

Return of the Swans: Envisioning and Defining the National and Cosmopolitan Characteristics of “British Ballet” after Diaghilev (1929-1956)

Ballet is an internationally recognized high art form with transnational origins, and its use in Cold War cultural diplomacy exchanges requires that scholars interrogate closely what is meant by “national” or “state-representative” arts. Fundamental to my exploration of early-twentieth-century ballet is my assertion that the level of similarity in the actual content of repertoires and performance styles of state-representative ballet companies from Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union during the Cold War results not only from the dissemination of codified aesthetic preferences formed by established taste communities into an international arena of cultural exchange but also because of the transformation of arts funding, especially pertaining to ballet, in the first half of the twentieth century. The tensions between the national and cosmopolitan characteristics of ballet not only fascinated me but also formed the genesis of my interrogation: why did state-representative ballet companies, such as Britain’s Royal Ballet, perform similar cosmopolitan repertoires in a period of cultural exchanges aimed at displaying national characteristics in the arts?

In terms of their aesthetics, there are major differences between the market-driven modernism and bold gender explorations of Sergei Diaghilev’s productions performed by the Ballets Russes and the ballets later danced by state-representative companies in the Cold War era, which returned to full-length symphonic scores and revived the choreography and more conservative gender performances of the nineteenth century. Much scholarly attention has been given to Diaghilev and his famous company, which performed between 1909 and 1929, and to the dance diplomacy tours that began in the mid-1950s, but relatively little attention has been given to the interim period in order to understand the aesthetic shift that took place in the art form in the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, *Return of the Swans* investigates not only the development of divergent forms of British Ballet that came to the forefront of the London dance scene after Diaghilev’s death in 1929 but also the formation of a “taste community” that codified its preferences for the emergent national art form during what I have called the “British Ballet Movement.” It was the influence of this taste community that ultimately caused the “return of the swans” through unadulterated, full-length revivals of Imperial Russian Classics.

This British Ballet Movement began while Diaghilev’s company was still touring, flourished after the impresario’s death in 1929, and culminated in the rise of the Royal Ballet once the British government took an interest in state-funding for the arts during and after World War II. In the Interwar Period, British balletomanes, critics, and cultural arbiters, especially Philip J.S. Richardson, Arnold Haskell, and John Maynard Keynes, developed the taste community that came to define British Ballet. Initially, members of this taste community searched for the men who would lead the British Ballet Movement because they were informed by the sexist division of labor in ballet, which preserved administrative and creative efforts for men while women were the art form’s primary labor force as performers. Instead, it was two women, Marie Rambert and Ninette de Valois, who established the flagship ballet companies of the British Ballet Movement, and de Valois’ company ultimately was chosen to become the state-representative ballet company (the Royal Ballet) after World War II.

I have subtitled this dissertation *Envisioning and Defining the National and Cosmopolitan Characteristics of “British Ballet” after Diaghilev (1929-1956)* because I not only consider the tensions between the nationalist and cosmopolitan wings of the movement but also between ballet’s labor force and its opinionated patrons in order to demonstrate how the preferences of this taste community came to define what counted as British Ballet. Certainly, the ballet mistresses mentioned above, their choreographers, designers, and performers were key to the development and practice of British Ballet, but the balletomanes, critics, and general audience also shaped the art form by their positive or negative receptions to the creative products performed for them. In the early years of the British Ballet Movement, there was a heavy focus on the development of national characteristics in ballet, which is evident in the earliest *British* productions created by Marie Rambert’s upstart choreographers, but by the mid-1930s there was a more cosmopolitan shift occurring alongside developing interest in reviving Imperial Russian Classics by the cultural elites. Whereas Rambert’s repertoire became more cosmopolitan over the course of the decade in response to ballet criticism and cultural preferences, the works created by her choreographers remained distinctive compared to the continental adaptations and Russian Revivals performed by Ninette de Valois’ company attached to the Vic-Wells theatres in this decade.

Ultimately, tensions between these various factions resulted in the codification of aesthetic preferences for British Ballet by the powerful taste community during the Interwar Period, and once adopted by the state when it

began funding ballet this altered the trajectory of the two companies as well as the overall aesthetics of British Ballet as a distinct or national art form. The renowned economist and cultural philanthropist John Maynard Keynes, in his roles as treasurer of The Camargo Society, which was an influential but short-lived ballet-producing society in London in the early 1930s, and as the second chairman of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) during World War II, was particularly influential in shifting the aesthetics of British Ballet in this period. Furthermore, he positioned Ninette de Valois' company at the Royal Opera House so that she could later spread the preferences of this British taste community abroad through the repertoire she developed while highly dependent upon the Keynes-influenced Camargo Society.

Developments in British Ballet in the period under consideration are quite key to understanding the noticeable aesthetic shift in the art form of ballet from Diaghilev's triumphant seasons to the Cold War cultural exchanges. These are not two unrelated periods in the history of ballet (or culture more broadly), and they must be considered in their full context by investigating the interim in order better understand the evolution of the art form and its reception throughout the twentieth century. Furthermore, the recognition of a taste community and its ability to alter the aesthetics of an art form is vital to understanding the transformation seen in ballet in the twentieth century. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain how neoclassical ballet, expressly Russian in origin, became a politically expedient and culturally acceptable form of modernism for various state-representative ballet companies during the Cold War. The pairing of these cultural preferences with state-funding during and after World War II resulted in the dissemination of didactic entertainment for domestic audiences and dance diplomacy abroad, but it also caused the politicization of an art form that previously thrived with far different aesthetics under market conditions. Therefore, the developments of the British Ballet Movement are quite important because they affected the aesthetic trajectory of the art form across the globe in the decades that followed resulting in the privileging of Imperial Russian Classics over national developments in ballet.