

# P E R F O R M A N C E

## Diaghilev and His Geniuses

The culturati of Europe in the early twentieth century had a phrase for cutting-edge developments: "That's very Ballets Russes." Indeed, the Ballets Russes, founded and run by the legendary Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), were a fountain of energy that launched many of the century's creative icons. Igor Stravinsky, for example, was not well known when Diaghilev commissioned *The Firebird* in 1910; *Petrouchka* followed in 1911, and *The Rite of Spring*'s 1913 Paris premiere triggered an artistic riot that made both the composer and the ballet famous. Even Pablo



Right: A portrait of Diaghilev in graphite and chalk, by Constantine Korovine.

Below: *The City Square*, 1937, a scene design by Natalia Goncharova for *Le Coq d'Or*.



Picasso's reputation grew when Diaghilev engaged him to design *Parade* (1917), with music by Erik Satie and a scenario by Jean Cocteau.

Vaslav Nijinsky and, less frequently, Anna Pavlova danced for the Ballets Russes; Michel Fokine was the most prominent choreographer. At the center was Diaghilev, "a man of great taste and discernment, as well as personal persuasiveness," says Fredric Woodbridge Wilson, curator of the Harvard Theatre Collection, a part of Houghton Library. "He was an adventurer who sought out novelty, and delighted in revealing new artists. There was perhaps never quite a parallel circumstance in the history of the arts in which the tastes and personal influence of



Above: Costumes and set design by Robert Edmond Jones '10 for *Till Eulenspiegel*, 1916. Left: Vaslav Nijinsky as the Spirit in *Le Spectre de la Rose*, a 1911 portrait by Jean Cocteau. Below, right: A painted porcelain figurine of Nijinsky as Harlequin in *Carnaval*



one person had such an effect on the future of the world of art."

This enchanted age of dance is the focus of a centennial exhibition by the Theatre Collection, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1909-1929: Twenty Years That Changed*

*the World of Art*, scheduled to run through August 28 in Pusey Library. The collection, assembled across decades, ranks among the world's great centers for studying the Ballets Russes, and will have many unique items on display, like an autograph letter from Picasso to Diaghilev about *Parade*.

In mid April, the Theatre Collection and the Office for the Arts were set to convene more than three dozen speakers for a three-day symposium, including *New Yorker* dance writer Joan Acocella, Diaghilev biographer Joy Melville of London, and Toni Bentley of Los Angeles, an author and former Balanchine dancer who will discuss Ida Rubinstein, the wealthy, beautiful ballerina who broke from Diaghilev to found her own company. (She commissioned and danced Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* in 1928.)

Concurrently, the Harvard Dance Center planned to present *Dancers'Viewpointe 9*, including scenes from *The Rite of Spring* newly choreographed by Jaime Blanc of Mexico, and Harvard radio station WHRB expected to air several programs of music associated with Ballets Russes productions. Meanwhile, the nonprofit Brattle Theatre in Harvard Square was to screen three days' worth of ballet films, including a new Finnish movie, *My Madness Is My Love: Impressions of Vaslav Nijinsky*; the 1948 Hollywood classic *The Red Shoes*; and *The Mad Genius*, a 1931 movie starring John Barrymore, with ballet scenes and characters transparently based on Diaghilev and his circle.

—CRAIG LAMBERT



Images courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection