18 The ballet avant-garde II: the 'new' Russian and Soviet dance in the twentieth century

TIM SCHOLL

In 1908, a collection of articles on contemporary Russian theatre appeared in St Petersburg. Modestly titled *Theatre. A Book on the New Theatre*, the volume featured contributions by the painter Alexandre Benois, theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, future Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, the symbolist poets Andrey Bely and Valery Bryusov, and novelist Fyodor Sologub. The diversity of this group suggests the significance of Russian theatre in St Petersburg at the turn of the century and the breadth of the quest for new forms in the arts in Russia in the early years of the twentieth century. The writers mostly advocated the latest movement in Russian theatre, shaped as it was by a fascination with emerging symbolist tendencies that sought to correct, or at least to dethrone, the naturalism of Konstantin Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, though Stanislavsky's innovations were still relatively new.

One year after the theatre volume appeared, Sergey Diaghilev presented Russian dancers in five ballets in his *Saisons russes* in Paris. The fame and notoriety of this "new" dance from Russia would soon eclipse the discussion of new theatre – and outlast that earlier phenomenon. Nonetheless, Russia's new ballet owed much to the experimentation of new theatre. The new ballet emerged alongside it, and, like the new theatre, new dance was simpler to define by what it was not. However variously writers conceived of the 'new' ballet, one thing was clear: Marius Petipa and the large repertory he created for the Russian Imperial Ballet represented the old.

Petipa's 1898 production of *Raymonda* was the master choreographer's last "grand" ballet. He created a series of smaller-scaled works for the Hermitage (court) Theatre in 1900 and 1902; the production of his last ballet, *The Magic Mirror* met with unprecedented failure in 1903. Ironically, the reasons routinely cited for the fiasco could serve as the template for the innovations of the new ballet: the "symphonic" score, the sets by Aleksandr Golovin, a leading easel painter, and the curious provenance of the libretto, concocted from the unlikely pairing of the Brothers Grimm and Russia's great romantic poet, Aleksandr Pushkin. A mere six years after the failure of Petipa's *Magic Mirror*, Sergey Diaghilev's Ballets Russes stormed Paris with ballets set to "concert" music, with sets and costumes designed by

fashionable painters, and libreti drawn from a variety of sources, including the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé.

The ballets and choreographers eventually termed "new" were a loose collection of ballets and ballet innovators who worked mostly at the fringes of a ballet establishment centred in St Petersburg's Maryinsky Theatre, Petipa's laboratory since 1847. With ballet education and production the exclusive domain of the Imperial Theatre system, the new ballet had to emerge, with difficulty, from the old. And although foreign ballerinas, mostly from Italy, regularly received contracts to dance on the imperial stages, visiting ballet troupes (and choreography from beyond the Russian empire) only began to visit Russia once the Imperial Theatres' monopoly was relaxed in 1882. However Russian dance writers were none too impressed with the quality of the dancing or the choreography they saw when troupes such as Luigi Manzotti's staged their productions on the summer stages of suburban amusement parks.

The most stunning blow to the old ballet was delivered on the illustrious Maryinsky stage in St Petersburg, when Aleksandr Gorsky's production of *Don Quixote* (1900, Moscow), was brought in to replace Petipa's 1869 staging. Aleksandr Gorsky, a former dancer with the Petersburg troupe, established his reputation as a ballet master by staging Petipa works in Moscow (including *The Sleeping Beauty*, from dance notations, in 1899). Gorsky moved from these fundamentally faithful restagings of Petipa's ballets to full-scale revisions of his works in later years. As was typically the case in "new" ballets, Gorsky's attempts at revision were mostly attempts to make the old ballets more logical and dramatically viable. Gorsky was influenced by Konstantin Stanislavsky's work at the Moscow Art Theatre, which was then enjoying its artistic peak, staging premieres of Anton Chekhov's plays. From Stanislavsky, Gorsky learned the importance of the unity of the production as a whole, as well as the value of its details. In Gorsky's productions, dancers were encouraged to analyse their characters' motivations, decors were painted in a more realistic manner and costumes were increasingly designed for individuals rather than for groups. Most importantly, Gorsky focused his directorial attentions on establishing a clear line of action in his so-called choreo-dramas, revealing a clear debt to Stanislavsky.

When Gorsky's version of the Petipa classic *Don Quixote* arrived in St Petersburg, local critics were shocked at the asymmetry of Gorsky's choreography, his attempts to integrate the group dances into the dramatic fabric of the work and to rid the ballet of these conventionalised divertissements. The decors, painted by Konstantin Korovin and Aleksandr Golovin (who would design Petipa's *Magic Mirror* the following year) represented another departure from the work of Petipa's academically trained designers. Their

works did not meet with general approval; they were deemed "decadent" for their lack of perspective and for the predominance of mottled colours.

Gorsky staged *Giselle* four times in Moscow (1901, 1907, 1918, and 1922). The evolution of this work in Gorsky's stagings offers a snapshot of the trajectory of his evolving approach to the classics, and to his evolution as a choreographer. His first staging remained faithful to Petipa's version and used old decors. Gorsky's 1907 staging of the work was for Vera Karalli, the dramatically gifted dancer who had graduated from the ballet school one year earlier. This staging of the ballet updated the action to the Directoire period and assigned individualised tasks to the crowd. Karalli clearly stepped outside the bounds of traditional interpretations of the classic role: she was criticised for laughing loudly in the mad scene. In the second act, the wilis, dressed in nightgowns, behaved more as seductresses than spirits from the underworld.

Gorsky's quite radical notions of ballet dramaturgy suited the new political and cultural climate that followed the decisive October 1917 Revolution – for a time. His attempts to democratise ballet institutions – as well as ballets – won him enemies at the Bolshoi, particularly among established virtuoso dancers who were replaced by a new generation of "dancing actors". Gorsky's favourite ballerinas were dramatically gifted but technically weak, and this preference for acting showed in the dances Gorsky created. Gorsky's 1918 version of the ballet was criticised as overly cinematic, as was the acting of the character dancers who played the lead. By 1922, Gorsky advised his ballerina not to dance on pointe, but to jump like a young goat, to really go mad, and die with her legs apart.[1] In Gorsky's hands, in successive stagings, *Giselle* became a mimed melodrama.

Gorsky played a central role in ballet reform in Russia in the early years of the twentieth century, but the radical nature of his later experiments made his innovations ultimately unworkable, and his productions were quickly replaced by more traditional treatments of the classic ballets Gorsky reconfigured. By the time of his death in 1924, little remained of the repertory Gorsky created for the Bolshoi Theatre.

Despite Gorsky's pioneering efforts in the creation of the new ballet, the body of work he created was little known beyond Moscow. Paradoxically, some of the most famous of Russia's new ballets were not seen in Russia until the wave of new ballet experimentation was over. Michel Fokine's *Schéhérazade*, *Firebird* and *Le Spectre de la rose*, essential to the early success of the Diaghilev ballet and exemplars of Russia's new ballet, did not become part of the Soviet repertory. Fokine's ballets, set mostly to concert music and therefore much shorter than the nineteenth-century's three- to five-act ballets, were deemed 'choreographic miniatures' in the Soviet Union, where works of epic length and scale were preferred.

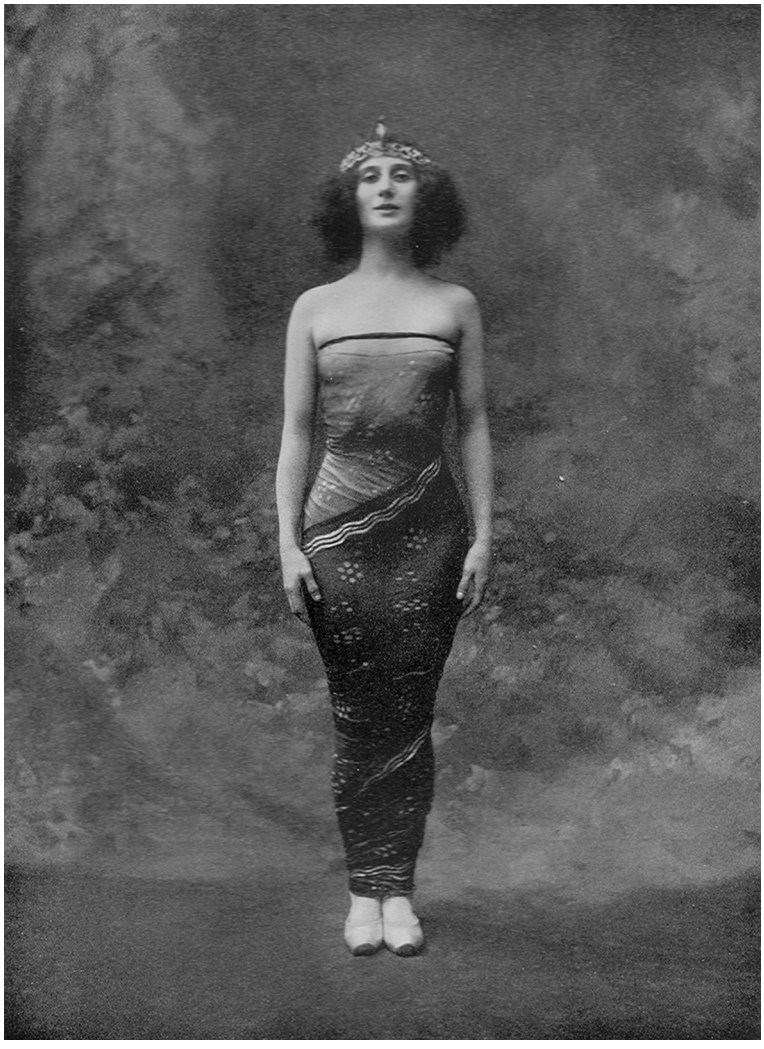

Figure 34 Anna Pavlova, studio photograph.

Fokine began his choreographic career in 1905 with *Acis and Galatea*, a stylised Greek ballet for his students. His best-known and most-performed work, *The Swan*, was created for Anna Pavlova two years later (see Fig. 34). In these and subsequent works, the inspiration of Isadora Duncan is evident. Duncan began her first tour of Russia in 1904, and the self-taught, free-form dances she created furnished a ready model for Fokine and for others. Her dances were produced independently of state-supported academies and theatre bureaucracies. Duncan danced to concert music, without special sets, and with minimal costumes that revealed a freer body than tights and tutus allowed. Fokine responded to Duncan with a series of retrospective stylisations, yet *The Swan*, despite its conventional costuming and steps, was

Fokine's most significant contribution to the new ballet repertory. Its nearly naturalistic focus on the moment of death directed the new ballet's priorities towards expression, the watchword of so many modern dance innovators of Fokine's day.

Fokine drafted a manifesto of the new ballet that first appeared in *The Times* of London in July 1914, one month after the choreographers's last work for Diaghilev premiered. Fokine called for the ballet to abandon its usual conventions, including those of steps and costuming in favour of new forms better suited to the time and settings of individual ballets. Fokine believed that the ballet should also abandon the divertissement as a diversion from the action of the dance, and that dance and pantomime must be combined to express the idea of the ballet as a whole. Finally, the dance should unite with other art forms; the new ballet should function as a union of the arts, and dance should cease to be subordinate to music and the visual arts.

Fokine's *Chopiniana* (1907, the 1909 version for Diaghilev is known in the West as *Les Sylphides*), like his *Swan* from the same year, stylises the dance of the nineteenth century. These two works provide a fair representation of the principles of the new ballet that Fokine would later draft. They feature integrated dances, not divertissements, and relate events (relationships, death) that are readily understandable without recourse to pantomime. Although Gorsky had staged a similar work years earlier (*Valse fantaisie*, 1901), *Chopiniana* is generally regarded as the first plot-less ballet.

Fokine worked with the painter and set designer Alexandre Benois on the production of *Pavillon d'Armide* (1907). The first ballet shown by the Diaghilev ballet in Paris, *Pavillon* could serve as the template for the Ballets Russes and the works Diaghilev would produce. The ballet's opulent visuals were faithful to the rococo period. The dance was not; yet the harmonious blend of dance, drama, decor, and music captured the attention of the European public and established the choreographer's early fame. The ballets Fokine created for the Diaghilev ballet – *Schéhérazade* (1910), *Firebird* (1910) and *Le Spectre de la rose* (1911) – follow the choreographer's principles to varying degrees, though *Petrushka* (1911) is arguably the choreographer's most accomplished work. Fokine employed a variety of dance styles to create the world of the pre-Lenten urban Russian fairground. The divertissements for nurses, coachmen and others remain mostly in unison, as in the old ballet, but blend seamlessly into the fabric of the work. Fokine arrived at creative movement solutions to delineate his characters, utilising movements and gestures for his stars which were usually performed by character dancers. The Moor's splayed and Petrushka's turned-in positions built on grotesqueries from the Petipa ballet, although in *Petrushka*,

Figure 35 Vaclav Nijinsky in the title role of *Petrushka*, 1911, choreography by Mikhail Fokine.

these movements were given to soloists who were mostly deprived of virtuoso movement (see Fig. 35). Fokine responded in kind to the innovative character of Stravinsky's groundbreaking score, answering the simultaneous sounding of two melodies with two different dances performed at the same

time, although Gorsky had already attracted attention with this device in his 1900 production of *Don Quixote*.

In a lifetime of making dances, Fokine never regained the success he achieved in his early works, or the fame he gained in his work for Diaghilev. A careful look at Fokine and his innovations reveals enormous debts to his predecessors: Petipa, Gorsky and Duncan. A clever packager of other choreographer's ideas, Fokine found an ideal outlet for their dissemination while he was part of the Diaghilev enterprise, an enormous travelling production company that put the best Russian and European designers, composers and dancers at the service of the choreographer. After breaking with Diaghilev, Fokine choreographed in Russia, Europe and North America, mostly restaging the hits of his early career. His early innovations, so central to the new ballet, soon became commonplaces of twentieth-century dance, while the Wagnerian hope for the total art work, the harmonious unification of dance with music and painting, required a constellation of collaborators and resources impossible to assemble outside Diaghilev's orbit. Nonetheless, many of the works Fokine created for the Ballets Russes have survived – a remarkable achievement (given the life expectancy of ballets from the early twentieth century) and a testament to Fokine's ability to translate important new cultural trends in Russia into ballets.

The decisive October Revolution of 1917 dramatically shifted the landscape of dance in Russia. For some time after the Revolution, the future of the Imperial (then State) Theatre system remained in doubt. Lenin's position on theatres and culture was ambivalent. The new Soviet leader believed vaguely in the need to preserve culture, but it was Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Enlightenment (or education) who campaigned most vigorously on behalf of the theatres. Eventually, the State Theatres received a life-saving appellation: they were called "academic", to convey their status as educational tools. Government committees scrutinised their repertories, singling out supposed counter-revolutionary works and recommending revisions of others. The libretto of the ballet *Sleeping Beauty* was reworked as *The Sunny Commune*, for example, though the new version was never produced.

Meanwhile, lively debates on the future of dance in the new Soviet republic appeared in a variety of theatre and culture journals. These discussions focused on appropriate themes for contemporary dances and on the content of the new choreographic spectacles. The radical left recommended that the ballet vocabulary be jettisoned in favour of vernacular movement, acrobatics and folk dance. Others noted that many of the alternative movement idioms suggested (especially those from the West, such as Isadora Duncan and 'machine' dances) were as alien to Russia as the European court dances that flourished in Russia's theatres for two centuries. Until the crackdown on independent arts groups in the early 1930s, when the state gradually took

control of all arts production in the Soviet Union, a number of experimental dance groups and choreographers flourished. Kasyan Goleizovsky and Fyodor Lopukhov are the best known of these vanguard choreographers, and well represent the range of the experimentation in Russian dance in the 1920s.

A dancer in the Bolshoi Theatre at the time of the Revolution, Goleizovsky had already opened his own school and was much in demand as a choreographer in Moscow's private theatres and cabarets. In the year following the Revolution, Goleizovsky took charge of the Bolshoi's theatre school, but left the company months later to choreograph full time. A harsh critic of the routine and the increasingly archaic repertories of the State Theatres, Goleizovsky nonetheless saw the professional ballet theatres as the sole repositories of skilled, well-trained dancers in Russia. Goleizovsky based his ever-expanding movement idiom on classical technique and required trained dancers, but nonetheless believed that all movement was legitimate and could be used to invigorate classical technique. Goleizovsky's dancers might perform somersaults, daring lifts, or lie on the stage, but the choreographer's diverse movement idiom relied on a foundation in ballet technique. A new attitude towards the visual elements of the ballet production marked Goleizovsky's new dance theatre and brought the ballet fully into the artistic vanguard of 1920s Russia. The costumes, however, lent the enterprise a hint of scandal. Goleizovsky believed in the nude body as both an aesthetic and a moral ideal, and although his dancers never appeared completely nude, they often appeared in minimal costumes. Like other dance reformers in the twentieth century, including George Balanchine, Goleizovsky preferred minimal costumes as a better way to reveal the body's movement. And like many theatre directors in Russia in the 1920s, Goleizovsky arranged these bodies on constructivist stage sets; dancers and dances were arranged on multiple planes.

Goleizovsky's best-known work, *The Legend of Joseph the Beautiful*, staged in 1925 for the Bolshoi's Experimental Theatre, made extensive use of stage platforms, stairs and constructions. Boris Erdman's costumes were asymmetrical and eccentric, updating the dress of Ancient Egypt for 1920s flappers. Goleizovsky's choreography avoided the archeological stylisations of Fokine and Gorsky, instead incorporating motifs from a variety of folk and historical dance traditions. Yet despite the fusion of dance styles Goleizovsky used in the ballet, contemporary commentators noted an unusual degree of coherence in the dances.

Work on *The Whirlwind* (1927) led to Goleizovsky's resignation from the Bolshoi Theatre, though he continued to contribute occasional works to the theatre until 1964. The choreographer's withdrawal from the Bolshoi anticipated the conservatism of the "academic" theatres in the 1930s and

beyond, a time when Goleizovsky retreated to music halls and cabarets, and arranged dances for films.

If the work of Gorsky and Goleizovsky ultimately proved too radical and eccentric for the Bolshoi Theatre, St Petersburg's Maryinsky (called the State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet until it received the appellation "Kirov" in 1935) followed an even more conservative path to a Soviet approximation of modernity. The Revolution made for a very difficult situation within the former Maryinsky, not least because so many of the company's former stars (Nijinsky, Pavlova, Karsavina, to name a few) had established themselves in the West with the Diaghilev troupe and chose to remain there. Nikolay Sergeyev, the troupe's arch-conservative régisseur, left Russia in 1918 with the dance notations that recorded the bulk of the ballet repertory; Fokine left St Petersburg the same year. A series of male dancers staged ballets and worked as régisseurs for the company during the chaotic period following the Revolution until Fyodor Lopukhov was appointed director in 1922.

The first directive of Lopukhov's new administration amounted to a purge. A statement announced that Petipa's ballet would form the basis of the troupe's repertory and that special efforts would be made to cleanse them of the accretions of recent years (the work of other régisseurs from the time of Petipa's retirement in 1903 and death in 1910). Lopukhov began a process that continues to dominate discussions concerning the Maryinsky and its performance practices to the present day. His determination to return to a more pure or authentic version of Petipa's ballets inaugurated a quest as impossible as stepping twice into the same stream.

The complexity of Lopukhov's undertaking is demonstrated by a small, but telling moment in Russian ballet history in which Lopukhov played a leading role. In 1972, Lopukhov admitted that in 1914, he had choreographed the most commonly performed variation for the Lilac Fairy in Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty*. Lopukhov maintained that the variation was attributed to Petipa in order to escape the scrutiny of the régisseur, Nikolay Sergeyev. In his 1972 account of this history, Lopukhov nonetheless maintains that his variation functions as a kind of quintessence of the role, thus justifying his questionable maintenance of the Petipa legacy and congratulating himself for the deception. This pattern of "improving" Petipa continued throughout the Soviet era.

However questionable the authenticity of Lopukhov's revisions of Petipa, the decision to preserve the legacy proved more fruitful than the Moscow tendency to create increasingly eccentric versions of the nineteenth-century repertory. Throughout the Soviet period, the Petersburg/Leningrad ballet remained a repository (if an imperfect one) of the nineteenth-century repertory, whose productions were copied and reproduced for ballet companies

around the Soviet empire and the world. And despite Lopukhov's reputation as a conservative, intent on preserving the classical legacy, the ballet master and choreographer was also interested in new forms.

His best-known work had only one performance; the dance-symphony *Magnificence of the Universe* was set to Beethoven's Fourth Symphony and featured dancers from George Balanchine's Young Ballet in its cast. Lopukhov's fascination with the symphony reflected a generalised anxiety over the ballet's place in some imagined hierarchy of the arts in the young Soviet republic. At a time when the score of *Sleeping Beauty* was singled out as the sole, musically acceptable score suitable for performance in the Soviet "academic" theatres, Lopukhov sensibly scrambled for the higher ground of an indisputable genre. Beethoven was admired in the Soviet Union in this period, both by conservatives and by radicals. The latter judged him close to the spirit of the French Revolution. The symphony quickly became an *idée fixe* for Soviet dance. Russian writers still use the term 'symphonic' to connote choreographic sophistication.

Lopukhov's choreography to the Beethoven score was perhaps less remarkable than the programme notes he wrote for the performance. With sections of the ballet titled *The Conception of Light*, and *Life in Death and Death in Life*, Lopukhov's vision for the new ballet wed pretension to naivety. The ballet proved an unpalatable concoction that, regrettably, suggested much of the future direction of Soviet dance. An uneasy step into the world of abstraction, Lopukhov's ballet retained narrative as an organising principle. At a time when flirtations with abstraction would be denounced as formalist experiments (the most damning denigration in Soviet arts criticism), Soviet choreographers intent on exploring the plot-less potential of dance were careful to disguise these "deviations" with an overlay of plot.

The theoretical foundations for Lopukhov's 1923 ballet may be found in a written work that appeared two years after the ballet, although he had begun it much earlier. In *Paths of a Ballet-Master*, Lopukhov outlined his notions of an ideal relationship between dance and music. Essentially, Lopukhov's tract calls for a unity between the two forms, though many of the specifics strike the modern reader as naive. Lopukhov's insistence on correspondence between the two forms included such particulars as the suggestion that minor keys be reflected in *en dedans* movement and major keys mirrored by movement *en dehors*.

Like Goleizovsky, Lopukhov worked only intermittently in the Soviet academic theatres after the 1920s. In both cases, the two men's notions of the future of dance proved too radical for an arts bureaucracy that came to favour slow evolution over new theories and "revolutionary" change. The future of Soviet dance lay with less progressive ballet masters who were willing to parrot formulaic approaches to art as handed down by party

tribunals. It is not surprising, then, that the next important wave in Soviet ballet production had no identifiable author.

Much as Lopukhov, and others, sought to "symphonise" the ballet, choreographers in the 1930s and 1940s turned to another unshakeable genre from yet another art form as a basis for new ballets. The Stalin-era adoration of epic forms resulted in the Soviet ballet's new enthusiasm for adaptations of novels and the plays of literature's Beethoven: William Shakespeare. Rostislav Zakharov's *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* (1934) and Leonid Lavrovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* (1940), both based on literary monuments, functioned as exemplars of the new wave in Soviet choreography, the *drambalet*. A contraction of "drama" and "ballet", the *drambalet* was meant to fuse the two seamlessly in a marriage of gesture and movement that avoided the nineteenth-century's division of pantomime and dancing. With time, it became clear that these dances privileged storytelling and pantomime over movement, and that dance as such took a second place to narrative conveyed in highly conventionalised gestures. The close-ups in the film version (1954) of Lavrovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* make it more accessible than the staged ballet and point out the genre's greatest deficiency: with so much of the story conveyed by silent-film gesturing, the live version of the ballet suffers by comparison.

The burst of creativity, experimentation and theorising that characterised Soviet arts in the 1920s was largely absent by the 1930s, when the state sought, and mostly achieved, control of avenues of creative expression. The ballet proved especially malleable, since dance activity was centred in the large theatres of large cities and the Western system of independent choreographers leading small troupes of dancers had not taken root in Russia. Despite a fervent period of activity in the dramatic theatre and the ballet theatre, the new Russian theatre and dance that captured the imagination of practitioners and writers in the first years of the twentieth century failed to blossom in Russia and the Soviet Union. The 1917 Revolution had drastically changed conditions in the Russian theatres; the emigrations of artists immediately thereafter left a creative vacuum impossible to fill in the lean and hungry years of civil war and cultural revolution that followed.

Russia's new dance, like new theatre, had a greater impact in the West, where experimentation and artistic collaboration were prized long after both became problematic in the Soviet Union. Abstraction and formalism, dangerous concepts for Soviet choreographers, became the rule in ballets created by Russian émigré dance-makers, especially George Balanchine. Balanchine's revolution in the ballet certainly drew upon his experience in 1920s Russia: his incorporation of a plentitude of dance idioms and styles echoed Goleizovsky's catholic approach to choreography; Balanchine's thorough investigation of the relationship of choreography to music revealed a debt

to Lopukhov. In the hands of Russian émigrés, ballet became a prominent feature of the European and North American cultural landscape in the twentieth century. The dance that these émigrés created was no longer identified with Russian new ballet, yet it grew from the revolt against the old ballet begun by Gorsky, Fokine, and others in the first years of the twentieth century.