

## The Rite of Spring (*Le Sacre du printemps*)

updated Apr 26

*"The Rite of Spring remains without doubt, the most emblematic collaboration between Stravinsky and the Ballet Russes. Conceived by Igor Stravinsky (composer), Nijinsky (dancer/choreographer)<sup>1</sup> and Nicolas Roerich (a painter and the libretto's author and costume designer), it tells of, in the words of the composer, a great pagan ritual where 'wise elders are seated in a circle and are observing the dance before death of a girl whom they are offering as a sacrifice to the god of Spring'. The dancers needed 120 hours of rehearsals as their training at the Imperial Ballet School in Saint Petersburg had ill prepared them for the structure of Nijinsky's choreography....."<sup>2</sup>. The ballet's theme of ritual sacrifice is a test of stamina, willpower and skill "as exhausted dancers are only too aware by the time the curtain falls"<sup>3</sup>.*

Serge Diaghilev's company Ballets Russes that he had created in St. Petersburg had its first Paris season in 1909 where it was not only the main ballet (Michel Fokine's *Le Pavillion d'Armide*) that caused a stir but the appearance of a young unknown dancer – Vaslav Nijinsky. For the following year's Paris season, Diaghilev requested 27-year-old Igor Stravinsky to compose the score for a new ballet (*The Firebird*), saying "I want a ballet and a Russian one; there has never been such a ballet before ..." to be again choreographed by Fokine. Diaghilev had originally commissioned a score from Anatoly Liadov but turned to Stravinsky when Liadov procrastinated. Danced by Tamara Karsavina the ballet was a great success although it is worth noting that Diaghilev's first choice for the lead role, Anna Pavlova, had declined his invitation as she found Stravinsky's music incomprehensible.

In the following years, Diaghilev and Stravinsky collaborated on a series of new ballets, one of the most acclaimed works being *Petrushka*, premiering in June 1911, for which Stravinsky's music was so discordant that the orchestral players burst out laughing and had to be persuaded by the conductor that it wasn't a joke. But Stravinsky believed if you play something that sounds wrong, you make it seem intentional by going back to it and repeating it over and over. The act of repetition legitimizes that 'wrong note'.

Stravinsky took this idea of discordance into his next collaboration with Diaghilev's Ballet Russes – *The Rite of Spring*. The idea for the ballet had come to Stravinsky as he was finishing *The Firebird* writing "I had dreamed a scene of a pagan ritual in which a chosen sacrificial virgin danced herself to death". In a later interview Stravinsky said: "I started to play him (i.e. Diaghilev) this chord – 59 times the same chord. Diaghilev was a little bit surprised. He asked me only one thing, a question that was very hurtful. Will it last a very long time? I said – to the end my dear". Discordance repeated is now a popular feature of modern music – and why as a non-musical person I find much modern music to be nothing but unpleasant noise.

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<sup>1</sup> The collaboration between Stravinsky and Nijinsky was not smooth – Stravinsky complained of Nijinsky's musical ignorance and Nijinsky deplored the way he was treated as an ignoramus and a child.

<sup>2</sup> Quote from Christian Dumais-Lvowski, publisher, writer and the author of several documentary films on dance.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Money – *The Art of the Royal Ballet* 1964

Premiering in May 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, and featuring Marie Piltz as The Chosen One, *The Rite of Spring* is legendary for the riot it caused. Based on a Russian fairytale, the ballet has two acts: Act I (The Adoration of the Earth) comprising an Introduction and six scenes; Act II (The Sacrifice) an Introduction and five scenes. The ballet begins with a solo bassoon playing in a high register. Veteran French composer and pianist Camille Saint-Saëns sitting in the audience at the premiere turned to his neighbour and asked: “What is that instrument?” Informed it was a bassoon<sup>4</sup> he replied: “If that’s a bassoon then I am a baboon”. He was one of many who left the theatre before the performance ended and later famously described Stravinsky’s music for *The Rite of Spring* as the work of a madman. For the music has syncopation, atonality and bitonality plus multiple time signatures. There is no melody – the music is rhythmic and pounding. At the ballet’s conclusion as the Chosen One lies on stage dead the final chords of the bass part spell out D E A D.

If Stravinsky’s music was provoking, so too were Roerich’s costumes and sets. The expected tutus of a conventional ballet were missing, replaced by peasant garments that hung awkwardly on the dancers’ bodies plus heavy woolen leggings such that their bodies were completely covered. The primeval backdrops portrayed jagged rocks and looming trees painted in nightmarish colours. A few of the stage and costume designs can be seen here:

<https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/stravinsky-rite-of-spring>

The final straw for the audience’s patience, however, was Nijinsky’s choreography which totally distorted traditional ballet. When the curtain went up the audience saw a circle of long-braided young women, knock-kneed with their toes pointed inward, bodies twitching to the music and then jumping up and down landing heavily, the jumps often off the beat. Within two minutes of curtain-up the audience was hissing, booing and cat calling. When the dancers tilted their heads to the side resting their jaws on their hands one wit shouted: “Call a dentist”. From then on chaos ensued.

Stravinsky, who had been sitting in the stalls section of the theatre, left his seat shouting out “Go to hell!” and made his way backstage where he found Nijinsky standing on a stool calling out the count to the dancers who were unable to hear the orchestra over the noise of the audience, and even he had eventually to resort to stomping his feet to give the count.

The first-night audience was a mixture of fashionable Parisians who regularly attended the ballet and had paid for tickets expecting to see a classical ballet and avant-garde students and artists to whom Diaghilev had given free tickets<sup>5</sup>. The two disparate groups shouted insults at each other and even resorted to slapping and fisticuffs. To restore order, Diaghilev tried flicking the theatre lights off and on but ultimately the police were required to restore order, reputedly ejecting 40 troublemakers and arresting at least two.<sup>6</sup> Stravinsky

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<sup>4</sup> Stravinsky’s opening melody is recognized as being derived from an anthology of Lithuanian folk songs. In a nod to Stravinsky, the solo bassoon also opens the movie *Star Wars Episode IV*.

<sup>5</sup> Stravinsky later said he suspected Diaghilev had done this deliberately to provoke audience reaction, presumably for publicity purposes

<sup>6</sup> The audience were certainly noisy, and according to artist Valentine Gross: “People shouted insults, howled and whistled, drowning the music. There was slapping and even punching ...”, but it is worth noting that calling the disturbance a ‘riot’ did not occur until much later.

remembered that afterwards “*We were excited, angry, disgusted, and .... happy .... Diaghilev’s only comment was ‘Exactly what I wanted’.*”

Because of the scandal created, *The Rite of Spring* was withdrawn from the Ballet Russes repertoire after only eight performances (five in Paris and three in London). Nijinsky had not recorded his choreography and despite Léonide Massine’s 1920 version, the ballet fell into disuse. It was only after several years of research by dance historians and choreographers, Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer, that Nijinsky’s choreography was reconstructed in the mid-1980s. They staged the result for the Joffrey Ballet in 1987. Until then only Massine’s 1930s version was available to be revived.

The first American production of *The Rite of Spring*, featuring Martha Graham as the Chosen One, had been staged in New York in 1930 by Massine, a young Bolshoi Ballet dancer and later choreographer, who had been enticed by Diaghilev to join the Ballets Russes in 1913 as a replacement for the recently dismissed Nijinsky<sup>7</sup>. Massine had created his version in 1920, reworking Stravinsky’s score, to the composer’s approval, Stravinsky explaining: “*Massine does not follow the music note by note or bar by bar. Quite the contrary, he battles against the metre ..... I will give you an example. Here is one bar of four, then one of five beats: Massine might make his dancers do three threes, which corresponds and adds up to exactly the same total, but goes better under the music than a note-by-note transference, which was the fault of the old choreography*”.

On Diaghilev’s death in Venice in 1929 the Ballet Russes company collapsed. Diaghilev had not been a ballet dancer nor a choreographer, but an impresario, a self-described “*great charlatan*” and “*charmeur ..... with very few principles*” and his great skill had been in fostering collaboration between artists from diverse disciplines. He launched the careers of dancers (Vaslav Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Alicia Markova), choreographers (Mikhail Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska<sup>8</sup>, Léonide Massine, George Balanchine), and musical careers (Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev) as well as commissioning ballet scores from established names such as Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Richard Strauss, Erik Satie. He also commissioned designs by Léon Bakst, Nadia Benois, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and costumes by Coco Chanel<sup>9</sup>.

Following the demise of Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes multiple new companies sprang up, many retaining the Ballet Russe’s name, such as René Blum’s Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo with George Balanchine as the choreographer. Blum was soon joined by showman Colonel W. de Basil who later took over his company when Blum left to form his own company. De Basil’s company (known as the Original Ballet Russe) spent the war years touring Australia and the Americas before folding in the late 1940s. As the multiple Ballet Russe companies were touring companies rather than state-funded national companies, the need for portable painted scenery backdrops rather than built sets saw the practice of commissioning established painters to produce backdrops and set designs continue for many decades.

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<sup>7</sup> Dismissed by his jilted lover Diaghilev after he suddenly married Romola de Pulszky, a well-born Hungarian dancer, during a South American tour.

<sup>8</sup> Vaslav Nijinsky’s sister – the only female choreographer to work for the Ballet Russes

<sup>9</sup> Zoë Anderson - *The Ballet Lover’s Companion* 2015

Massine for instance carried on Diaghilev's practice of involving visual artists during his years with both the de Basil company and its American rival the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

When de Basil's company toured Australia for the first time, dance critic Arnold Haskell reviewing *Les Sylphides* in December 1936 for Melbourne's Daily Telegraph commented on the unsatisfactory décor and suggested it be scrapped. "*Why not give us a background of white gums with their subtle colouring – as ideal a setting as one could conceive*". This idea appears to have resounded with de Basil for in February 1940 during his third and last tour of Australia he announced a competition, carrying a ten-guinea prize, for Australian artists designed to elicit designs for a projected ballet on an Australian theme. Around 70 designs were submitted for the competition, which was won by Donald Friend with his designs for *Hold-Up*, a ballet based on an incident in the life of the bushranger Ned Kelly. However, de Basil never produced a new ballet designed by an Australian artist. During his three tours of Australia his company performed 46 ballet productions, including Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (tours 1, 3) and *Petrushka* (tours 1, 2, 3), but *The Rite of Spring* was never performed.

Sydney Nolan, one of Australia's most significant modernist artists, best known for his iconic paintings of the bushranger Kelly Gang as well as his depictions of the history and mythology of bush life in Australia, was a beneficiary of this movement to use Australian artists.

Aged only 21, Nolan was commissioned to create new designs for Serge Lifar's<sup>10</sup> 1940 Australian production of his ballet *Icare (Icarus)*, originally created for Paris Opera in 1935. Nolan produced a set of designs based on the tents of his childhood haunt of St Kilda Amusement Park and these were approved by Lifar. Nolan then presented three models painted with an abstracted camouflage pattern of stripes. Lifar was not impressed as he thought the design was too complicated and in competition with the dancers. Nolan later recounted Lifar saying: "*I have the most beautiful line in the world, and you are trying to destroy it ..... So I took away all my pet ideas which I had been thinking about for two or three years and I returned with a rather simple idea of rainbows over the St Kilda pier in Melbourne and of Icarus falling into the rainbow and he said 'oh that's perfect'*".

Reflecting on the experience later in life, Nolan commented: "*So all my theories about stage design and ballet design were proven quite wrong because of his implacable and entirely correct idea that his line, his balletic line was sacrosanct. That came first and my ideas and my design came second. So that was my first lesson*".

Nolan's scenery was much discussed and views differed. Melbourne's The Argus newspaper reported "*Nolan has designed a neutral backcloth and some excellent costumes*" and "*Icare wins 20 curtains*", while its morning competitor, the Melbourne Age, commented "*Icare was staged arrestingly in costumes beautiful, yet austere by Sydney Nolan of Melbourne*". In contrast the Sydney Morning Herald reviewer was not impressed writing: "*As regard the scenery, that was a mere vague scraggle of black lines against a flat surface, part pink, part*

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<sup>10</sup> Following Diaghilev's death in 1929, principal dancer Serge Lifar went on to direct the Paris Opera Ballet for three decades.

blue. If it had any meaning, it was not apparent to the causally seeking eye". You can judge for yourself in the link below.

<https://digital.nga.gov.au/archive/exhibition/balletsrusses/default.cfm%3Firn=49956&bioartistirn=23585&mnuid=3&galid=35&viewid=2.html>

To mark Stravinsky's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, a new production of *The Rite of Spring* was commissioned by The Royal Ballet in 1962 to be directed by dancer and choreographer Kenneth MacMillan who approached Nolan to collaborate. Nolan recalled: "*I began by talking to the choreographer Kenneth MacMillan. He analyzed the music and produced some dance forms, and I made suggestions as to what I could do which was basically to provide a kind of Central Australian landscape ..... Kenneth quite properly thought this was wrong. He suggested I try and produce a more elemental scene which primitive people could worship and then I thought of The Moon Boy which I had painted in 1940*".

The painting, officially titled "*Boy and the Moon*", comprises an ovoid mass of mustard yellow with a stalk-like protrusion at its base – silhouetted against a ground of blue-black. The idea for the painting came simply from Nolan observing his friend's head one night while sitting on a bench as a full moon rose above the horizon. Nolan repeated this image of a shimmering orb in a deep indigo blue background on a monumental scale for the backcloth to Act 2: The Sacrifice, where it presides over the climax of the ballet in which the Chosen Maiden dances to her death.

[https://www.moma.org/collection/works/38442?artist\\_id=4325&page=1&sov\\_referrer=artist](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/38442?artist_id=4325&page=1&sov_referrer=artist)

Nolan's costumes comprised woolen unitards marked with handprints in tones of reds and ochres, imitating Aboriginal rock art that Nolan had seen at Carnarvon Gorge, Queensland in 1947. Many people now consider Nolan's use of handprints on the costumes to be an act of cultural appropriation from Australia's First Nations people and to be inappropriate. Perhaps, but pre-historic handprints cannot be owned by anyone – as they occur in caves in France, Spain<sup>11</sup>, India and Argentina and probably in many other places of which I am unaware, not just Australia, even if it was here that Nolan received his inspiration.

Nolan was also commissioned by The Australian Ballet's co-Artistic Director Robert Helpmann to design the décor and costumes for TAB's appearance at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in March 1964. Helpmann's concept for the ballet was based on his experience seeing the dance and hearing the call of a Lyrebird in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges. The resulting ballet, *The Display*, was a festival highlight but as it included fights and a brutal rape of a young woman, very controversial becoming "*the subject of lively, even heated, conversation and discussion in the daily and periodical press*". Over the next decade TAB presented the work in over 100 theatres worldwide.

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<sup>11</sup> A study of 32 handprints in eight caves in France and Spain concluded, based on finger length, that 75% were drawn by woman. Another researcher in a more recent study, using palm-to-thumb ratio of the handprints, concluded they were mainly drawn by teenage boys who, he told National Geographic magazine, often drew their two favourite topics: big powerful animals and naked ladies

Nolan had worked with stage designers to develop a painted backdrop of dark hues and a layering of gauze to echo the dappled light of the forest. The lyre bird costume comprised a velvet suit with a spray-painted pattern on the chest while the sweeping tail had two side levers that allowed the dancer to extend, close and rotate the tail at 180 degrees – a feat of engineering that required exceptional strength and dexterity to operate. To quote Australia Dances<sup>12</sup> “... *apart from the startlingly realistic lyrebird costume for the Male, Nolan’s costumes were generally undistinguished*”, although, “*his décor, dappled by William Akers’ skilful lighting, was a sensitive evocation of the Australian bush*”.

**Key References:**

The Ballet Russes in Australia and beyond. Editor Mark Carroll 2011.

The Ballet Lover’s Companion by Zoë Anderson, Yale University Press (2015)

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<sup>12</sup> Australia Dances (Creating Australian Dance 1945-1965) by Alan Brissenden and Keith Glennon 2010