

The Once and Future Ballets Russes

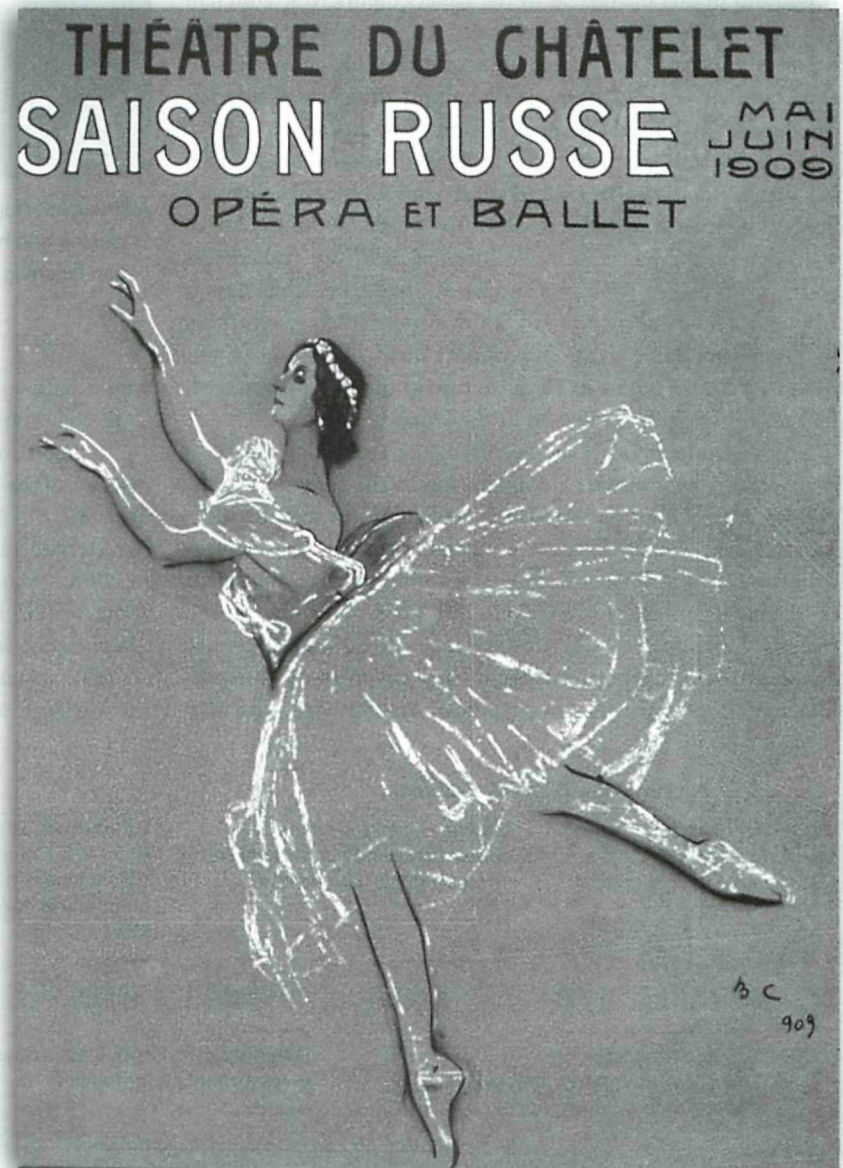
BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

A remarkable collection from the ballet companies that took the world by storm is inspiring a new generation of dancers and preserving history for all.

When ballet's first superstar, Vaslav Nijinsky, soared above the stage of the Theatre National del'Opera in Paris in 1910, he could not have known that he would land solidly in the heart of Oklahoma a century later, bringing the mystery and romance of the Ballets Russes with him.

For the past four years, letters and programs, toe shoes and trunks have found their way to the University of Oklahoma campus, each with a story to tell. The source of this magnetic pull is the Ballets Russes Archive in the School of Dance, which is gathering materials from the 20th century's pre-eminent ballet company and its progeny. Far from being wrapped in tis-

Anna Pavlova danced in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes during the premier 1909-1910 season. On the poster at right she appears in "Les Sylphides," choreographed by Michel Fokine.



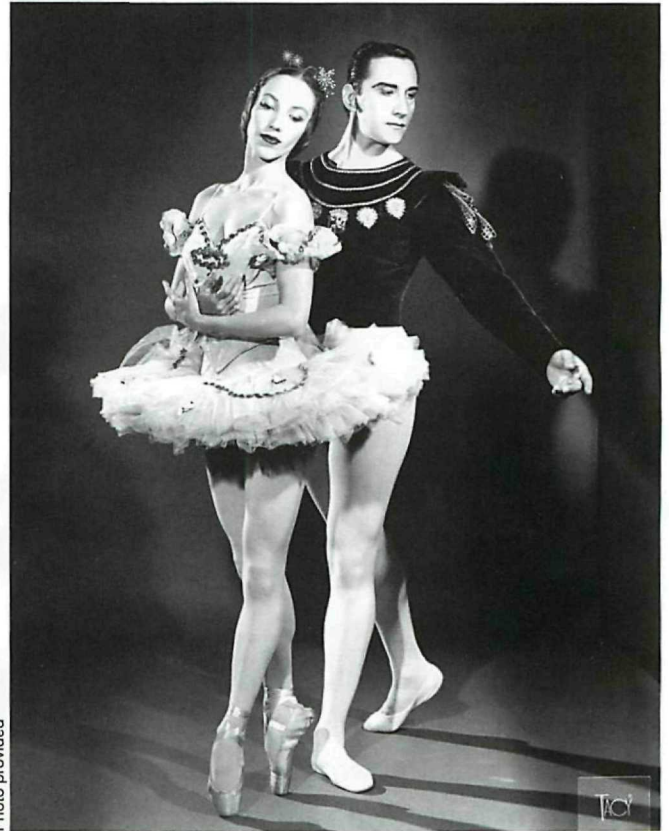
sue and laid to rest, contributions to the archive are being put to work by choreographers, set designers and dance historians, giving new life to important works from the past.

Founded in 1909 by Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev, the Ballets Russes created a global sensation with its extraordinary ensemble of artistic talent. Prokofiev, Ravel, Stravinsky and Strauss all wrote scores for the ballet. Set designers included Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Georges Braque and Joan Miró. The company's productions starring Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova and Tamara Karsavina were cutting-edge, forever altering audience expectations of ballet theatre.

Power struggles and Olympian egos produced as much intrigue and drama offstage as in the ballets themselves. Different factions seceded and regrouped over the years. Yet for all the twists and turns in the Ballets Russes lineage, the connection to the University of Oklahoma is direct and straightforward, carried by the small bright flame of Yvonne Chouteau.

One of Oklahoma's American Indian ballerinas, Chouteau left her home in Vinita at age 12 to study with George Balanchine's School of American Ballet in New York City. At 14 she began touring with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. When the ballet company folded in 1956, she and her husband, principal dancer Miguel Terekhov spent time in South America before returning to Chouteau's home state. The couple came to OU as guest artists in 1962 and stayed to establish one of the first fully accredited university ballet programs in the United States.

Even with its demise, the mythology of the Ballets Russes is the stuff of which movies are made, and in the early part of the 2000s, Dayna Goldfine and Daniel Geller did just that. In 2005, they released "Ballets Russes," an award-winning documentary for which they interviewed dozens of former company dancers, including Chouteau and Terekhov. The film screening at OU rekindled the magic, and Chouteau and Terekhov expressed concern that other precious documents and personal histories might be forever lost. Many of the dancers did not know what



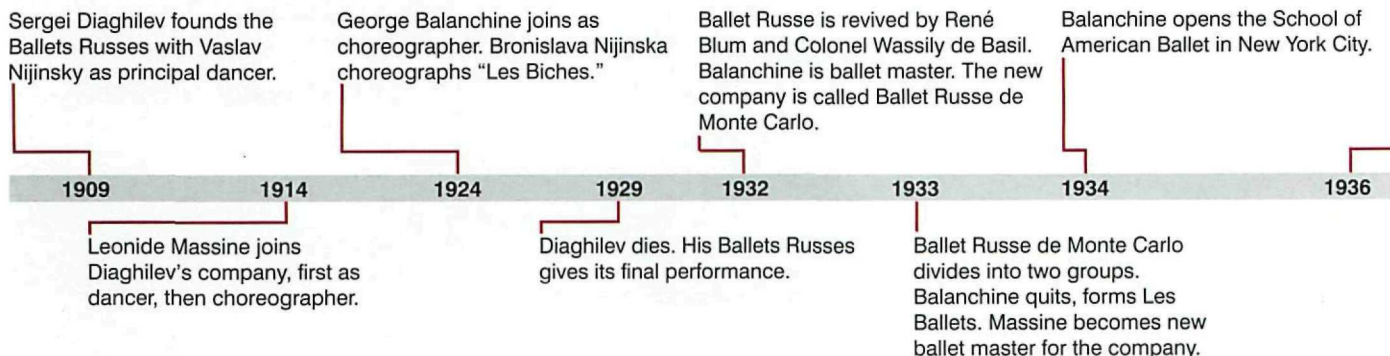
After successful careers with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Yvonne Chouteau and husband Miguel Terekhov returned to Oklahoma and began teaching at what would become the OU School of Dance.

would happen to their personal archives once they were gone. "Someone should do something about that," the couple said.

That someone was Mary Margaret Holt, Nichols Chair and director of the School of Dance. The ages of the dancers, in their 70s, 80s and 90s, underscored the immediacy of the project. Armed with a list from the Ballet Russe Reunion in New Orleans in 2000, she began contacting former company members to see if they would be interested in donating their personal affects to a permanent archive.

Staff assistant Peggy Chaffin says when she began making calls she was surprised by the youthful voices that answered the phone.

Timeline Ballets Russes





Robert Taylor

From left: Mary Margaret Holt and Camille Hardy look over materials in the Ballets Russes Archive while Charlotte Hart and Jeri Smalley organize recent contributions to the collection.

“They all sounded like they were in their 30s,” says Chaffin. “Only one time did someone sound out of breath, and that was because she was running out the door to teach a Pilates class.”

To a person, Holt’s proposal met with enthusiasm. Boxes and packages started to arrive at the Reynolds Performing Arts Center. “Every time a box was delivered, it was like Christmas,” says Holt. “Work would stop as everyone gathered around to see what treasures we would unwrap.”

The archives received a small treasure in 2006—not in the form of a package, but a person. “I had met Camille Hardy in New York several years ago,” says Holt. “She is a noted dance

critic, historian and scholar, and most recently, a researcher and writer for the *International Dance Encyclopedia*—a huge task—as well as contributing to the Popular Balanchine project.”

Now associate professor of dance history, Hardy left behind an apartment near Lincoln Center for Norman and the prospect of what she would find in the burgeoning archives. “Having been digging in this field all of my adult life, every new piece brings something else to bear,” she says. “Each piece provides details that complete the picture.”

Photographs from the dancers’ private collections revealed new insights into costumes, choreography and sets, while 8mm home movies provided an intimate glimpse of life on the road. Especially compelling are the oral histories Holt and Hardy have collected from New York to Los Angeles. The media room in the Reynolds Center contains more than a dozen video interviews from Fredric Franklin, longtime partner of Alexandra Danilova, to Raven Wilkinson, one of the first African American women to join a major ballet company. In their own words, they bring to light not only the history of dance, but also a history of the world.

Wilkinson is the epitome of grace and elegance as she tells stories that range from humorous, such as the time she started out on the wrong foot and spent “about half of ‘Swan Lake’ facing the wrong way” to ominous as the target of the Ku Klux Klan during a tour through the South in the mid-1950s. Eventually, Wilkinson left Ballet Russe for a successful career in Holland before returning to New York and the Metropolitan Opera, where she works today.

There is also the account of Yvonne Mounsey, a South African, who like many in the company found herself stranded in Paris at the start of World War II. Bombs were falling on London as she escaped on a ship that zigzagged across the English Channel, dodging U-boats along the way. She remembers the date clearly, September 2, 1939, her 20th birthday. “When you are young like that,” she said, “you tolerate everything.” She later rejoined

De Basil’s company is renamed Colonel de Basil’s Original Ballet Russe.

Yvonne Chouteau is accepted into Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo at 14.

Yvonne Chouteau and Miguel Terekhov establish dance program at OU the year after Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo disbands for the last time.

1938

1942

1943

1946

1963

Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo company splits due to conflicts between Massine and de Basil. Massine directs new version of Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, which tours U.S. with Sergei Denham as managing director.

René Blum dies at Auschwitz. Miguel Terekhov joins de Basil’s Original Ballet Russe while the company is touring his native Uruguay.

Oklahoma ballerina Maria Tallchief marries Balanchine.



the company in Australia.

René Blum, who co-founded the original Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo with Colonel Wassily de Basil, was not so fortunate. He was arrested in Paris and died at Auschwitz in 1942.

Of special interest to Oklahomans are the materials concerning Terekhov and Chouteau, as well as the other American Indian ballerinas. All of the “Five Moons”—Chouteau, Rosella Hightower, Moscelyne Larkin and Maria and Marjorie Tallchief—performed with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

A letter dated August 16, 1943, from C.E. Chouteau, Yvonne’s father, to Sergei Denham, managing director of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, gives insight into the dancer’s family and her father’s hopes and dreams for his daughter.

“My wife has just advised me that you are considering taking Yvonne into the Ballet Russe on your fall and winter tour for which rehearsals start this week and, of course, this gladdens my heart, because I have been interested in ballet for years and have wanted a daughter schooled in the classical ballet even before she was born.”

Another correspondence from Denham to Terekhov reflects both exasperation and good humor as the ballet director tries to cut through bureaucratic tape to get his lead dancer out of Cuba and back into the United States in time for the fall tour.

“Dear Miguel: I wonder if you should not be shot for all the trouble you have given me and this office in connection with your safe arrival. I have contacted the State Department and the Immigration Service, and I think your case is in good shape.... Get here as quickly as possible, because we need a Shah and a Coppélius.”

In April, the School of Dance sponsored a reunion of former members of the Ballets Russes. Ramrod straight and reed slender with perfect turnout, the dancers were easy to spot as they toured the Reynolds Center.

“That’s my trunk,” exclaimed Walda Welch Cobain as the group viewed items on display from the archive. “A lot of toe shoes spent time in that case.” Like so many of the company, Cobain was a teenager when Sergei Denham signed her on in 1954, and most of her worldly possessions traveled in that trunk.

“If any luggage was late, it was always ‘Welch’ and [Rochelle]

‘Zide,’ because we were at the end of the alphabet,” says Cobain. When Zide, who was a huge baseball fan, began collecting autographed baseballs, the handlers started treating her trunk with more respect. “After she got a Ted Williams, our trunks were

never lost again.”

In the mid-1950s, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo toured exhaustively, notching 188 performances in 104 cities in one season alone. With the bus home to a group comprised mostly of 14-to-18-year-old girls, the windows soon became bulletin boards decorated with photos of family and friends. In December, the bus virtually jingled with ornaments and tinsel. Tights were rinsed in sinks at night and often worn damp the next day. There were no classes on the road, and the dancers warmed up hanging onto lights and pieces of scenery in place of a barre.

Cobain remembers with clarity when legendary choreographer Leonide Massine strode into rehearsals at Palm Garden. “My eyes were popping out of my head,” she says. “The star of ‘The Red Shoes’ was right there in front of us. He was picking people for ‘Harold in Italy,’ and he picks me. I was beyond happiness.”

Cobain says Massine gathered the chosen around him, “hummed a little bit” and showed them what he wanted them to do.

The show opened in Cobain’s hometown of Boston. “I am getting ready to go onstage, and I’m frantic,” she recalls. “I realize I have never heard the music by the orchestra, just Mr. Massine humming.

“I tell Freddie [Franklin], and he says to me, ‘Don’t worry about it. Just go out there and flit around like a foliage. The deer can’t go on until you come off, and they probably don’t know their music either.’”

At the end of her flitting, the trembling foliage glanced over at Massine. “‘Good,’ he said, and that was that. We girls had a wonderful time. The pay was really poor, but we didn’t know it at the time. We would have paid to be there.”

The reunion featured lectures, roundtables and a performance of “Les Biches” by Oklahoma Festival Ballet. Students had the opportunity to work with guest artist Howard Sayette, who had

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From left: Howard Sayette, Helen Murielle Greenberg, Nancy Warreck Whitesell, Dorothy Matsie Wade, Maria Youskevitch, Miguel Terekhov, Rochelle Zide, Barbara McGinnis Arms, Walda Welch Cobain, Ted Sprague and Jack Anderson join hands during the April reunion on OU's Norman campus for friends and dancers from Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.



Former Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo dancer Howard Sayette coaches OU students Brett Young and Charlotte Hart during rehearsal for "Les Biches," which Oklahoma Festival Ballet performed in April.


danced with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and now stages ballets from the Diaghilev repertoire. Propelled by the original choreography of Bronislava Nijinska and set design of Marie Laurencin, audiences were transported to French high society of the 1920s.

"It was wonderful to work with Mr. Sayette," says Charlotte Hart, a graduate student in the School of Dance. "I also like working in the archive because I feel like I have a personal connection to these dancers. I have known some of them as teachers."

Rochelle Zide, another former company member, talked to students and alumni during the reunion about technique. "The Ballet Russe was all about movement. Dancers would spring from the floor like tigers, arms would shoot into space like light sabers. We were not just dancers, we were characters on a stage. 'Tell me a story with your adagio, with your pique arabesque.' That's what we learned in the Ballet Russe."

Holt says the archive's potential as a resource extends to every college across campus. "There are so many crossovers—with African American studies, with women's studies, with musicology and art history. This collection meets a very important need that exists not only in the world of dance, but also in the world of western art and culture."

Holt would like to see materials from the archive, which is funded solely through private donations, to be made available online. "Once we get everything organized and digitized, anyone anywhere in the world can access it," she says.

By preserving this history for a new generation of artists and dancers, the final curtain of the Ballets Russes will never really fall. 

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.