IN GOOD COMPANY

These days, tickets to the ballet can mean you're in for a fashion show. **Rebecca Kamm** reports on the history of designer-dancer collaborations

In May 1913, before the wealth of obscenities proffered by the internet rendered us all unshockable, a ballet caused a riot. At the Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, staged by new Russian dance company the Ballets Russes, the orchestra had barely started on composer Igor Stravinsky's score when the audience turned on each other, screaming and punching. The police were called, but even batons failed to calm the masses, who raged on until they were flung back out onto the street. Stravinsky, shocked, sneaked off into the black of night.

A combination of factors caused the mayhem. The unconventional music, with its pulsating, dissonant chords, was a slap in the face; as was dancer Vaslav Nijinsky's frenzied, jutting choreography – dancers claimed to land on the stage floor so hard their organs shook. And artist Nicholas Roerich's stark peasant costumes, while perfect for the story's pagan theme, outraged with their boldness. In essence, the audience arrived expecting grace and tradition, and instead got extravagance and daring. This was no *Swan Lake*; naturally the only thing for it was to give the next person along a good thump.

Not everyone was livid, though. The riot delighted Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev, the Russian impresario behind the Ballets Russes. The son of a bankrupt vodka distiller, Diaghilev had arrived in Paris four years earlier with a small troupe of dancers he'd poached from the Imperial Ballet of St. Petersburg. As the co-founder of a well-regarded arts review, he was already a key cultural figure back home, and his ambition was boundless. "Exactly what I wanted," he later confided in Stravinsky, when the audience lost its marbles. Diaghilev's hope for his itinerant dance company was to forge new ground with artistic collaboration, so the uproar only served to validate his daring.

Today, hardcore tutu spotters cite the incident as the pinnacle of a golden age in ballet history. Before Diaghilev shook things up, ballet in the West had grown predictable and staid: all fluffy themes, paint-by-numbers choreography and innocuous design. In contrast, the bold young artists commissioned by the Ballets Russes – Bakst, Picasso, Chanel, Matisse, Miró and Dalí among them – created stage sets and costumes that stunned and startled. Potent colour, Oriental exoticism, Slavic embroidery and primitive Russian art all broadened ballet's creative vocabulary and saw it become an experimental art form. Or, as French poet Anna de Noailles said at the time, "It was as if Creation, having stopped on the seventh day, now all of a sudden resumed."

The legacy of the Ballets Russes would impress even Diaghilev himself, however. The troupe disbanded in 1929 when he died suddenly of diabetes, but his genius is alive and kicking more than a century later in the explosion of seasonal marriages between designers and ballet companies. Cropping up with reliable frequency in the past few years and covered dutifully by the fashion press, Valentino, Chanel, Narciso Rodriguez, Lacroix, McQueen, Prada, Willow and Vezzoli have all spun their exclusive yarns around dancers' limbs.

Despite the recent resurgence, these collaborations are nothing new. In the 1980s, ballet was gripped by the scruff of its delicate neck by youth culture, or, more specifically, a man nicknamed "Nijinsky with a mohawk". Like Nijinksy, Michael Clark was a ballet dancer and choreographer with a difference. The Scotsman joined forces with the designers of Bodymap, a forward-thinking label known for its deconstructed, anti-establishment ethos, and infused his London-based productions with an anarchic culture of sex, fashion and performance. In 1986, dancers in *No Fire Escape in Hell* wore hand-printed unitards with their bottoms sticking out, and rubber strap-ons. Australian avant-garde performance artist Leigh Bowery did his thing in 10-inch heels, and post-punk groups Wire, Laibach and The Fall also added to the merriment.

From top: Igor Stravinsky in New Zealand in 1961; costume designs by Pablo Picasso for* The Three-Cornered Hat*; artist Henri Matisse and choreographer Léonide Massine; a scene from* The Rite of Spring*; Royal New Zealand Ballet's Tonia Looker wearing Karen Walker for* Satisfied with Great Success*. Left: A Karen Walker sketch for the RNZB.

The latest surge of fashion designer/ballet company couplings are less political and more reflective of modern economic imperatives. These happy unions give a stamp of high culture to high-end brands, and a seal of modernism to ballet companies targeting new, younger and hipper audiences.

But it's a symbiotic relationship that also produces works of spectacular dynamism, true to Diaghilev's vision of collaboration for the purpose of "total theatre". Karl Lagerfeld of Chanel's creation for the English National Ballet's 2009 production of *The Dying Swan* was undeniably striking. Delicious upward plumes of the softest, whitest feathers stemming from the bodice of a sharp-edged yet delicate tutu; the eponymous swan's dress was enchantment itself. Opinion was divided, though. While fashion sorts gazed on in moonstruck awe, serious ballet critics felt the tutu's high waist made the dancer look plump, as though that were actually possible.

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Alexander McQueen's designs for Sadler's Wells' *Eonnagata* that year created a similar double-sided commotion. True to his aesthetic, the late maverick dressed dancers in gender-bending and culture-crossing drama that had the fashion press agog. In the blink of an eye, blogs and magazines were covering his sumptuous, oversized crimson fans, floor-length cage skirts and long, high-collared suit jackets. But dance devotees complained the designs were impractical, hindering the action.

Both Lagerfeld and Valentino have commented on the difficulty of combining couture and dancers' need for movement. Karen Walker – who has designed for the Royal New Zealand Ballet's 2011 Stravinsky series – says the aim is to create pieces that don't skimp on either moveability or aesthetics. Still, there are limitations.

"We got a clear brief on what does and doesn't work for dancers," says Walker. "Their ability to perform has to be considered at every moment. We can't have too much fullness in a skirt, as that means a ballerina's partner can't get an immediate, controlled grip on her hips, or hold her upside down above him, as the skirt would fall on his face."

The outfits the Royal New Zealand Ballet dancers will don were inspired, Walker says, by the colour and body blocking of Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Dadaist marionettes. Modernism, of course, was courtesy of Diaghilev: "We took inspiration from the Ballets Russes in that they sometimes had an unconventional approach to costumes, using clothes instead of ballet costumes, and in doing so casualising high art and elevating street into something disciplined."

It was Coco Chanel, the designer credited with moving women out of restrictive bustles and corsetry and into clothing that actually let them move, who replaced traditional ballet costumes with clothes for the Ballets Russes.

Le Train Bleu (the title refers to the train that sped Parisians along the Côte d'Azur) from 1924 is the best example of her involvement. Diaghilev's direction for the costumes stated: "Instead of trying to remain this side of the ridiculous in life, to come to terms with it, I would push beyond." Chanel took his instructions and ran with them, putting the dancers in sportswear from her own collection. Her black tank bathing tops, striped woollen jumpers, culottes and muted tunic dresses certainly "pushed beyond"– straight ahead into Chanel's 2010 resort collection which, 86 years later, echoed the same cuts and hues.

It wasn't just Chanel who added a special touch to *Le Train Bleu*. Like every Ballets Russes production, it was the sum of its specially chosen parts. Pablo Picasso also hung about, fulfilling the specific role of backdrop painter; while Bronislava Nijinska, Vaslav Nijinsky's sister, helped choreograph. Poet and playwright Jean Cocteau put together the libretto; composer Darius Milhaud, the score; and sculptor Henri Laurens, the sets.

There was no riot. On the contrary, a magazine lamented, ''It is as difficult to get a seat for *The Blue Train* as it is to get a seat for the thing itself during the height of the Riviera rush." The crowds loved the drama, a light-hearted look at fashion and high society that both celebrated its excesses and poked fun (Scene 1: *Tarts, gigolos, sunbathing. Then gigolos run (in place) and do rapid physical exercises, while the tarts, scattered in groups, assume the graceful poses of coloured postcards*).

It was certainly closer to home than *The Rite of Spring*'s maniacal peasants. Or maybe the audience had simply grown used to Diaghilev's difference. Either way, the crowds wanted in. They still do. ★

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