



# Dance, body and memory: the Original Ballet Russe and its three seasons in Rio de Janeiro

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**ABSTRACT – Dance, body and memory: the Original Ballet Russe and its three seasons in Rio de Janeiro** – This text presents reflections on studies of history, memory and dance. I start from the field of History and my interest in understanding the role of memory in knowledge production processes. As a case study, I examine the three Original Ballet Russe seasons in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which took place in 1942, 1944 and 1946. During this period, the company was seen as exemplary in its contribution to the building of Brazilian national ballet. I demonstrate how the discourse employed by the local press fueled these ideas. Guided by the methodological procedures of cultural history, I use dance critic Jaques Corseuil's reviews as key sources.

Keywords: **Dance. History. Memory. Original Ballet Russe. Rio de Janeiro.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Danse, corps et mémoire: les trois saisons de l'Original Ballet Russe à Rio de Janeiro** – Cet texte vise à présenter quelques réflexions sur les études de l'histoire, de mémoire et de la danse. Nous partons du domaine de l'Histoire pour comprendre le rôle de la mémoire dans le processus de production des connaissances. Comme étude de cas, je prends les trois saisons de l'Original Ballet Russe à Rio de Janeiro en 1942, 1944 et 1946 moments où la compagnie a été signalée comme un exemple pour la construction d'un ballet national et je montre comment le discours constitué dans la presse de Rio élaboré cette articulation. Pour cela, j'utilise comme sources les critiques de Jaques Corseuil, en utilisant les procédés méthodologiques de l'histoire culturelle.

Mots-clés: **Danse. Histoire. Mémoire. Original Ballet Russe. Rio de Janeiro.**

**RESUMO – Dança, corpo e memória: as três temporadas do Original Ballet Russe no Rio de Janeiro** – Este texto tem como objetivo apresentar algumas reflexões entre os estudos da história, da memória e da dança. Parte-se do campo da História a fim de entender o papel da memória no processo de produção de conhecimento. Como estudo de caso, tomo as três temporadas do Original Ballet Russe no Rio de Janeiro, em 1942, 1944 e 1946, momentos em que a companhia foi apontada como exemplo para a construção de um balé nacional e demonstro como o discurso constituído na imprensa carioca em torno dessa presença elaborou essa articulação. Para tal, utilizo como fontes as críticas de Jaques Corseuil, lançando mão dos procedimentos metodológicos da história cultural.

Palavras-chave: **Dança. História. Memória. Original Ballet Russe. Rio de Janeiro.**

## Beginnings

I begin this text with a discussion of issues on the production of knowledge in the field of History, as they relate to dance as a performing art. My purpose is to apply this lens to the Original Ballet Russe's three seasons in Rio de Janeiro, in 1942, 1944 and 1946, paying particular attention to the way they were constructed by specialized criticism, and in particular, through journalist and dance critic Jaques Corseuil's (1913 – 2000) analyses of the company's tournees.

Considered one of the most important dance groups of the first half of the 20th century, the Original Ballet Russe claimed, from the start, to be direct heir of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes<sup>1</sup>, a company directed by the Russian entrepreneur Serge Diaghilev (1872 – 1929) which existed from 1909 to 1929. It was known for the technical quality of its dancers, as well as its refined and innovative staging that, nonetheless, did not relinquish use of traditional ballet technique<sup>3</sup>. The influence of Diaghilev's company which "[...] turned ballet into a modern and vital art" (Garafola, 1998, p. 7) through its emphasis on original choreography, score, scenery and costume, made itself felt not only over its two decades of existence, but also in the years that followed its close, "[...] the company's influence was enormous both on and off stage" (Craine; Mackrell 2000, p. 47).

In 1932, three years after Diaghilev's Ballets Russes disbanded, two businessmen, the Russian Vassily Grigorievich Voskresensky (1888 – 1951), known as Coronel Wassily de Basil, and the Frenchman René Blum (1878 – 1942), took it upon themselves to continue Diaghilev's work and went on to found the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo. Their partnership broke down in 1936, after De Basil added his own name to that of the company. That same year, Blum founded the Ballets de Monte Carlo, a group that moved to the United States in 1939. It remained there through its last performing season, 1961-62 (Craine; Mackrel 2000, p. 44).

After undergoing three name changes – W. de Basil's Ballets Russes, during the 1936 and 1937 seasons, Convent Garden Russian Ballet, in 1938, and the Educational Ballet, Ltd., from 1938 to 1939 – in 1939, the company acquired its definitive identity as the Original Ballet Russe, kept until it was

officially disbanded in 1952 (García-Marques, 1990, p. 15-17; Victorica, 1948, p. 255). It should be taken into account that, notwithstanding changes in the name of the group, the company never strayed from the classical ballet as the technique informing its training and choreography. In other words, the Diaghilevian legacy was maintained throughout, and the company saw itself as the legitimate heir to the latter, thereby reaffirming the classical ballet tradition as a central aspect of its identity.

This brief genealogy of the Original Ballet Russe is necessary for our understanding of its importance on the international scene and the stance it took, in artistic and political terms, in the countries in which it performed. In an interview conceded to the magazine *Ilustração Brasileira*, in May of 1942, De Basil asserted that the company's role was, in addition to producing and performing its best pieces, to contribute to the development of ballet:

[...] our company awakens an interest in dance and all the countries we travel to will enjoy its performance based on the Russian Ballet. From the curiosity it arouses in the public, from the influx that turns into poetry, music and painting, comes an environment in which dance can flourish, and from which the idea of the making of a national ballet emerges (Corseuil, 1942, p. 28).

These words are significant, as is their pretentious tone, providing some clues to the complex relations that tie dance – in this case, ballet – to the idea of the *national* then in force. It should be said that this was not just “any ballet”; rather, it was one that was expected to unfold through Russian referents while at the same time incorporating national elements. The goal, on the one hand, was a dance corps that could be recognized through the technical parameters of Russian ballet, as De Basil saw it, and on the other, a staging that would include characteristics that were thought to define a *national ballet* – choreographies created through Brazilian themes and engaging local artists in their creation, such as musicians or figures from the visual arts to be made responsible for scenery and costume design.

The search for a so-called *national ballet* was part of the ideological context of President Getúlio Vargas' (1882 – 1954) authoritarian regime, known as the Estado Novo, or New State (1937 – 1945). One of its pillars was “[...] the strengthening of the sense of national identity, of being Brazilian”,

through “[...] the valorization of culture and education” (Pereira, 2003, p. 276), and for which it employed strict policies for monitoring and controlling communications media – in particular, radio and press<sup>4</sup>. This was the scenario within which De Basil presented his “Project for the organization of a National Dance Theater” (*Projeto para a organização do Teatro Nacional de Bailados*) that in the end was not implemented. In his view, a *group of artists within the classical ballet tradition*, by which he meant the Russian ballet and his own company, would accrue the task of organizing and ensuring the functioning of “[...] an exemplary institution which, under the pretext of teaching dance, would serve as a vehicle of general education” (Pereira, 2003, p. 310). Although we are lacking in precise information as to the year of this formulation – 1942 or 1944 – we note its proximity to the ideas defended by the New State, such as the close relationship between culture, art and education, and their use as propaganda for the regime. The press, subjected to harsh censorship on the part of the New State’s Department of Press and Propaganda (Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda (DIP) - as were the radio, television and cinema - also contributed to the fulfillment of the New State project, both through the publication of favorable reports and through dance criticism that corroborated the nationalist perspective to be put into practice on stage.

Some of the relationships that can be established between the theoretical references of history, memory and dance criticism are important for our understanding of how the latter can be put to use through the process of collecting information and elaborating reflections on the dancing body and modes of staging. Not to be taken as absolute truth, dance criticism should be seen as material that provides clues to the past, through the interlacing of “[...] aesthetic conceptions formulated by groups or individuals who are involved in the artistic practice that is under discussion and the tensions and strategies that comprise historical discourses” (Guarato 2019, p. 236). Texts, therefore, that should be seen as sources that provide information and context on performances and dancers, in a continuous process of construction of memory. It is through this perspective that I will examine the Original Ballet Russe’s seasons in the city of Rio de Janeiro, as well as some of the reviews and texts that Jaques Corseuil (1913-2000) wrote on the company

One of the first critics to specialize in dance within the Rio de Janeiro press<sup>5</sup>, writing prolifically from the 1940s to the 1960s, Jaques Corseuil published articles a variety of newspapers and magazines, including *Brasil Musical*, *A Cena Muda*, *Cinearte*, *Correio da Manhã*, *Diário Carioca*, *Ilustração Brasileira* e *O Globo*. In journalistic accounts of the work of dance companies and critique of performances, he wove meaningful narratives on dance as a means of communication. Thus, his efforts played a fundamental role in the process of creating a public for this art form, defending what at the time was understood as a *national ballet* and elaborating an eloquent discourse on the need to invest in the training of Brazilian dancers<sup>6</sup> (Cerbino, 2011). It is no coincidence that it was Corseuil who, together with the visual artist Sansão Castello Branco (1920 – 1956), went on to establish the Ballet da Juventude, a company that existed for ten years, between 1946 and 1956, patterned after the Original Ballet Russe<sup>7</sup>.

To preserve the traditions of classical ballet without excluding the marks of the modern was the motto of the Original Ballet Russe, a discourse that Jaques Corseuil did not fail to bring into his work with what was then known as the Corpo de Baile do Theatro Municipal (Dance Corps of the Municipal Theater), known today as the Ballet do Theatro Municipal. Created in 1936 by the teacher, dancer and choreographer Maria Olenewa (1896 – 1965), Russian-born but later naturalized Brazilian who, nine years earlier, in 1927, had started the Ballet of the Municipal Theater School, the first official school of dance in the country (Pavlova, 2001, p.33), the Ballet Corps held its first official season in 1939. As Roberto Pereira points out, this was a very special moment: ballet danced by Brazilian companies found itself facing the challenge of seeking “[...] possible responses to a nationalism that was acquiring new tones, particularly within the Vargas regime ideology that was taking hold” (Pereira, 2003, p. 138). The dance criticism and feature stories that were penned by Jaques Corseuil, particularly those published over the decade of the 1940s, signal this process and become important sources in our attempt to uncover how the quest that Pereira speaks of was dealt with at that time.

Work with primary sources, a key aspect of a historian's tasks, is a fundamental element of scholarly research. It requires making choices and poses questions as to how sources are interrogated. Historical documents, tangible and intangible, just as their vestiges are, include "[...] all that man says or writes, all that he makes, all that he touches that is capable of providing information about him" (Bloch, 2001, p. 79). In this regard, literature on dance, that is, all that speaks of its creative processes, such as choreography, and of the dancing body, of scenery, costume and soundtrack, as well as reviews and texts made within the media, can be taken as sources.

Jaques Corseuil's archive, to which my work resorts, contains invaluable documents, among which are written accounts, programs and images, providing insight into the Original Ballet Russe's seasons in the city of Rio de Janeiro. As a methodological procedure, I have taken these sources as records which are able to provide information on the past and which allow us to access the different times and choices contained therein. Thus, cultural history, and studies on memory, become the theoretical references that make the present research possible.

### **History, memory and dance criticism.**

In order to examine criticism, in terms of the texts that are written, ideas that are defended and the way they are organized, the issues underlying the choices they contain must also be grasped. This means perception of the cultural, political, economic, artistic and social contexts in which they were produced. Unlike a totalizing quest that attempts to know the past "[...] as it really was" (Guinzburg, 2007, p. 10), our method seeks out vestiges and footprints, as well as the tensions and transit of the company during its seasons at the Rio de Janeiro Municipal Theater, and the different programs it performed there, made up of diverse choreographic works (Chaves, 1971, p. 284, 286, 287-288).

The analysis I develop here through the categories of representation, practice and appropriation originate within the field of cultural history (Burke 2005, Chartier 2002a), central to my reflections on the relationships spawned between dance, body and social context. My perspective is that of

cultural history as a study of the processes, representations, classifications and exclusions that constitute the social and conceptual configurations proper to a time or a place. Cultural aspects are thus understood in terms of two basic concepts: practices and representations. The structures of the social world are thus, not objective data; rather, they are historically produced through connected practices which in turn, construct and imprint their mark on figures and representations, that is, in the cultural practices that occur within them (Chartier, 2002a, p. 4-28). Therefore, documents that describe the symbolic actions of the past are not neutral, innocent and transparent texts, but renderings with different intentions and strategies. The conditions and processes that operate in the construction of meanings, in addition to expressing the plurality of uses and modes of developing intellectual issues and cultural forms, are at the root of important aspects of the thought of French historian Roger Chartier for whom “[...] these operations are embodied, while at the same time constructed within the discontinuities of historical trajectories” (2002a, p. 27).

Concentrating the emphasis of his analysis on the plural ways of understanding, experimenting with and experiencing the works and norms present and circulating within society, Chartier takes his distance from simplifying social perspectives that first establish a distribution of objects and then go on to the uses and distinctions that emerge from there. Neither is his own perspective neutral. On the contrary, it indicates clearly that cultural practices should be seen, systematically, as the object of social struggles that classify them, and thereby consecrate or disqualify them. In this regard, there is an intrinsic relationship between practices and representations, one through which it is possible to elaborate an interpretation of the social in which ideas and practices are not detached from their historic trajectories, and much less, disembodied. Operations of meaning production unfold, therefore “[...] through the appropriations realized by groups or individuals” (Chartier 1995, p. 184). Thus, in the web of relationships that is constituted in Rio de Janeiro dance performance, through the cultural production of different social groups, we are able to observe how the ballet appropriated information and brought, into its own practices, different modes of movement, constructing a web of texts expressed through the body.

This is a fundamental perception when working with dance, as practices and their appropriations materialize in the body itself, as embodied representations. In other words, the construction of meanings also unfolds through danced movement. Practices are captured in the way the dancers move, as this connects to a special, temporal, cultural and political context, fundamental to understanding dance performance, which is our object here. Jaques Corseuil's texts and criticism, examined here through a methodological perspective that brings such interweaving to light, are plentiful sources for the understanding of the choices that materialize in the movement of Original Ballet Russe dancers.

In a short book published in 2006, *Uma história do corpo na Idade Média* [A history of the body in the Middle Ages], historians Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong engage in instigating reflections on the body in the Middle Ages, indicating how history, in its most traditional sense, was written from a disembodied perspective, that is, how it removed the body and its actions from a large part of academic scholarship. As exceptions, they name the works of Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias, Marc Bloch, Michel de Certeau, Mikhail Bakhtin, George Duby and Paul Veine<sup>8</sup>. Although the period studied by Le Goff and Truong is the Middle Ages, both their reflections and the methodologies they employ are important in the systematization of studies of the body, through questions regarding how it should be studied and contextualized, how it was rendered in thought and how it was visualized, and what it meant for different societies, over time.

Le Goff and Truong taken on the challenge of making the body their object of study, asserting that “[...] the body has a history, the body is our history”. In this book, as well as in the important three-volume publication *History of the Body* (Corbin; Courtine; Vigarello, 2008), it becomes clear that the study of the body is indispensable for our comprehension of the world we live in and how we act within it, due not only to the space it garnered over the last few decades as object of study, but also as it becomes a viable source for the study of the construction of different socially-elaborated dynamics and meanings. Eloquently, Le Goff and Truong argue that



The history of the body offers the historian and those interested in history an advantage, a supplementary pursuit. The body illustrates and feeds a slow history. This slow history which is, in depth, that of ideas, mentalities, institutions and even of technique and economies, this interest provides a body, the body (2006, p. 173).

Reflections on the body and its history are thus paramount to our understanding of society and of the transformations that it has undergone over the course of centuries. On the other hand, studies of memory are equally important, illustrating how our task is not one of recovering facts or events of the past, but the process of producing memory through the lens of the present and the issues that are posed by the here and now. Memory and history are not synonyms, as the French historian Pierre Nora (1993) warns us; they are, however, far from antagonistic. Distinct narrative operations, each with its own particularities, it is hence much more interesting to see them as constructions which, always incomplete, also pose problems. Memory is, by nature and simultaneously, individual and collective, multiple and slow-moving. Memory, rooted in the concrete, in image, in gesture and the object, seeks locations where it can take nourishment in what it remembered and what is forgotten (Nora, 1993, p. 9). These locations, comprised of functional, material and symbolic aspects, are not mutually exclusive and co-exist over time. Their function is to continually invoke the past, in an attempt to maintain active bonds of belonging and identity. The disintegration of these bonds and the resulting crises are, according to Nora, features of contemporaneity, in which memories are transformed into material stock in an attempt to mend a certain state of affairs. (Nora 1993, p. 21-28).

To understand the body as a place where memory is constructed, as a location in which gestures and movements are anchored, is to understand it as absolute and relative, a site in which the materiality of the flesh is joined with the symbolic particularity of created meanings and images. Memory should not be thought of through a chronological and linear perspective; rather, we should turn to it to capture the processes that reconstruct sense and meaning, through the temporal discontinuities created through the very act of remembering/forgetting. Maurice Halbwachs (2006) points to the way individual memory, from the most particular recollections, is part of a social

milieu, where it is influenced and structured. By conceptualizing the social frameworks of memory, Halbwachs points to this quality of knowledge, as the former are the instruments that collective memory uses to recompose the past, and thus elaborate its history. Because memory is not fixed and invariable, as a human construction it undergoes transformations which change according to the value systems of the period. Reading a book, appreciating a work of art, or a choreography, for example, are acts that gain different meanings over time, since the social point of view of those who enjoy these works are based on sociocultural relations, always changing and shaped by negotiations, disputes and conflicts (Cerbino, 2009).

The relationship between memory and identity that the anthropologist Joël Candau (2011) writes about are especially interesting because of their contribution to our understanding of memory, not as a simple unit but as a phenomenon full of subtleties and differentiations. He decomposes it into three levels: proto-memory, evoked memory and meta-memory. Candau conceives of proto-memory as veritable social memory that is incorporated in gestures, practices and languages, yet performed almost automatically, acting directly on the body (Candau, 2011, p. 22-23). The second level he presents is memory itself, in which voluntary recall extends to knowledge, beliefs, feelings and sensations. The third level, metamemory, concerns the construction of identity, that is, the representations we construct from our memories, how we deal with them and the uses we make of them. This last formulation is closest to Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, as according to Candau, only metamemory, as a set of representations of memory, can be shared, (Candau, 2011, p. 133).

### **The Original Ballet Russe in the city of Rio de Janeiro**

The city of Rio de Janeiro, as a political and cultural center, became – as of the 1940s – more of a cosmopolitan center, asserting itself in the social and economic life of the country, part of the slow and complex process of the country's spatial and territorial re-organization<sup>9</sup>. Spread throughout the city were cinemas, theaters, and cassinos, with a variety of shows in season,

providing more work for dance professionals. The founding of two film companies -

Atlântida, in 1941, in Rio de Janeiro, and Vera Cruz, in 1949, in São Paulo, further widened opportunities for dancers, as this included the significant presence of music and dance numbers in films.

To perceive these changes is also to understand that after the Second World War came not only the emergence of another monetary standard, the dollar, but also a new cultural model, the North American one. Publicity, books and the cinema, in particular, may be identified as the vehicles that were responsible for their spread. The rise of the Hollywood star system and the cult to its artists were characteristics of these standards, and the dance produced within the context of this aesthetic and cultural project was not sidelined by this process. In truth, the structure of this ballet company had for some time been treating its main dancers as *stars*, a situation that was in place since the days of 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism, as in the case of the Italo-Swedish dancer Marie Taglioni (1804 – 1884) of the Paris Opera. But the major change that took place, in the decade of the 1940s, lies in the fact that these professionals sought the status of major international film stars, using the media not only to sell their shows but also for purposes of self-promotion. A case in point is the ballerina Tamara Toumanova (1919 – 1996), who used her 1944 film debut, as the U.S. actor Gregory Peck (1916 – 2003)'s co-star in film *Days of glory*, to such ends.

At the same time, dance sought other forms of theatrical presentation that would, both in technical and aesthetic aspects, take into account the transformations that were underway<sup>10</sup>. One of these possibilities was the dialogue between modern dance and ballet which, in 1930s, had already reached the international scene, coming to the Rio de Janeiro theaters through the tournees of the Original Ballet Russe, with the first three symphonic ballets<sup>11</sup> created by the Russian dancer and choreographer Leonide Massine (1896 – 1979).

The Original Ballet Russe held three major seasons in the city of Rio de Janeiro<sup>12</sup>, all during the 1940s, and always at the Theatro Municipal. The first took place from April 20th to May 10th, 1942, the second started on

May 5th and lasted until June 1st, 1944 and the third was divided into two stages: from June 3 to 14 and from August 10 to 23, 1946. On these three occasions, important names in international dance, such as Andre Eglevsky (1917 – 1977), Alexandra Danilova (1903 – 1997), Alicia Markova (1910 – 2004), David Lichine (1910 – 1972), Geneviève Moulin, George Zoritch (1910-1983), Igor Youskevitch (1913 – 1997), Irina Baronova (1919 – 2008), Lubov Tchernicheva (1890 – 1976), Nana Gollner (1919 – 1980), Nina Verchinina (1910 – 1995), Tamara Grigorieva (1918 – 2010), Tamara Toumanova (1919 – 1996), Tatiana Leskova (1922), Tatiana Riabouchinska (1917 – 2000), Tatiana Stepanova (1924 – 2009), Yurek Shabelewski (1910 – 1983), were, among other professionals, part of the cast (Chaves, 1971, p. 284, 286, 287-288).

On the occasion of its Rio de Janeiro debut, Jaques Corseuil wrote for the *Ilustração Brasileira*, in May of 1942 that the Original Ballet Russe was a “[...] company that kept alive the tradition” of what he referred to as the *Russian ballets* (1942, p. 28). This term was generally applied to the Russian companies which were recognized for the technical skill of their dancers, as well as for their repertoire. It should be noted that Corseuil uses the Russian term to sum up the very idea of ballet as a quality to be achieved, a parameter by which actions and projects related to ballet in Brazil should be guided (Cerbino; Cerbino, 2010).

In addition to pointing out and asserting the quality of the company, the critic was clearly concerned with showing how ballet, and Russian ballet in particular, had the power to foster the development of local culture, operating as vector for the constitution of a *national dance* and for the training of dance professionals. This discourse would be repeated in his writings, during the company’s stays in Rio, and particularly during its first two seasons which were a part of the context of President Vargas’ New State. It was a line of thought consistent with Colonel de Basil himself, who argued that the Original Ballet Russe should be seen as “[...] a school of pure technique and an example of the development of art at its most complete”. Its mission was to keep the tradition of the past alive and carry out “[...] constant work in the present, to preserve the future” (Corseuil, 1942, p. 28).

In its first season at the Rio de Janeiro Municipal Theater, the company presented 19 different pieces, of which five were for season subscribers, six soirees and five extra shows, comprising a total of 50 performances. The most repeated were *Les sylphides*<sup>13</sup>, *Swan Lake*, in a two-act version, *Graduation Ball*<sup>14</sup>, *Aurora's Wedding*, a one-act version of *Sleeping Beauty*<sup>15</sup>, *Paganini*<sup>16</sup>, *Les Presages*<sup>17</sup>, *Choreartium*<sup>18</sup> and *The Spectre of the Rose*<sup>19</sup>, (Chaves Jr, 1971, p. 284).

During the following season, in 1944, in the first text that he wrote about the company's return to the city, in addition to the importance of its presence in galvanizing the Rio de Janeiro cultural scene, Corseuil drew attention to the renewal of the cast. Two years after its Latin American tour, several dancers chose to remain in the cities that had performed in, such as Dimitri Rostoff, who chose to stay on in Lima, Peru and open up a ballet school there, or to return to their homelands, as was the case of H. Algenaroff (1903 – 1967), who returned to England, and Nana Gollner (1920 – 1980), who went back to the United States. However, he saw such events as common to major companies and “[...] fundamental for the emergence of new talents and their acquisition of onstage experience” (Corseuil, *A cena muda*, 1944b, p. 8-9).

The company returned with basically the same repertoire, to which they added *Icaro*<sup>20</sup>, *Island of the Ceibos*, *L'après-midi d'un faune*, *Eternal Struggle*, *Good-humoured ladies*<sup>21</sup> and *Symphonie Fantastique*<sup>22</sup>. There was a season subscription of eight performances, as well as seven soirees, two extra shows and a performance that was part of the 165<sup>th</sup> *Sarau da Cultura Artística*, totalling fifty-four performances (Chaves Jr, 1971, p. 286). The major difference in comparison to the previous season was that it became possible to watch Leonide Massine's three symphonic ballets – *Les Presages*, *Choreartium* and *Symphonie Fantastique*<sup>23</sup> – which, alongside *Graduation Ball*, *The Blue Danube*<sup>24</sup>, *Swan Lake*, *Les sylphides*, *Paganini* and *Schéhérazade*, were the most performed.

During the Original Ballet Russe's second season, in 1944, Corseuil insisted on the need for a policy of support for national ballet, as well as investment in the training of Brazilian dancers. In his article *A volta do ballet russo*

(The return of the Russian ballet), published in the April issue of the film magazine *A cena muda* (1944a, p. 8-9), he emphasized that the robust repertoire and opportunities for new dancers and choreographers that De Basil had provided was fundamental to the group's success, and should be preserved for the Corps de Ballet of the Teatro Municipal. In the May issue of *Vida* magazine, he returned to the topic, arguing that it was this type of orientation that the official company of the city, which had not yet realized its official season of the year, was most in need of. Corseuil (1944c, p. 48-49) was emphatic in asserting that “[...] the more we recognize the merits of a foreign ballet company, the more desirous we become of having a national ballet that lives up to these high standards (Cerbino; Cerbino, 2010). In this regard, according to Corseuil, the Original Ballet Russe provided a role model for the times, enabling contact with the best of what was available both in terms of choreography and dance technique.

Taking stock of the whole 1944 season, Jaques Corseuil (1944d, p. 40) highlighted the conservative nature of the repertoire, and considered that the season was “[...] useful, not only insofar as it cultivates a taste for classical ballet (...) but because it contributes to dance appreciation”. Performing a set of choreographies that included the traditional ballets of Marius Petipa<sup>25</sup> (1818 – 1910), the innovations of Leonide Massine and Michel Fokine's re-appropriation of the classics, the company gave Rio de Janeiro spectators a chance to watch, in person, a veritable “[...] documentary on the origins of ballet” (Corseuil, 1944d, p.40). He then responded to the criticism that the company had received, comparing it to a *museum*, by arguing that such a comment should, in his opinion, be taken as praise - it could in fact be seen as a “[...] living museum of gesture and movement” (Corseuil, 1944d, p.40), and paramount to the continuity of the ballet. Corseuil bemoaned the shortness of the season and its scant number of popular spectacles (1944d, p.40). It is worth noting that in his texts, Corseuil insisted on defending the ballet, especially what he referred to its Russian tradition, as a model for structuring a company, whether in terms of its mode of staging or as a technique to be followed.

This was the year in which several dancers from Coronel de Basil's group decided to remain in Rio de Janeiro. Among them were Anna Volkova (1917 – 2013), James Upshaw (1921 -?), Lydia Kuprina and Tatiana Leskova (1922). Volkova, Upshaw and Kuprina, after some time, took up their tournees again. Leskova, on the other hand remained in Brazil, and went on to become a major figure in the history of Brazilian ballet. She established herself in Rio de Janeiro, where she trained several generations of dancers and, on a number of occasions between 1950 and 1999, served as director of the Ballet do Theatro Municipal (Pereira, 2001). Another important name in national ballet was Yurek Shabelewski<sup>26</sup> who, after some comings and goings, set up permanent residence in the city of Curitiba, in 1971. He served there for five years as director and choreographer for the Corps de Ballet of the city's Teatro Guáira.

The Original Ballet Russe returned to Rio de Janeiro in 1946 and held its official season at the Theatro Municipal, as it had done in 1944. Divided into two parts, the first in early July and the second at the end of August, the company presented again choreographies that had brought them previous acclaim, and this time totaling 46 performances, including 8 that comprised the season subscription, four soirees and four extra shows (Chaves Jr., 1971, p. 288).

The novelty of the season lay in the inclusion of four pieces that had not yet been danced for the Rio de Janeiro public: *Cain and Abel*<sup>27</sup>, *Firebird*<sup>28</sup>, *Sad Waltz*<sup>29</sup> and *Yara*. The latter choreography, thematizing the drought of the Brazilian northeast, was premiered in July, in São Paulo, from where it went on to be performed in Rio de Janeiro. Its topic, the life of the northeastern *retirantes* – a term applied to people or groups who are obliged to abandon land and home, seeking refuge elsewhere – was considered “a bold choice” for the *first Brazilian ballet* to become a part of the repertoire of a major international company (Bento, 1946, seção 2, p. 1). The ballet appeared thrice on the Rio program and was part of the company's repertoire during its season at the New York *Metropolitan Opera House*, as well as in its coast- to-coast tour of the United States (Original Ballet Russe, 1946).

It was also that year that the Russian ballerina (later naturalized Brazilian) Nina Verchinina (1910 – 1995) came to Rio de Janeiro for the first time, joining the company as one of its *guest artists* (alongside Irina Baronova and Lubov Tchernicheva). On that occasion, the director of the City Department of Cultural Diffusion, Antonio Vieira de Melo, invited her to remain in the city and assume company directorship, as *maître de ballet* and choreographer of what was then the Corps de Ballet of the Theatro Municipal, which was then going through difficult times and found itself, in mid-1946, with no programmed recitals. The fact that the Original Ballet Russe was tasked with performing the official ballet season at the Theatro Municipal, repeating what had occurred in 1944, was a significant indication of the hardships that the Corps de Ballet was enduring, struggling to survive as a professional ballet company whose dancers had high levels of technical expertise and whose repertoire included both new works, such as *Maracatu do Chico Rei*<sup>30</sup>, as well well-known pieces such as *The Spectre of the Rose*, *Petruchka*<sup>31</sup> and *Les Sylphides*<sup>32</sup>, among others.

In a report for the *O Globo* newspaper in which Nina Verchinina was presented as one of the foremost names associated with the *formation of the modern Russian ballet*, Corseuil affirmed her importance as a dancer in Brazil, a sign of the will to “[...] finally invest in the training of Brazilian ballet dancers” (Corseuil, 1946, p. 5).

With a contract signed for two seasons, 1947 and 1948, Verchinina nonetheless encountered major resistance as she attempted to implement her ideas and advance her work, as in the case of her new proposals for body training, and in particular, on the floor warm-up exercises for modern dance classes (Cerbino, 2001, p. 32). Furthermore, financial and administrative issues plagued the Theatro Municipal itself, causing problems such as delayed payment of her salary and difficulties in putting a season together, making it impossible for her to stay on. In March of 1948 she returned to Europe and to Colonel Cel. W. De Basil’s company

### Concluding remarks



The Original Ballet Russe continued its touring of the Americas throughout the days of the Second World War, from 1942 to 1946, performing seasons in several countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, the United States, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Peru and Uruguay. We should note that, in many of the cities it passed through, the company left important references for the production of local ballet in its wake, through its performances and through the classes that many of its dancers taught during their stay (García-Márquez, 1990, p. 316).

At the time the company made its debut in Rio de Janeiro, in 1942, dance performances at the Theatro Municipal were fairly frequent. Among the groups that performed in the city prior to that date, two are especially noteworthy: the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, under the direction of Leonide Massine, and the following year, the American Ballet directed by George Balanchine (1904-1983). However, it was not until 1942 with the Original Ballet Russe that the Diaghlevian ballet could be experienced firsthand by the city's professional dancers.

Colonel de Basil's group performed thrice there, over a four-year period, spending seasons of about two months each in the city, at which time he engaged with local dancers, artists, critics, and businessmen. As was then common, professionals in the countries where the company performed were hired to dance with the company: Leda Iuqui (1922 - 2012) danced in the first two seasons, in 1942 and 1944; Lorna Kay took part in the second and then went on tour with the group, returning to Brazil in 1944; Marília Franco (1920 – 2006), a São Paulo dancer whom, upon marriage to Vaslav Veltchek<sup>33</sup> (1896 – 1967), moved to Rio de Janeiro, was also hired and stayed on at the company until mid-1945. During the Original Ballet Russe's third season, in 1946, she was a company soloist (Cerbino; Cerbino, 2010).

In addition to performances, company tournees gave other dance professionals of the city a chance to widen their knowledge of classical ballet technique and to gain access to a broad repertoire. After all, the Corps de Ballet of the Rio de Janeiro Municipal Theater had only recently performed its first official season.

Another important aspect of the Original Ballet Russe's seasons in the city of Rio de Janeiro was its dancers' participation in the city's dance performance circuit. Although it began modestly, such activity became more accentuated over the seasons that followed. Generally speaking, these professionals became soloists or members of the corps de ballet but were rarely its principal dancers. Lidia Kuprina, James Upshaw and Yurek Shabelewski, members of the company in 1942, stayed in Rio and took part, the following year, in the show *Em busca da beleza* [In search of beauty], in October of that year, at the Cassino Copacabana. The piece was choreographed by the Czech Vaslav Veltchek and included arrangements by Brazilian composer, pianist and maestro Radamés Gnattali (1906 – 1988)<sup>34</sup>.

In 1944, Anna Volkova, Tamara Grigorieva and Tatiana Leskova danced in shows at the Copacabana, such as *Ciclo eterno* [Eternal Cycle], in August, *Flagrantes da vida* [Highlights of life], in October, and *Meia-noite na meia-noite* [Midnight in midnight], in December<sup>35</sup>, and the end of the year performance, sponsored by the Federação Atlética dos Estudantes [Student Athletic Federation]. Kuprina and Upshaw also took part in this piece and, in 1946, as guest artists of the Ballet da Juventude [Youth Ballet], which at the time was giving its first performances. That same year, Upshaw danced in the film *Caídos do céu* [Fallen from heaven], a musical comedy produced by Cinédia and directed by Luiz de Barros. Four years later, in 1950, Kuprina and Upshaw danced in another musical comedy, *Um beijo roubado* [A stolen kiss], also known as *Noites em Copacabana* [Copacabana nights], produced by Cinédia and directed by Leo Marten<sup>36</sup>.

Over the course of 1945, these dancers also had a marked presence in different shows at the Cassino Copacabana, such as *Máscaras* [Masks], which premiered in January, *Variety*, in May and *Olimpiada* [Olympiad], in October, the two latter pieces choreographed by Vaslav Veltchek. It should be kept in mind that all these ballets enjoyed the participation of prima ballerina Leda Iuqui, and that the main star of the Cassino da Urca was prima ballerina Madeleine Rosay, both of whom were members of Ballet of the Theatro Municipal.

In passages from some of the feature stories signed by Jaques Corseuil that we have discussed here, we see that the critic took it upon himself to emphasize, from his own perspective, the formative and informative character that the dance seasons had, acting to “[...] shape the taste for dance” among spectators and to teach them about dance history (Corseuil, 1946, p. 25).

It is also worth observing that Corseuil’s criticism operated on two fronts: within the field of aesthetics, insofar as he indicated technical references that should be adopted by national ballet, and in terms of the formation of an environment that would be *favorable* to dance, through his suggestion that the Original Ballet Russe seasons become part of a program of education through dance. We are thus able to detect the political and artistic motivation that is contained in his writing, aligned with the nationalist ideals of the New State. The thematic choices he made in his articles, as well as the conventions of the time that he followed and defended, are important pieces of information, from today’s critical perspective, regarding changing perspectives on ballet .



Figure 1 – Anna Volkova, Jaques Corseuil and Tatiana Leskova, at the Rio de Janeiro Theatro Municipal, during the Original Ballet Russe’s first season in the city, in 1942. Photo: Kurt Paul Klagsbrunn.

Source: Jaques Corseuil Archives.

**TEATRO MUNICIPAL**  
TEMPORADA OFICIAL DA PREFEITURA DO DISTRITO FEDERAL  
ORGANIZADA PELA SOCIEDADE ARTISTICA BRASILEIRA

**“ORIGINAL BALLET RUSSE”**  
Diretor Geral: Col. **W de Basil**

Artistas hóspedes:  
Irina BARONOVA — Lubov TCHERNICHEVA — Nina VERCHININA

PRINCIPAIS ARTISTAS (por ordem alfabética):  
Olga MOROSOVA — Genevieve MOULIN  
Tatiana STEPANOVA — Nina STROGANOVA

VLADIMIR DOKOUDOVSKY — ROMAN JASINSKY — MARIAN LADRE  
KENNETH MACKENZIE — VANIA PSOTA — OLEG TUPINE  
Kiril VASSILKOVSKY

Solistas:  
Tatiana BECHENOVA — Natascha CONLON — Marilia FRANCO  
Moussia LARKINA — Lara OBIDENNA  
April OLRICH — Raul CELADA — Carlotta PEREYRA

e o Conjunto de 70 artistas

SERGE GRIGORIEFF Regente Geral  
V. GRIGORIEFF Administrador Geral  
MARIAN LADRE Regente  
CARLOS MARCHESE Diretor de Cena  
JACOB ANCHUTIN Cenógrafo  
VANIA PSOTA Mestre de Ballet e Coreógrafo

GRANDE ORQUESTRA DO TEATRO MUNICIPAL  
SOB A REGENCIA DOS MAESTROS Cesar de Mendonça LASALLE e William MECDERMOTT



Figure 2 – Original Ballet Russe program, Rio de Janeiro, in 1946, while the company was responsible for the official ballet season at the Theatro Municipal.

Source: Jaques Corseuil Archives.



Figure 3 – Rehearsal director Sergei Grigoriev (1883 – 1968) training the Original Ballet Russe company in the Rio de Janeiro Theatro Municipal, in 1946. Grigoriev worked in this position with the OBR from 1932 until 1952. He was also the rehearsal director of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes from 1909 to 1929. Photo: Kurt Paul Klagsbrunn.

Source: Jaques Corseuil Archives.

## Notes

- 1 Over its 20 years of activity, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had a hearty list of production collaborators, such as the musicians Claude Debussy, Darius Milhaud, Erik Satie, Igor Stravinsky, Maurice Ravel, Serge Prokofiev, among others and visual artists such as Alexandre Benois, Andre Derain, Giacomo Balla, Henri Matisse, Juan Gris, Léon Baskt, Michel Larionov, Natalia Gontcharova, Nicholas Roerich, Pablo Picasso etc. As resident choreographers, the company enjoyed the participation, during different periods, of Michel Fokine (1880 – 1942), Vaslav Nijinsky (1889 – 1950), Leonide Massine (1896 – 1979), Bronislava Nijinska (1891 – 1972) e George Balanchine (1904 – 1983) (Garafola 1998, p. 399-415).
- 2 The Diaghilev company presented its first ballets at the Rio de Janeiro Theatro Municipal during its premiere season in the city, in 1913. It included 12 recitals, from October 17th to November 1st, and returned to the city in 1917, holding 11 recitals from August 14th -26th (Chaves Jr., 1971, p. 270, 271).
- 3 For a deeper look at the staging innovations proposed by the Diaghilev company, see GARAFOLA, Lynn. *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1998.
- 4 For a deeper look on the cultural policies of the Brazilian New State, see SCHWARTZMAN, Simon; BOMENY, Helena, M. B.; COSTA, Vanda M. R (orgs.). *Tempos de Capanema*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra: FGV, 2000.
- 5 It was common during this period for critics of the visual arts, music and theater to also produce texts on dance. Examples are Antonio Bento (1902 – 1988), for the *Diário Carioca*; Mário Nunes (1886 – 1968), for the *Jornal do Brasil*; JIC, the initials used by João Itiberê da Cunha (1870 – 1953), Eurico Nogueira França (1913 – 1992), for the *Correio da Manhã*, Mário Domingues, for the *Correio da Noite*, D'Or, pseudonym used by Ondina Ribeiro Dantas, for the

Diario de Noticias; Grock, for the O Cruzeiro magazine, and Ruben Navarra (1917 – 1955), for the newspaper A Manhã (Cerbino, 2011, p. 4).

- 6 For more on this topic, see PEREIRA, Roberto. *A formação do balé brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2003.
- 7 For an in-depth discussion of the formative processes of the Ballet da Juventude, see CERBINO, Beatriz. *Cenários cariocas: o Ballet da Juventude entre a tradição e o moderno*. Niterói. Doctoral thesis in History, – Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, 2007.
- 8 In Brazil, noteworthy research was done by Holly Cavrel, discussed in her book *Dando corpo à história* (2015), and also found in the writings of Cássia Navas, in particular her *Dança, História, Ensino e Pesquisa / Danse, Histoire, Formation, Recherche* (2017), co-edited with Isabelle Launay e Henrique Rochelle. These are works that take a consistent look at issues around bodies that dance.
- 9 For a closer look at the topic, see SANTOS, Milton. *A urbanização brasileira*. 5th edition. São Paulo: Edusp, 2005.
- 10 For discussion of this issue, see GARAFOLA, Lynn. *Legacies of twentieth century dance*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005.
- 11 The first three symphonic ballets, of the 10 that Massine created, thus denominated because they used symphonies for the soundtrack, were *Les Présages* (1933), with Pyotr Tchaikovsky Fifth Symphony, *Choreartium* (1933), using Johannes Brahms' Symphony no. 4, and *Fantastic Symphony* (1936) adopting Hector Berlioz's homonymous (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 319).
- 12 As in the case of the three Original Ballet Russe Brazilian tournees, in addition to the Rio recitals, the company also performed in the city of São Paulo, seasons that I do not discuss here.
- 13 Ballet in one act, music by Frédéric Chopin, set and costume design by Alexandre Benois. Premiered on June 2nd, 1909, in the Parisian Chatelet Theater (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 459-460).

- 14 Ballet in one act, choreography by David Lichine, J. Strauss, arrangements by A. Dorati, set and costume design by A. Benois. Premiered at the Teatro Real de Sidnei, on February 28th, 1940 (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 211).
- 15 Ballet in three acts, music by Piotr Tchaikovsky, libretto by Marius Petipa and Ivan Vsevolozhsky, costumes by Vsevolozhsky, sets by Ivan Andreyev, Mikahil Bocharov, Konstantin Ivanov, Heinrich Levgot and Matvei Shishkov, premiered at the Maryinsky Theater on January 16, 1890 (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 437).
- 16 Ballet in one act, choreography by Michel Fokine, music by Rachmaninov, libretto by Rachmaninov and Fokine, sets and costumes by Soudekine, premiered at Convent Garden, London, on June 30, 1939 (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 357).
- 17 Ballet in four movements, with Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, choreography by Leonide Massine, set and costume design by André Masson, libretto by Leonide Massine. Premiered at the Teatro de Monte Carlo, in Monte Carlo, on April 13, 1933 (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 378).
- 18 Ballet in four movements, with the Fourth Symphony by J. Brahms, choreography by Léonid Massine, set and costumes by Constantine Terechkovich and Eugène Lourié. It premiered at the Alhambra Theatre, in London, on October 24, 1933. (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 104)
- 19 Ballet in one act, choreography by Michel Fokine (1880 – 1942), libretto by JL Vaudoyer, music by Carl Maria von Weber, set and costumes by Léon Bakst (1866 – 1924). Premiered on April 19, 1911, at Teatro de Monte Carlo, in Monte Carlo (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 446).
- 20 Ballet in one act, choreography by Serge Lifar, music by Lifar with instrumentation by G. Szyfer, scenery and costumes by P. Larthes, premiered at the Paris Opera, on July 9, 1935 (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 244).
- 21 Ballet in one act, choreography and libretto by Leonide Massine, music by Domenico Scarlatti, with arrangements by Vincenzo Tommasini, scenery and costumes by Léon Bakst, premiered at the Teatro Costanzi, in Rome, on April 12, 1917 (Craine; Mackrell, p. 208).

- 22 Ballet in one act and five scenes music by Hector Berlioz, sets and costumes by Christian Bérard, premiered at London's Covent Garden on July 24, 1936 (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 461).
- 23 Ballet in one act, choreography by Leonide Massine, music by Berlioz, sets and costumes by Bérard. Premiered at Covent Garden, London, on July 24, (Craine; Makrel, 2000, p. 461).
- 24 Choreography by Serge Lifar, music by J. Strauss, arrangements by Eugene Furst, sets and costumes by Conte Etienne de Beaumont, premiered in Sydney on February 9, 1940. It was, in fact, a controversial revival of *Le beau Danube*, by Leonide Massine, done in the author's absence by Lifar, who rearranged the scenes and gave the choreography a new name (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 56).
- 25 Acclaimed as the most important choreographer in the history of classical ballet, the Frenchman Petipa, later naturalized Russian, migrated to St. Petersburg in 1847, where he lived for sixty-three years, going from dancer to maître de ballet. There he created and revised about fifty choreographies for the Imperial theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Among his works are: *Don Quixote* (1869), *La Bayadère* (1877), *Sleeping Beauty* (1890), *Swan Lake* (1895) and *Raymonda* (1898) (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 368-369).
- 26 The documentary *Shabelewski*, a 17-minute short film about the life of the dancer, was produced and directed by Nivaldo Lopes, in 2005.
- 27 Ballet in one act, choreography and libretto by David Lichine, music by Richard Wagner, arrangements by William McDermott, set and costumes by Miguel Pietro. It premiered at the Palacio das Bellas Artes, in Mexico City, on March 8, 1946 (Walker, 1983, p. 258-259).
- 28 Ballet in one act, choreography by Michel Fokine, music by Igor Stravinsky, scenery and costumes by Alexander Golovin and Leon Bakst. Premiered at the Paris Opera, on June 25, 1910 (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 183).
- 29 Ballet in one act, choreography by Nina Verchinina, music by Jean Sibelius, scenery and costumes by Jan Zach (Walker, 1983, p. 278-279).



- 30 Ballet in one act, choreography by Maria Olenewa, music by Francisco Mignone, scenery and costumes by Santa Rosa. It premiered on July 8, 1939, at the Municipal Theater of Rio de Janeiro (Pereira, 2003, p. 134, 139).
- 31 Ballet in one act, choreography by Michel Fokine, libretto by Alexandre Benois (1870 – 1960) and Igor Stravinsky (1882 – 1971), music by Stravinsky, set and costumes by Alexander Benois. It premiered on June 13, 1911, at the Chatelet Theater in Paris (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 371).
- 32 Ballet in one act, choreography by Michel Fokine, music by Chopin. The first version premiered on February 23, 1907, at the Maryinsky Theater, under the name Chopiniana. The following year, on March 21, a second version was presented, also at the Maryinsky Theatre. The third version, already renamed *Les Sylphides*, premiered on June 2, 1909, at the Chatelet Theater in Paris (Craine; Mackrell, 2000, p. 459).
- 33 Vaslav Nijinsky arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1939, at the invitation of Mayor Henrique Dodsworth, to help organize, together with Maria Olenewa, the season at the Municipal Theater. With the outbreak of World War II, he remained in Brazil until 1953, playing a fundamental role in the development of ballet in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. From 1953 onwards, he worked as a guest choreographer in Uruguay, Venezuela and Spain, settling permanently in Brazil from 1965 until the year of his death (Faro, 1988, p. 29-33).
- 34 O Globo newspaper, September 24, 1942; Correio da Noite, October 1, 1943; A Cena Muda film magazine, March 27, 1945th
- 35 Correio da noite newspaper, October 16 and December 16, 1944.
- 36 Available at <[www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0180589/](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0180589/)>. Accessed March 8th, 2021.

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