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THE HISTORY OF
THE BALLET RUSSES



The Impresarios

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The Impresarios

SERGEI PAVLOVICH DIAGHILEV



MARCH 31, 1872-APRIL 19, 1929

Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev was born on March 31, 1872 to Pavel Pavlovich Diaghilev and Yevgeniya Yevreinova. After the death of his mother his father married Elena Valerianovna Panaeva. She was an artistic woman who had great affection for Sergei and a strong influence upon him. Although Sergei's family had been very wealthy, by 1890 they were completely bankrupt from having lived beyond their means for a very long time. Sergei, who had a small inheritance, supported the family until he moved to attend St. Petersburg University where he studied law and music. Upon graduating he was appointed Artistic Adviser to the Director of the Imperial Theatres, Prince Sergei Mikhaylovich Volkonsky. In 1901, after many antagonistic episodes between Diaghilev and the Prince, Diaghilev refused to continue performing his duties and was discharged.

From 1901 to 1908 Diaghilev began to build his career as an impresario, and he became very expert at organizing and soliciting funding for art exhibitions, concerts, plays, ballets, and operas. In 1908, Diaghilev received the invitation that would change his life and the history of ballet forever, and he was asked to produce a ballet as well as an opera for the upcoming season. On May 19, 1909, the *Ballets Russes* was an instant sensation upon their first appearance in the Theatre du Chatelet in Paris with some of the best young Russian dancers of the time which included Anna Pavlova, Adolph Bolm, Vaslav Nijinsky, Tamara Karsavina, and Vera Karalli. Prior to 1909 an independent ballet company was unheard of, as most ballet companies were part of an opera company or were subsidized by the ruling power of a nation.

Revitalizing ballet by integrating the ideals of the other art forms of music, painting, and drama with those of the dance, Diaghilev created the exotic appeal of the *Ballets Russes*. Collaborating with the famous artists, designers, and composers of the time sensationalized the ballet. Over the years Leon Baskt, Alexandre Benois, Georges Braque, Coco Chanel, Giorgio de Chirico, André Derain, Max Ernst, Juan Gris, Vasily Kandinsky, Marie Laurencin, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Rouault would all design for the *Ballets Russes*, just as Claude Debussy, Manuel de Falla, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Francis Poulenc, Sergei Prokofiev, Maurice Ravel, Ottorino Respighi, Erik Satie, Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Nikolai Tcherepnin would compose for them. It became evident

immediately that conventional choreography was to have no place in the *Ballets Russes* novel spectacles, and that an entirely new vocabulary of movement was being created. The ballets that were created became part of the avant-garde culture in Paris, and indeed in all of France making Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* the most influential ballet company of the 20th century precisely because of these ground-breaking artistic collaborations between artists, composers, choreographers, and dancers.

In St. Petersburg, Diaghilev had been a member of an artistically inclined gay clique. By the early 20th century, being a homosexual opened as many doors as it closed. Having come to terms with his sexuality at an early age, Diaghilev made no attempt to conceal his homosexuality. Nicolas Nabokov, a composer and writer, said of Diaghilev that "he was perhaps the first grand homosexual who asserted himself and was accepted as such by society." The threads of Diaghilev's personal life and his *Ballets Russes* were tightly interwoven and the artistic tapestry created could not have existed without either. Amongst Diaghilev's lovers were the famous choreographers and dancers of the *Ballets Russes* including Anton Dolin, Serge Lifar, and Léonide Massine. His most legendary romance with Vaslav Nijinsky, who was credited as the greatest male dancer of the early 20th century, began in 1909. Nijinsky had been the former lover of Prince Lvov, and the fact that Diaghilev didn't bother to conceal the affair infuriated social conservatives who convinced the Tsar to withdraw his financial support of the *Ballets Russes*. Without the financial support of the Tsar, Diaghilev and his *Ballets Russes* were forced to depart from Russia.

Diaghilev, having to constantly raise funds after leaving Russia, developed a fascination with the privileged class that led to both a personal and professional crisis. In 1911 he presented Nijinsky with the opportunity to experiment with choreography. Nijinsky not only forged a new path in ballet for the male dancer with his innovative choreographies, but he also became an internationally famous dancer himself. Romola de Pulszky, a young woman from a very wealthy and prominent Hungarian family, saw Nijinsky while on tour in Budapest and fell madly in love with him. The wealthy heiress managed to talk Diaghilev, who was thrilled to have a benefactress, into allowing her to travel with the company and

take ballet classes with them. Suspecting nothing, Diaghilev permitted her to travel with the company on their first tour to South America in 1913. Diaghilev, who was mortally afraid of drowning in the sea, remained behind in Europe. When the company returned, Diaghilev learned that his lover and star dancer had married his benefactress in Buenos Aires after a shipboard romance. Filled with rage, Diaghilev immediately fired Nijinsky.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, it was certain that Diaghilev and his *Ballets Russes* would never return to Russia, now the Soviet Union. Instead, they toured in Europe and the uncharted territory of the United States. From January 17th through April 3rd of 1916, Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* made their only tour in the United States. On May 6, 1916, in the midst of World War I, they set sail back to Europe on the Dante Alighieri, which was loaded with a cargo of ammunition, horses, and ballet dancers. In 1923, Diaghilev signed a contract with the Principality of Monaco for the company to become the official ballet of the Monte Carlo Opera, and the company was renamed *Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo*. Diaghilev's *Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* continued to perform throughout Europe until 1929. Fraught with debt, Diaghilev's *Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* gave their final performance at Covent Garden Theatre in London on July 26, 1929, and Diaghilev died the following month in Venice, Italy, on August 19th from complications of Diabetes. After his death, all the property of *Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* was claimed by creditors, and the dancers scattered to find work.

The Impresarios
RENÉ BLUM



MARCH 13, 1878-SEPTEMBER 1942

René Blum, born on March 13, 1878, was a man of many talents whose love of the arts was firmly seeded in his heart during his youth. During his military service in World War I, Blum was instrumental in rescuing the threatened artwork from Amiens Cathedral and earned the French Croix De Guerre. After World War I Blum became Editor of *Gil Blas* - Parisian Literary Journal, and eventually Director of Plays and Operettas at Monte Carlo Opera. In 1931, Blum created the *Ballets de l'Opera de Monte Carlo* at the request of Louis II - Prince of Monaco who wanted a ballet company that would continue the work and legacy of the late Diaghilev. Blum was joined by Colonel Wassily de Basil, a former Cossack Officer who had managed the *Opera Russe a Paris*, in reviving Diaghilev's company which was renamed *René Blum and Col. De Basil Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo*. The company premiered on January 17, 1932, but by April of 1935 Blum and de Basil were constantly fighting for control of the company. Finally, they disassociated themselves with Blum retaining the rights to the "Monte Carlo" name.

By the spring of 1937 Léonide Massine, who had been Diaghilev's and then de Basil's leading dancer and choreographer, became disgruntled with de Basil's leadership. Massine, in seeking sole artistic power, secretly met with four very prominent and wealthy Americans, Sergei Denham, Julius Fleishmann, David Lidbins, and Watson Washburn to plan the formation of a new company. This new company was to be created by purchasing Blum's rights to the *Ballets de Monte Carlo*, and in November of 1937 the purchase was completed transferring all rights, performing and otherwise. Thus began the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* with Sergei Denham as President, René Blum as Co-Director, David Lidbins as Administrative Director, and Léonide Massine as Artistic Director.

The *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* opened its first season in Monte Carlo followed by seasons in London and New York where the company launched its first American tour in March of 1939. Since the original plan called for the company to split its time evenly between Europe and the United States, the company returned on April 4, 1939 to perform in Monte Carlo and London, but World War II intervened. Under extreme duress the company and all of its properties managed to escape to America in time to open a slightly delayed New York season in October. Unable to return to Europe during World War II, the

Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo toured extensively throughout the United States, giving Americans a strong impression of what was known as the "Russian Ballet."

The German Occupation of France in the summer of 1940 compelled René Blum to return to his family in France. This proved to be fatal mistake for Blum, who was a Jew, and he was arrested on December 12, 1941. Being amongst the first Jews to be arrested in Paris, he was interned in France until he was transported to Auschwitz Concentration Camp where he was murdered by the Nazis in late September of 1942. He was remembered for keeping up the spirits of his fellow prisoners with his tales of his life in the ballet.

The Impresarios
CL. WASSILY DE BASIL



SEPTEMBER 16, 1888 - JULY 27, 1951

Colonel Wassily de Basil (Vassily Grigorievich Voskresensky) born on September 16, 1888 was a Colonel in the Cossack Army from which he was discharged in 1919. Seeking a new life outside Russia, de Basil moved to Paris and began work as an entrepreneur. In 1925, de Basil partnered with Aleksey Tseretelli to form Zerbason, an agency that represented artists. Shortly thereafter, both became Directors of the *Opera Russe a Paris*.

After Diaghilev's death de Basil joined René Blum to found the *René Blum and Col. De Basil Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo*. However, vehement disagreements caused Blum and de Basil to sever their relationship. Léonide Massine, the premiere dancer and choreographer who remained with de Basil after the split, also became disgruntled with de Basil reporting that it was impossible to work with him. After his contract with de Basil was fulfilled, Massine returned to Monte Carlo and initiated the creation of another company. With Blum. Not only did Massine lure away some of de Basil's dancers, but he sued de Basil as well to regain the intellectual property rights to his own choreographies, and to claim the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* name. A London jury decided that de Basil owned Massine's ballets that were created between 1932 and 1937, but not those created before 1932. It also ruled that both successor companies could use the name "*Ballet Russe*," but only Massine's company could use "*de Monte Carlo*."

After the exodus, de Basil founded his own company which he initially named *Col. de Basil's Ballets Russe de Monte Carlo*. Now unable to use "*de Monte Carlo*" in the name of his company, de Basil changed the name to the *Covent Garden Russian Ballet* which was used until 1939 when the company assumed its final name the *Original Ballet Russe*.

From 1936 to 1940 the *Original Ballet Russe* toured Australia three times, and was inherently responsible for bringing ballet to Australia. During these tours, de Basil commissioned work from Australian designers to be used in the production of his ballets. The *Original Ballet Russe* brought a panorama of choreography, music, and design never before seen in Australia. In all, a stunning range of forty-four ballets, most of them Australian premieres, was presented over the three tours of the *Original Ballet Russe*. The influence of de Basil's *Original Ballet Russe* on the development of ballet and indeed her

sister arts in Australia had a significant, long-lasting, and tangible impact resulting from the choice of a number of company dancers to stay in or return to Australia permanently.

Colonel Wassily de Basil directed his company until his death in 1951.

The Impresarios
SERGEI DENHAM



SEPTEMBER 16, 1888 - JULY 27, 1951

Sergei Denham (Sergei Ivanovich Dokouchaiev) was born on October 22, 1896 in Samara, Russia. Denham recalled that when his father died a French Governess was hired to help care for all eight children. He credits her for nurturing his early love of ballet by creating tiny theater stages and paper ballerina dolls out of orange cartons for him to play with. After his father's death, the family moved to Moscow where Sergei was able to attend boarding school. His education was very diversified and included both business and the arts. After the Revolution of 1917, Denham decided to immigrate with his family to the United States. In 1921, the family settled in New York City where Sergei would eventually become Vice-President of the Bankers Trust Company.

In 1935, it became apparent that the ballet company formed by René Blum and Colonel W. de Basil was going bankrupt and would soon collapse. Sol Hurok, the American impresario, assumed management until Denham eagerly accepted the offer to assist in forming the new *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*. Denham seized the moment and gathered his wealthy friends to form World Art Incorporated, the stock corporation that purchased Blum's company. Denham was appointed President of the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*, a position he would hold throughout the entire length of the company's existence.

From 1939 to the company's final performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1962, the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* spent nearly all of its time on the road touring extensively throughout the United States with occasional excursions to Canada and South America. They performed two-hundred times a year for a total audience of a million people in a hundred different cities bringing ballet to every corner of the continental United States. By the early 1960s, waning artistic standards and union difficulties served to undermine the popularity and financial viability of the company, and the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* quietly dissolved after its spring performances in 1962.

Despite tremendous adversity, Sergei Denham refused to give up. Although the performing company had disbanded, the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* continued to operate its school in New York City which had been founded by Maria Swoboda in 1954. Denham, believing that a ballet school was the lifeline for a company, acquired all of Swoboda's

rights and leases to the school. Afterward, he once again sought the financial backing of Julius Fleischmann and other wealthy benefactors making a bold attempt to reorganize the company. Renaming the company the *Ballets de Monte Carlo*, he boldly proceeded until the company, comprised mostly of young and inexperienced dancers, collapsed shortly after only one grueling winter and spring season. By 1967, the ballet school had lost its lease and was forced to close for good ceasing the flow of performing dancers feeding into the company.

Under Sergei Denham, the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* had been both vital in presenting new ideas, as well as successful in maintaining the finest traditions of the ballet. Denham was able to continue preserving the ideals, tradition, and glamour of the classical ballet while at the same time forming collaborations between noteworthy artists in painting, music, writing, and dance to produce novel choreographies. It is interesting to note that an unprecedented number of those choreographies were created by women, signaling that Denham was far ahead of the times. Agnes de Mille, Bronislava Nijinska, Pilar Lopez, Ruth Page, Valerie Bettis, Antonia Cobos, Ruthanna Boris, Tatiana Chamie, Nini Theilade, and Nina Novak were all championed by Denham.

Sergei Denham died on January 20, 1970 in New York City. He was struck by a bus as he was leaving the Ballet Russe Office.

The Impresarios
SOL HUROK



APRIL 9, 1888 - MARCH 5, 1974

Sol Hurok (Solomon Isaievich Hurok) was born on April 9, 1888 in Pogor, Russia to a traditional Russian-Jewish family. He was the third son of Israil Gurkov, a retail trader. Although Hurok was sent to study at the Kharkov Trade School at the age of 18, he used all of his travel money to immigrate to America in 1906. Hurok arrived penniless and immediately went to work any job he could find. He was a peddler, streetcar conductor, bottle-washer, and a hardware salesman until he finally landed a position as a show promoter for the labor organizations. His career as one of the most foremost impresarios in history was launched in 1913 when he inaugurated a popular concert series *Music for The Masses*. Afterward, Hurok founded his company, S. Hurok Concerts, Incorporated, which focused mostly on Russian musical, opera, and ballet stars. It is recorded that Hurok represented about four thousand individual artists and companies.

Hurok first became acquainted with the ballet during the 1920s when he managed the American tours of *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*. René Blum and Colonel W. de Basil, who had assumed Diaghilev's legacy, were on the verge of bankruptcy and solicited Hurok to assume the management of the company. Hurok promptly booked the company at the St. James Theatre in New York City, and although he lost a considerable amount of money on this first venture, he believed it was time that the ballet took its rightful place in the culture of America. The next season, Hurok booked the company in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, and the season proved to be an enormous success. However, the differences between Blum and de Basil were irreconcilable, and Blum relinquished his share of the partnership leaving de Basil to run the company. Hurok temporarily severed his relationship with de Basil to manage the new company that had been created by Blum, Massine, Denham, Fleishmann, Lidbins, and Washburn.

Beginning in the late 1930s, Denham's *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* and Colonel W. de Basil's *Original Ballet Russe* were both performing on the circuit. Hurok, certain that the American public could not support two ballet companies, encouraged the companies to reconcile and merge. Hoping to inaugurate a reunion, Hurok hosted a management session for the two companies to meet and iron out their differences in an all-night session. Although throughout the meeting reconciliation looked promising, at the last moment de Basil

refused. Both companies continued performing in the very same cities at the very same time. In London, at Covent Garden the audience could see de Basil's company, and then scurry two blocks away to Drury Lane to see Blum's company. Balletomanes ran back and forth from one theater to another to see the ballets. When World War II began both companies made New York City their permanent home, and Hurok was asked to manage both companies. He booked their tours one right after the other instead of at the very same time, and this brilliant maneuver created the longest ballet season to ever hit New York City which lasted a solid fifteen weeks.

Hurok, the common thread uniting ever single Ballet Russe company, sold the S. Hurok Concerts, Incorporated to the Transcontinental Investing Corporation in 1969, but retained control to actively promote concerts until his death. In 1972, Hurok was injured and his Staff Receptionist, Iris Kones, killed by the explosion of a bomb planted in his office. Although many believed that the bombing had been arranged by the Jewish Defense League, an organization that opposed artists from the Soviet Union touring America, no one was ever convicted of the crime.

Sol Hurok died of a heart attack on his way to meet with David Rockefeller to discuss a sponsorship to bring Rudolf Nureyev, the famous new Russian ballet star, to America on March 5, 1974. His memorial service held at Carnegie Hall was attended by thousands.