined that one could find anything seditious in the triumph of a simpleton.³³

Here Benois suggests a connection between the “national” themes of *The Little Humpbacked Horse* (which I would suggest is actually “imperialist,” with the procession of nations, vilification of the khan, and triumph of the Slavic folk hero) and the origin of *Petrushka*. In both ballets, the conflict between the simple Slav, Ivan or Petrushka, and the despotic Other, the Khan or Moor, is resolved with a death and an “apotheosis.” The Russian empire in the former is glorified by the death of the Khan, a multi-ethnic march, and the veneration of Ivan; while in the latter the ghost of the Petrushka, murdered by the Moor, rises above the fairground and imparts to the Parisian audience the introspective and eternal “soul” of the Russian people.³⁴

The Premiere of *Petrushka* in Paris

Much scholarship has explored the authorship of *Petrushka*’s libretto, the history of which is complicated by the collaborative process of the scenarist Benois, the composer Igor Stravinskii, and the choreographer Mikhail Fokine.³⁵ All three artists construe their

³³ Benois. *Reminiscences*. 56-58.

³⁴ Benois. *Reminiscences*. 329.

³⁵ See Andrew Wachtel. “The Ballet’s Libretto.” In *Petrushka: Sources and Contexts*. Ed. Andre Wachtel. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998. 11-13.

contributions as central to in their respective memoirs,³⁶ yet the nature of *Petrushka* as “total work of art” or “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” blurs genre demarcations and synthesizes individual influences. This very process of collaboration deviates from the traditional form of creating ballets in the imperial system. The imperial ballet emulated the French tradition, established in the eighteenth century, when Jean Georges Noverre “envisaged the *ballet d’action*, which might be inserted between the acts of an opera but would stand on its own as an independent work.”³⁷ Noverre wrote in his *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* that ballet no longer required verbal aid in the expression of narrative, as “dancing is possessed of all the advantages of a beautiful language . . . it will speak with both strength and energy . . . And dancing, embellished with feeling and guided by talent, will at last receive that praise and applause which all Europe accords to poetry.”³⁸ Although ballet continued to appear in opera, the *ballet d’action* established the legitimacy of ballet as an independent art form and simultaneously enabled the absolute control of the choreographer, epitomized by Petipa in late-nineteenth-century Russia. The rigid hierarchy of commission, choreography, and musical composition suggests a descending relationship of power from court to choreographer to composer. Scenarists and stage artists ranked even lower, and multiple artistic visions often resulted in a final product that lacked integrity. But the Modernist project of the Ballets Russes sought to alter this power dynamic.

³⁶ In addition to the above-cited Benois memoir, see Igor Stravinskii. *An Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936. Also Mikhail Fokine. *Protiv pecheniia: vospominaniia baletmeistera*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1981.

³⁷ Ivor Guest. *The Ballet of the Enlightenment: The Establishment of the Ballet d’Action in France, 1770-1793*. London: Dance Books, 1996. 30.

³⁸ Jean Georges Noverre. *Letters on Dancing and Ballets*. Trans. Cyril W. Beaumont. New York: Dance Horizons, 1968. 20.

The most important way in which the ballets of the “Russian Seasons” deviated from the path of imperial ballet production was in their financial support. The system of imperial patronage, in which the maintenance of the ballet company and the commissions of ballets were allocated as part of the tsar’s household budget, was compromised first by Ivan Vsevolozhskii’s theatrical reforms. As the Director of Imperial Theatres (1881-1899), Vsevolozhskii’s reform in 1882 enabled privately-owned theatrical troops and “did much to revitalize the Russian stage in the next decades.”³⁹ Petersburg merchant Savva Mamontov’s Private Opera Company exemplified the new movement in theatre towards *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and indeed Mamontov “agreed, in 1898, to pay half the expenses of Diaghilev’s path-breaking journal *Mir iskusstvo*.”⁴⁰ Lynn Garafola positions the emerging Ballets Russes artists within the “neonationalist tide that swept Russia at the century’s end” and discusses the influence and patronage not only of Mamontov at his artists’ colony in Abramtsevo but also of Princess Maria Tenisheva at Talashkino.⁴¹ Tenisheva similarly “helped underwrite” Diaghilev’s journal in 1898 and 1899,⁴² yet Benois reveals that both patrons withdrew funding in 1900, at which time “we were saved by the Emperor, who gave 10,000 rubles from his private funds.”⁴³

Although tsar Nicholas II, by Benois’ account, looked favorably upon the *World of Art* and later Ballets Russes group of artists, their relationship to the court remained tenuous, especially in comparison with previous eras of the Russian ballet. During the brief directorate of Prince Sergei Volkonskii (Director of Imperial Theatres, 1899-1901) and

³⁹ Scholl 17.

⁴⁰ Wachtel 9.

⁴¹ Lynn Garafola. *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. 14.

⁴² Garafola 14.

⁴³ Benois *Reminiscences* 209.

the production of the ballet *Sylvia*, the relationship between Diaghilev and the Imperial Theatres became strained to the degree that Diaghilev was disgracefully dismissed from service. And Fokine became the target of the next Director of Imperial Theatres, Vladimir Arkadievich Teliakovskii (1901-1917), for his support of anti-tsarist comrades during the 1905 revolution. Consequently, the decision of Diaghilev, along with Benois and Leon Bakst, to launch an “export campaign of Russian art” in 1906 at the Grand Palais in Paris led to the showcasing of Russian concert music at the Paris Opéra in 1907, of the Russian opera *Boris Godunov* in 1908, and finally of Russian ballet in 1909.⁴⁴

The first “Russian Season” of ballet in 1909 was partially funded by Grand Duchess Marie Pavlovna, the widow of Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich, patron of the *Boris Godunov* production. Diaghilev additionally utilized a less traditional, now time-honored method: the sponsorship of “a manufacturer of galoshes, who had no connection whatsoever with the theatre” but who sought “the status of nobility as a reward for his donations to charity.”⁴⁵ This sum of 100,000 gold rubles echoes an earlier discussion by Benois on the criticism of ballet in the era of Alexander II: “in this epoch there prevailed in Russian society ideas of an utilitarian and materialist kind . . . these ideas found expression in the aphorism of the time: ‘Boots come before Pushkin.’”⁴⁶ By the beginning of the twentieth century, not only did “boots come before Pushkin” but even “galoshes paid for the ballet.”

The question of patronage illuminates a central tension underlying the seasons of the Diaghilev ballets in Paris. On the one hand, the architects of these ballets strove to

⁴⁴ Benois *Reminiscences* 238-239.

⁴⁵ Benois *Reminiscences* 279.

⁴⁶ Benois *Reminiscences* 47.

represent “Russian” ballet and thus imperial ballet. Yet their only means of showcasing such work required them to “export” their imperial product to Paris: the very empire they represented prevented their performance within its geographic borders. And their funding relied upon increasingly less reliable donations from noble families and increasingly more generous sponsorship from industrial donors seeking social ascendancy. This “world-upside-down” culture of artistic production found expression in the ballet *Petrushka*, with its “carnavalesque” setting, in the sense of Mikhail Bakhtin, during Shrovetide (*Maslenitsa*) in 1830s St. Petersburg.⁴⁷

The plot of *Petrushka*, a hybrid adaptation of the Russian “Petrushka” puppet show⁴⁸ and the sixteenth-century Italian Commedia dell’arte tradition,⁴⁹ depends upon the stock characters of Petrushka, the Moor (*Arap*), and the Ballerina as versions of Pierrot, Harlequin, and Columbine. The Commedia dell’arte triangle in the ballet plays on the competition of Pierrot, the tragic, contemplative hero, and Harlequin, the comic, demonic trickster, for the love of Columbine, the Symbolist ideal of the “eternal feminine.” In Benois, Stravinskii, and Fokine’s ballet, however, these types are revealed as puppet masks for sentient beings imprisoned and exploited by the orientalized Conjurer (*Fokusnik*). The setting of the ballet transports the audience to the Shrovetide square of Petersburg in the 1830s, the era of ballet “classicism” and the cruelty of Nicholas I,

⁴⁷ See Mikhail Bakhtin. “Popular-Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais.” In *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. 196-277.

⁴⁸ See Catriona Kelly’s discussion of *Petrushka*’s nebulous historical origins: its reputation as an ancient Russian puppet show, in contrast to its possible nineteenth-century European importation. “*Petrushka* and the fairground.” In *Petrushka: The Russian Carnival Puppet Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 18-58.

⁴⁹ See Wachtel’s discussion of “the Commedia dell’arte Tradition” and “the Contemporary Commedia dell’arte” manifestation in Russian Symbolism. 20-29.

where the puppet booths (*balagany*) of cultural memory figure prominently. Tim Scholl notes in his analysis of the ballet's choreographic innovations that Fokine has essentially extracted the scenes of "national" or "character" dance from the imperial ballets of Saint-Léon and Petipa and displayed them without their imperial fairy-tale frame of solo variations and *pas de deux*. Scholl writes, "[i]n fact, the crowd scenes in *Petrushka* are quite similar to those in Petipa works that feature suites of national or other character dances. . . . Once again, however, Fokine inverts ballet tradition: for the Paris audience, the national dances are Russian and, according to most witnesses, much closer to their folk sources than they had been on the imperial stages."⁵⁰

Fokine's inversion of ballet tradition extends to the dissolution or at least confusion of the division between spectacle and spectator. While the first and fourth tableaux of the ballet represent the exterior carnival square, the second tableau reveals the interior, psychological space of Petrushka's room and the third tableau represents the exotic splendor of the Moor's room.⁵¹ Thus the traditional theatrical conceit of performer and audience is undercut, as the dancing marionettes made to dance by the Conjuror's magic flute are given human attributes and represented in their "natural," non-theatrical environments. Just as the artifice of the Conjuror's tricks are revealed, however, the artifice of *Petrushka's* creators is suggested when the Moor kills Petrushka in a fight for the Ballerina, and Petrushka is revealed to the audience both on stage and in the theatre to be no more than a saw-dust body. Yet, once again, the ballet switches back to the non-realistic world of lyrical theatre, when the crowd disperses on stage, and Petrushka's

⁵⁰ See Scholl. "Fokine's *Petrushka*." In *Petrushka: Sources and Contexts*. Ed. Andrew Wachtel. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998. 45-48.

⁵¹ For the English translation of the libretto, see Wachtel. "The Libretto of *Petrushka*." 115-122.

ghost, Benois' conception of his soul, rises above the fairground to Stravinskii's final melancholy notes.

The performances of Vaslav Nijinskii as Petrushka, Tamara Karasavina as the Ballerina, Alexander Orlov as the Moor, and Enrico Cecchetti as the Conjuror were equally effective in conveying the conflict between life and its representation in art. Ia. Tugenkol'd writes in his review of the ballet in *Apollon*: "the performers . . . were so imbued with the seriousness of this 'puppet' drama that they were able not only to amuse the spectator by the strangeness of their 'cardboard' rhythms, but to force him to sympathize with the romantic tragedy of Petrushka-Pierrot."⁵² The sympathy of the Parisian audience, overwhelmed by the "invasion" of the "barbarian" Russians,⁵³ attests to the success of Russia's imperial ballet project and of Diaghilev's Modernist experiment. The cultural exportation of ballet from the Petersburg court of Russia to the Parisian stage of Europe reflects both the apogee and the passage of empire. In the ballet's ambivalent nostalgia for the imperial past of childhood and criticism of a regime of puppet-masters and their human puppets, the creators of *Petrushka* visualized a historic, folkloric Russia as a new kind of cultural commodity.

⁵² I. Tugenkol'd. "Itogi sezona." *Apollon*, no. 6, 1911, 65-74. As quoted in Wachtel 40.

⁵³ Benois *Reminiscences* 284.

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