

Olga Sobolev

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J M Barrie and the Ballets Russes

Olga Sobolev

London School of Economics and Political Science, London, England

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Abstract

Barrie's playlet *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* (written as a direct response to the impact upon British cultural life of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes) has been hardly discussed in the literary scholarship dedicated to his writings. By placing the playlet in the social and political context of the age, as well as focusing on close analysis of the textual variants of the manuscript, the paper discusses Barrie's exploration of the impressionistic notion of the unfamiliar and the exotic. It is shown that as a searching piece of dramatic criticism, the work provides a penetrating reflection on cultural dialogism produced within the framework of a modernist, rather than Edwardian platform, and thus puts into new perspective certain aspects of the British perception of what was notoriously categorised as the Russian myth.

Keywords: Dramatic Criticism, Modernism, Cultural Dialogism, Russian Myth

1. Introduction

Barrie's is not a name that features prominently in existing studies of the British reception of Russian culture, and his 1920 play *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* is hardly ever mentioned in the scholarship dedicated to his works (see, for instance, the two most recent studies by Bold and Nash 2014, Jack 2010). The notable exceptions to the generality of these studies are Janet Dunbar's *J.M. Barrie* (239-40), which quotes some of Tamara Karsavina's recollections on the production; Denis Mackail's *The Story of J.M.B* (545) and the memoirs of Cynthia Asquith (32), who observes that this charming "trifle [...] was written in a day or two, then worked on, altered and polished with infinite care", so that years later she "found ten different typescript versions of this one little play".

The Truth about the Russian Dancers, the number of existing draft manuscripts of which has now augmented to fourteen, remained unpublished till 1962, when it appeared in the art magazine *Dance Perspectives* (12-30) with Karsavina's illuminating introduction (4-10) and a discerning comparison of textual variants, produced by Selma Jeanne Cohen (31-34). In this context, Cynthia Asquith's comment is, perhaps, most telling and revealing, for it draws attention to the fact that Barrie's work was slightly more than a skilful parody on or a tribute to the unrelenting Russian craze, induced by a series of Diaghilev seasons in Paris and London. The thoroughness and infinite care with which Barrie worked on the playlet (the idea of which, as it will be shown, could have been easily nipped in the bud) lends it significance as an artistic statement. This paper will argue that as a searching piece of dramatic criticism, the playlet provides a penetrating reflection on cultural dialogism produced within the framework of a modernist, rather than Edwardian platform and thus puts into new perspective certain aspects of the British perception of what was notoriously categorised as the Russian myth.

2. Analysis of the Cultural Context

2.1 Productions History of Barrie's Play

The Truth about the Russian Dancers: was premiered on 15 March 1920 at the London Coliseum. Set to Arnold Bax's allusively witty music, it was framed within eye-catching designs by Paul Nash and directed by Gerald du Maurier – a great connoisseur of Barrie's theatre.

The curtain rises at Vere Castle, the peace and quiet of which is unexpectedly disrupted when Karissima, a Russian Ballerina (performed by Karsavina), pays a visit to this ancient stronghold of the conventionally correct. The charming guest can talk with nothing but her toes, and all way through the action Karissima expresses herself exclusively in dance. Naturally, Lady Vere and Bill, her elderly brother-in-law (a passionate golf-player and a villain), are utterly dismayed

Meanwhile, young Lord Vere loses his heart and almost immediately marries the irresistible dancer. The child is to be born to a happy couple, but according to the weird and powerful Maestro, who ultimately runs the entire show, Karissima should now sacrifice her life for her little child, for the world of the Russian Dancers is a closed one; and someone must leave this world to make place for a newcomer. Karissima agrees to the horrid condition, and the next moment she is brought out as a corpse on her biers by the maids, who dance their grief. Surprisingly, the corpse rises and dances too. "But the dead don't dance!", cries in bewilderment the young husband. "Dead Russian dancers do", answers the Maestro, but his heart is deeply touched. He takes the sacrifice upon himself, lying down in Karissima's stead on the bier, and allowing her and her child to live happily ever after in the gloomy luxury of the Vere Castle.

The play became a sell-out for the entire month-long stage-run (it was later revived at the Savoy Theatre in July 1926), and almost every paper had at least half a column dedicated to the production. *Punch* magazine (“At the Play”) wrote about the ultimate triumph of the author, who had never done anything better, *Tatler* described it as “the most delightful affair imaginable” (“Arkay”); while A. B. Walkley from *The Times* thought that words simply could not do justice “to such a blend of fantasy, irony, and humour”, which “one need hardly say, [was] only to be had from one man”. Arnold Bax’s music (“a separate ecstasy worth enjoying for its own sake”) and the directorial mastery of Gerald Du Maurier also received a series of fulsome comments; the latter was portrayed as the one who “brought to triumphant achievement a task, which must have bristled with difficult problems” (Johnson).

Ironically, the note on “the problems” (the full spectrum of which was hardly known to the reviewer) turns out to be more telling than a sheer rhetorical trope; and the whole question of Barrie’s interest in the Russian dancers deserves a closer and more in-depth consideration: firstly, because by the time when the play was completed the fame of the Ballets Russes in England had already passed its peak; and secondly, because Barrie had never been a fan of this type of performance.

2.2 British Reception of the Ballets Russes

The peak of the Ballets Russes’ fame fell largely in the pre-WWI years, when in 1911 London saw the premiere of Diaghilev seasons after their unparalleled triumph in the Parisian Théâtre du Châtelet. The audience was completely mesmerised by the performance, for everything in these productions was scandalous, innovative and ambivalently subversive: the ambiguous sexuality of Nijinsky, wearing a choker of pearls around his long and muscular throat; the mass whirling and stamping of the Polovtsian Dances; the lurid red-orange and blue-green contrasts of Bakst’s designs, which seared the European eye like a glimpse of an Oriental market at noon. “Announce unparalleled triumph”, Diaghilev cabled from London to Astruc, the impresario of the Ballets Russes in Paris, “Audience indescribably smart” (Buckle 205).

The atmosphere became different in less than ten years’ time, when in 1918 Russia was deserting her former allies on the First World War’s Eastern Fronts, under the separate (negotiated by the Bolsheviks) Brest-Litovsk Treaty. The common opinion was expressed by *The Times*, which stated that the new Russian government “has set the seal to their ignominy” (“Our New War”). Russia was now turned into some kind of a public bogey, casting a spell on everything remotely associated with its name. Serge Lifar, Nijinsky’s successor in the Russian Ballets, commented on the aura of hostility and tension that surrounded his compatriots in Europe during these post-revolutionary war years: “All sufferings endured by the Russian troops at the time of their advance to Eastern Prussia”, he wrote, “were instantaneously forgotten, and even the Russian officers, who had been selflessly fighting on the French battlefields, were not spared from the risk of being spit in the face” (Lifar 356).

Things were equally difficult for the Russian dancers. In spring 1918, the company found itself stuck in Lisbon and then subsequently in Spain, being completely bankrupted by the political unrest of the Portugal revolution. Coming back to Paris was no longer an option; for even Diaghilev – a firm favourite of the French stage in the pre-War years, “felt moral qualms about rendering himself to the city” that suddenly had become so ostentatiously anti-Russian (Lifar 357). The London Coliseum did offer Diaghilev a contract for the autumn season of 1918, but the terms were abusively poor and restrictive, as Diaghilev wrote in his recollections:

The War terminated these wonderful seasons, and after the separate Brest-Litovsk treaty, we – the Russians – became so unwelcome that we found ourselves locked in Spain for almost a year. [...] I, then, accepted an invitation from Sir Edward Stoll [*should read Sir Oswald Stoll*]; and although no theatres other than Music Halls have ever favoured our productions, I am grateful to Sir Edward [*Oswald*] for his kind assistance in these difficult times. (Lifar 360)

3. The Russian Theme in Barrie’s artistic world

As regards Barrie’s sketch on the *Russian Dancers*, it was conceived precisely at this stage when the spell cast by all things Russian was starting to wane. Diaghilev’s company stayed in England for a major part of 1919; the troupe performed in Manchester and in London; it received a fair degree of enthusiasm and public acclaim, but it was a moderate, lukewarm reception, not even comparable to the triumph and accolade of the first seasons. Did the playwright make an attempt to capture the glittering twilight of the fading fashion – to portray something that he felt was disappearing and that was so dear to his memories or to his heart? This, arguably, was hardly in line with the author’s initial intentions, for Barrie had never been a great enthusiast of the Russian ballet; moreover, on the whole, he was not particularly attracted to the art of music and dance. His interview (early 1920) on the background of the project displays a minimal, on the border of sheer politeness, degree of interest in the domain of ballet, mentioning an “occasional visit” to the show for which he “grew more and more enthusiastic” (Church). These “occasional visits”, however, cannot have been so very significant after all, because no mention of these occasions can be found in Barrie’s personal correspondence of the time (*Letters of J.M. Barrie* 80-93). Barrie, as it happens, was fully aware of the new run of Diaghilev’s seasons in London, but its appeal for him stemmed from the perspective of a professional writer rather than that of a ballet aficionado – a fresh source of plots for story-telling, which had always been his interest, his forte, as well as the essence of his art. Cynthia Asquith (15) refers to this in a diary entry from February 1919:

Barrie, encouraged by Whibley’s ready laugh, told several stories, two of which have stayed in my sieve. A London hostess wrote to a Russian dancer to ask what her fee would be for dancing at an

evening party. The dancer said she would come for a hundred pounds. The hostess, writing back to agree to this figure, added, "I think, perhaps, I had better tell you now that I don't introduce the *artiste* to my guests". To this the dancer replied, "In that case my fee will be only fifty pounds".

As curious as it may seem, this very story was later transferred directly to Barrie's *Truth about the Russian Dancers*; and in her recollections of the rehearsals Karsavina (7) comments on her difficulties in miming such lines as:

Karissima's telling the wicked uncle that her fee for a private appearance is three hundred guineas but only one hundred if she is not asked to mix with the guests [...] Three fingers stuck out? No! No! Three pointedly emphasized *ronds de jambe* and an arrogant toss of the head must make my meaning clear. That "line" never failed to raise a laugh.

Generally speaking, Barrie was not a musical person. Peter, one of the Llewelyn Davies brothers, befriended and then informally adopted by Barrie, drew attention to the fact that "music and painting and poetry, and the part that they may be supposed to play in making a civilized being, had a curiously small place in J.M.B.'s view of things [...] Being himself totally unmusical", Peter notes, Barrie "not only did not encourage such leanings, but in one way and another could not help discouraging them" (Birkin and Goode 219). He found it stressful when, reportedly, he was "forced" to go to the opera evenings, to which a good cricket game would be undoubtedly preferred. In July 1914, for instance, he wrote to George Davies that in the "stress of going to the opera" with Peter they had forgotten to wire him the results of the Eton and Harrow cricket match. He insisted that Peter had dragged him to the opera two nights running, and as a result "neither he nor Michael patronised the match" (Chaney 303). And despite the fact that music interludes and specially designed dances constituted an important part of Barrie's 1904 *Peter Pan* production, it was "the lighter side of life" (games or, occasionally, fishing) that, in the words of the Davies brothers, "he thoroughly catered for" (Birkin and Goode 219).

As regards the Russian theme in Barrie's artistic worldview, this too had never been the centre of his fundamental interests and literary pursuits. As a widely educated and cultured person, he certainly read the writings of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: in the first decades of the twentieth century everyone was enthralled by the newly-published translations of their works. This was reflected in one of his letters to Mrs. Lucas, where Barrie mentions *War and Peace* as his bedtime reading (*Letters of J. M. Barrie* 92); and although he does not go into any further comments regarding his impressions of the novel; he was known to join the group of British intellectuals, who in an open statement to *The Times* expressed their gratitude to the Russian men of letters for their contribution to the progress of the world's literary thought. "It was a strange world that opened before us", they wrote, "Yet beneath all the strangeness there was a deep sense [...] of finding expressed great burden of thought which had been lain unspoken and half-realised at the depth of our own minds" ("Russia in Literature" 65).

Written in December 1914, and signed by thirty-four illustrious British authors (including Arnold Bennett, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy, John Galsworthy, Henry James, and H G Wells), the letter was obviously "heated" by the allied spirit of WWI; but apart from that instance of congenial fervour, Barrie, did not seem to be particularly moved by Russophilia, which captured quite a few among his literary circle. In spring 1917, when many of his close friends (for instance, G. B. Shaw and H. G. Wells) were signing open telegrams in support of the Russian anti-monarchist revolution ("Assure New Russia of British Regard") Barrie's name did not appear in these lists. Unlike the Garnetts and Ford Madox Ford's family, he did not become a member of the Free Russian Library in London. Unlike Bernard Shaw, he never joined the Friends of Russian Freedom association, at the time when the prominent Russian anarchists (Prince Kropotkin, Volkhovsky and Stepniak-Kravchinsky) started to promote Russian literature as a part of their activities in London at the end of 1880s and 90s. And unlike Galsworthy, he was never involved in entertaining the Russian authors at the dinners of the newly established P.E.N. Club, attended by the Soviet envoy Boris Pilniak (1923) and by the future Nobel Prize laureate Ivan Bunin (1925). Generally speaking, Barrie was a rare guest at this kind of important social occasions, to the extent that at time people failed to recognize who he was. Marjory Watts (25), one of the organisers of the Club meetings and the daughter of Amy Dawson Scott – a co-founder of the P.E.N., notes an embarrassing episode during the First International P.E.N. Congress dinner in May 1923: "as I walked among the guests, with my sitting list, a very small man with a moustache smiled at me and asked. "And where do I sit?" "Well, who *are* you?" I asked, and he said gently, "My name is Barrie".

It is not incidental therefore, that Barrie's idea to write a play about the Russian dancers came from a purely personal perspective. In autumn 1918, after her spectacular success with the London public, Lydia Lopokova, a prima ballerina of Diaghilev's troupe, sent a letter to Barrie suggesting he write a play for her (Mackail 536). She had just returned from a tour in the United States, where she had not only been thrilled by Maude Adams (in the Broadway production of *Peter Pan*), but developed a great fascination for Barrie's books. They met, they became friends, retaining deep fondness for each other to the end of their lives. Lydia must have made quite an impression on Barrie, for almost immediately he thought of a sketch, inspired by the vivacious "Russianness" of his charming acquaintance (he could not have got to know at the time that this "vivaciousness" would go far beyond the limits of anything one could possibly imagine).

By 1918, the 26 year-old Lydia Lopokova, had already become an uncontested prima of the Russian Ballet. Always avid for sensation, and capitalising on Lopokova's miniature complexion, Diaghilev (in 1910) knocked a year off her age and promoted her as a teenage prodigy, starring in Fokine's *Carnival*, Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and even in *L'Oiseau*

de feu – effectively in all Karsavina’s leading roles, although, unlike Karsavina, she was never compared to the iconic type of a flaming princess – only “to a sparrow, a canary, or at best to a humming bird” (Mackrell xix). Her appearance was not remotely close to that of a ballerina of the classic formation, she was too short (about five feet height) with round, fairly plump shoulders; her *port-de-bras* were not perfect and neither were her *tours* but she responded instinctively to Mikhail Fokine’s expressive choreography and his rebellion against the stiff academicism of the classical style. Lopokova took part in practically every ballet performed during the 1919 London season, and had a stunning success with both the public and the critics: she danced witty and coquettish Mariuccia in *The Good-Humoured Ladies*, a bacchante in *Cleopatra*, and a doll in Rossini’s *La Boutique fantasque* – the story of two mischievous dolls, who elope from a Victorian toyshop. Directed by Leonide Massine (the most daring among Diaghilev’s choreographers), this ballet was a highlight of the season. Roger Fry (466) claimed that André Derain’s post-impressionist recreation of the ballet’s Victorian setting had refracted “the artistic impression of the past” into a strikingly contemporary aesthetics.

Everyone loved it, including the most sceptical and the most demanding: the crowd filled every seat and every inch of the standing space in the Alhambra Theatre; and when Massine and Lydia danced their frenzied can-can, which transformed her from an indolent porcelain doll into a bacchante, “the audience began screaming and chanting their names” (Mackrell 146). Barrie must have been aware of the stunning success of the performance: in March 191, the revival of his one-act play *Half an Hour* at the London Coliseum was placed in a double bill with Diaghilev Ballets. The run lasted for a couple of weeks, and the playwright, who had always been sceptical regarding the value of ballet as an art form, had an opportunity to get to know it at closer quarters. He perhaps became slightly more persuaded by *The Boutique* production, as a reference to it can be found in his sketch on the Russian dancers, the stage directions to which read: “The procession should be impressive – something like the carrying in the Boutique ballet” (Barrie 30).

He started working on *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* in spring 1919. The new project was a full length fantasy play, featuring a Russian ballerina called Uvula - a “little grape” (from Latin), which, as it seems, was the most accurate portrayal of Barrie’s diminutive, but full of revitalising energy friend. Uvula’s “bird-like motions” and “hesitant English” suggested further allusions to Lopokova, who was meant to take the lead in the play at the Haymarket in the autumn.

The existing holograph contains only the opening scene of the original project, but the framework of the love story between Uvula and Lord Vere becomes evident from the start. The scene is laid at the Veres’ private golf links with a distant view of the ancient house on a sunny summer morning. The Countess of Vere and her unmarried brother Bill (described as a “dark, designing villain”) are going to play against young Lord Vere and Mlle Uvula:

Lord Vere appears with Uvula, who makes “bird-like motions”. Her English is somewhat hesitant, and when she is offered a putter, she stretches out her arms to Lord Vere, intimating that he should explain for her, and he interprets, saying that she wants to play her own games (Cohen 31-32).

Two things are remarkable about Barrie’s fantasy playlet. Its plot-line turned out to be surprisingly prophetic: Lopokova did become the wife of an English aristocrat: her marriage in 1925 to the illustrious economist Maynard Keynes brought her the title of Lady Keynes following his ennoblement in 1942. As regards the staging, ironically, the project has never been put into being (at least in its original version), for in July 1919, when *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* was nearly half-written, Lopokova suddenly vanished, giving nobody any warning and abruptly breaking all her obligations to Diaghilev’s troupe. In a note left to the company manager Sergei Grigoriev she pleaded ill health, exhaustion and a nervous breakdown and for a couple of months nobody had any idea of what had become of her (Surits 375). She broke her cover absence in February 1921 in New York, where she performed in Mikhail Fokine’s production (rather poor) of *The Rose Girl*, and in spring, against all odds, she was dancing with the Ballets Russes again. Diaghilev, known for his intolerance to any kind of disciplinary matters, seemed to have a soft spot for his little prima ballerina: “Will you have Lopokova back?”, Lopokova’s manager cabled to him in Paris, “Yes, if it is the same Lopokova I knew”, followed the reply (Keynes 6).

Meanwhile, Barrie had difficulties in proceeding with the play. In vain he kept telephoning to Lopokova’s London address (though, according to Mackail (539), she was aware of his calls. He was distinctly annoyed by the ballerina, on whom he counted for the entire venture; hence a menacing subtitle that he added to the subsequent draft of *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* (dated September 1920), which was now to be called “A Warning in One Act” (Cohen 32). And although this “warning” was eventually effaced from the final version of the playlet, it shows how deeply Barrie was affected by the events. Moreover, one can say that *Mary Rose*, one of Barrie’s major plays completed precisely during these summer months of 1919, also bears some features of the disturbing Lopokova-affair. The female protagonist of *Mary Rose* keeps vanishing without any traces each time she sets foot on a particular remote Scottish Island: firstly for weeks and then for decades, turning eventually into a ghost. When she is found again, she is not a single day older and has no awareness of the passage of time. While completing *Mary Rose*, Barrie of course could not have known of Lopokova’s miraculous reappearance in Diaghilev’s ballets, but the parallel between her desertion and an odd habit of evaporation of the main character in *Mary Rose* should not be overlooked.

Given the difficulty of the situation, it is not clear why the story of the Russian dancers had not been dropped altogether and forgotten. In a few months, however, it was successfully reconfigured into a one-act extravaganza and targeted at

another uncontested prima of the Diaghilev Ballets - Tamara Karsavina, whom Barrie happened to know through the family of his godson Peter Scott.

4. Discussion

4.1 Barrie's play as a Reflection on Cultural Dialogism

One of the most obvious themes of Barrie's sketch on the Russian dancers is that of cultural dialogue and communication, which can be read as a playful double-edged parody directed evenly and neutrally at both sides. On the one hand, the Russian dancers clearly stand out from everything associated with the acceptable norm. They are called into being by a mysterious master-spirit - something of a Diaghilev or, perhaps of the magician in *Petrushka* - and can only express themselves through their own medium: ("they find it so much jollier to talk with their toes" (Barrie 14)), which remains incomprehensible to the respectable traditionalists, like the elderly Veres: "Whatever I say to Karissima she dances the reply, and I must admit that keeping up a conversation with her is rather a strain. Roger tells me that the clever London audiences understand at once what she is saying to them with her toes, but I am too stupid" (Barrie 14).

In brief, their origin is hazy (an inauspicious factor as far as respectable society was concerned) and their language is improper – the parallel here with Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1914) is not to be ignored. Nonetheless, within the medium of their communicative habits, the Russian Dancers seem to be inherently more creative and possess a greater degree of freedom of expression than that allocated to their English counterparts by the prescriptiveness of their lines. Karissima's unspoken part (as well as those of her maids) is presented exclusively by way of stage directions, and it is effectively for the performer to translate this outline into her own version of dramatic gestures and dance; here are but a few examples: "KARISSIMA makes some steps [...] of an excited, endearing character"; "KARISSIMA is eager"; "KARISSIMA makes movements which mean all this is Greek to her" (Barrie 18-19). Such a distinct difference in the mode of communication has a clear symbolic meaning on the compositional level of Barrie's playlet: the element of fantasy and beauty associated with the "Russianness" of the Dancers is pitted against the unimaginative rigidity and conventionality of English life.

It is interesting to note that the figure of Maestro is liminal with regards to this symbolic separation. Strictly speaking Maestro should also express himself through the language of mime; for who is more a member of the world of the Russian Dancers than a maestro himself? The fact that this was actually not the case, and that in the original show Maestro spoke normally, as did the rest of the cast, was perceived by certain critics as an obvious inconsistency of the production: "the author" wrote A.E. Johnson from *Eve* (113), "commits the mistake of giving him [the Maestro] a speaking part". And indeed, the division between two worlds, "the conventional" and "the exotically Russian" would have been much more pronounced, given that the ballet master had also expressed himself by way of gestures and dance. Some revisions in this regard were tried out in the 1926 revival of the performance, in which according to *The Times*, the Maestro was "blessed neither with speech, nor dancing", and yet expressed "himself to every one's satisfaction" ("Savoy Theatre").

Judging from the number of amendments in the earlier versions of the playlet, Barrie had certain difficulties (or hesitations) in conveying the "Russianness" of his Maestro. Initially, the latter was associated with Diaghilev in a much clearer and more straightforward manner (thus being perceived as unequivocally Russian); and two names of the well-known patrons of Diaghilev Ballets, Eddie Marsh and Lady Edwards, were conspicuously mentioned in relation to Maestro's identity and his past: "LORD VERE: But what do those in the know say about him? What does Eddie Marsh say – or Lady Edwards?" (Cohen 32).

Sir Edward Marsh or Eddie, as he is called in the draft, was a private secretary to Winston Churchill and a great patron of the avant-garde art. He famously called Diaghilev's *Jeux* a "Post-Impressionist picture put in motion", and made a lot of positive comments on the Ballets Russes in contemporary publications such as *The English Review*, *The New Statesman*, *The Nation*, and *Rhythm* (Garafola 475). As regards Lady Edwards, although Selma Cohen (34) describes her as a fictitious character in her notes to Barrie's playlet, one can argue that the name suggests a clear reference to Misia Sert (Edwards), who was known for her long lasting association with Diaghilev and for her involvement in all creative and financial aspects of the Ballets: it was she who rescued the opening night of *Petrushka*, when it was delayed twenty minutes because the creditors refused to release the costumes without a payment (Gold and Fizdale 141). Misia became the wife of José Maria Sert in August 1920, and was still known as Misia Edwards when Barrie was working on *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*. At that time she was married (unsuccessfully) to Alfred Edwards, the newspaper magnate and the founder of *Le Matin*, a French adaptation of the British daily newspaper *The Morning News*.

These associations were effaced from the later versions of the script, and instead the Russianness of the Maestro was affirmed by giving him a miming part - the same mode of expression as the Russian ballerinas: The stage directions of this draft manuscript say that "he can only express himself in dancing and dramatic look and actions". For instance, when Lord Vere comments on his wife's beauty: "Maestro indicates how glorious he thinks her. Indicates her figure better made"; and when Karissima dies, Maestro's actions are interpreted by Lord Vere in the words his mother can understand. In this case, Barrie remarks, Maestro is to "say his lines, not with dramatic gestures, but with movements of his feet" (Cohen 33).

Maestro's speech is retained in the final version of the text, and he is not given any more specific features relating him to the celebrated Russian ballet-master (Diaghilev). Somehow Barrie decided to play down the Russian colour of his whimsical lot, associating it more with the notion of "the bizarre" (the scene "must have a look of the bizarre, as in the

Russian ballet” (Barrie 13)) rather than with the realities of the Russian tradition. Towards the end he even began to have certain doubts about the Russian affiliation in the title: for in one of the later versions of the manuscript “he crossed out “The Truth about the Russian Dancers”, calling it simply a “Ballet-Play”” (Cohen 33).

It would be sheer speculation to say whether or not Barrie came up with the right decision. Most of the time he was driven by intuition rather than by any kind of rational concerns: “Don’t ask me what I mean, I don’t know myself”, he used to respond to Karsavina’s (6) questions. His play unreservedly charmed everyone who came to see it; even the ballet connoisseurs fell under its spell, for, as Denis Mackail (545) put it in his biography of Barrie, his “words and story were in entire and faltering sympathy with the most mysterious of the arts [...] and no one had a keener eye for absurdity, but he had seen and made others see the Russian ballet [...] leading a consistent, preposterous, and unearthly life of their own”.

It is difficult to argue with Mackail’s comment, which, nonetheless, can be developed further. With his lucid sense of irony and his feel for the unreal, he managed to see through the icon that for years was inseparably associated with the notion of *echt*-Russian, and conventionally taken as a substitute for what was then termed as the Russian myth. Effectively, there was very little “Russianness” in the Russian Dancers. They were different, innovative, aesthetically pleasing, mesmerising and exotic, but hardly representative of their own country, of its idiom and its tradition, of its identity and its cause. It is uncanny that Barrie’s insightful observation was supported much later in the works of modern critics, who argued that it was the modernist and the cosmopolitan, rather than the national and the folkloric, to which Stravinsky responded in his ballets:

In *Petrouchka* Stravinsky turned his back on both “the ethnographic approach and the Western-style sugarcoating of folklore that were implicit in the nineteenth-century Russian musical aesthetic, this process was deepened in *The Rite*, where [...] Stravinsky deformed both Lithuanian and Slavic materials with a sovereign freedom in a manner that may be termed cubistic (Burt 86).

The same applies to Diaghilev’s ventures, especially to those run in the early 1920s - the period when Barrie was working on his play. Could Diaghilev and his dancers be regarded as the representatives of the Imperial Russian tradition? The answer is negative, because this is precisely what the great Maestro wanted to get away from, dismissing the Imperial Ballet as obsolete and devoid of future. Even less, however, could he be equated with the notion of the contemporary Russian socialist agenda. By 1918 both Diaghilev and Stravinsky were stateless exiles from a Bolshevik country wracked by the rampages of the Civil War. As a person with a considerable social and artistic sensibility Diaghilev could not but feel that the belle époque that had seen the birth of the Ballets Russes had been shattered forever. All references that supported the notable strand of the Russian style he forged, nourished and developed were irrevocably effaced; it was time to move on. Subsequently, Diaghilev’s great themes – Russia, the classical world and the Orient - became treated in the contemporary context, acquiring some distinctly international tones and reflecting such topical interests as beach culture, cinema and sport. By 1920 the company underwent a considerable revision of its repertoire, to which new ballets were added each year. French avant-garde artists such as Matisse, Derain and Braque designed productions, which were no longer dominated by Russian music, and Leonide Massine emerged as a talented new choreographer, drawing on influences from the countries of his travels, notably Italy (*The Good-Humoured Ladies*, 1917 - music by Scarlatti; *La Boutique fantasque*, 1919 - music by Rossini) and Spain (*Le Tricorne* or *El sombrero de tres picos*, 1919 - music by Manuel de Falla).

Both socially and artistically the Ballets Russes were no longer representative of all things Russian: the company became an artificially maintained artistic project, which relied largely on Diaghilev’s personal charisma and led a fairly detached life of its own. All these overtones were keenly conveyed in Barrie’s *Truth about the Russian Dancers*.

4.2 Barrie’s Play as an Expression of Cultural Critiques: Modernist vs Edwardian Platform

Barrie has rarely been regarded as an overt social commentator. Throughout his career as a dramatist, he was associated with the West End commercial stage, his plays were frequently revived and produced by the most successful theatre managers (such as Charles Frohman); and “in a time in which revolt had become something of a convention, Barrie had been distinguished by standing apart from the protestants” (Dickinson 230). Nonetheless, this should not be taken as meaning that Barrie used to remain deaf to the artistic polemics and theatrical controversies of his time; critics often saw his works as pamphlets or an “ironical treatise” (Walbrook 69) and William Archer “solemnly expressed his doubts of whether the dramatist had the smallest idea of the immensity of his attack upon the constituted social order of the country” (Walbrook 73). And indeed, Barrie often resorted to theatrical form itself to expose the limitations of the conventional drama and theatre practice. *Alice-Sit-By-The-Fire* (1905) highlights the contrived nature of the “well made play”, as well as the reactionary ethos of Society drama relying on the time-worn motif of the “woman with a past”. William Archer (622) called it “an effective piece of dramatic criticism”, which, he affirms, is “like a commentary-in-action upon my article of last week; but it will do more [...] to render impossible the play of artificial situation and mendacious self-sacrifice”. *A Slice of Life* (1910), Barrie’s pointed satire of the “discussion play”, was presented by the *Times* reviewer as “a picture of the absurdities and self-conscious tricks of the modern play, which is a masterpiece of most delicate and searching dramatic criticism” (“St James’s Theatre”). The same can be said about his *Rosy Rapture* (1915) – a lighthearted parody of a musical with “its incompetent chorus [and] the grotesqueness of melodrama” (*Graphic*); and his *Punch: A Toy Tragedy* (1906), placing “conventional theatre” next to the “new drama” as the dated

and worn out puppets have to give way to the energetic “Superpunch” (a clear allusion to G. B. Shaw’s *Man and Superman*, premiered 23 may 1905 (Hugo 60)).

One can see that Barrie never stopped participating in the debates on contemporary theatre and its problems, although employing to this effect his own critical methods and representation techniques. His mode and his language were more akin to those of Symbolist drama: it is not co-incidental that Maurice Maeterlinck once declared that *Peter Pan* was the father of the *Blue Bird* (Ormond 151), and it is within the framework of this notion that one has to look for interpretation in Barrie’s works.

Thus, in *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* the idea of the artificially sustained, detached from its indigenous traditions, world of Diaghilev’s Ballets finds its symbolic manifestation in the claustrophobic group of Russian ballerinas, which, similar to an exclusive club, has a strictly fixed number of life-time members, and someone has to die in order to produce a space for the newcomers (“a dancer, past her best, can always be found to give her life for a newcomer” (Barrie 29)). Surprising as it may seem, by highlighting this notion of the aesthetic closeness of the world of the Russian Ballets – its auto-referentiality, its self-centeredness and alienation - Barrie got to the very essence of something that later, in modern theories of culture, was put forward as the major hallmark of modernist works. In his *Politics of Modernism*, Raymond Williams (45) maintains that the experience of exile, and migrating to a foreign metropolis, was central to the creation of the formal innovation made by the early modernists in their works:

Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices.

In Barrie’s playlet (15), the notion of this contrived, self-referential artistic medium is highlighted in the idea of a puppet maker, who simply “crafts” his ballerinas out of nowhere with a chisel and putty:

BILL: Made all of the Russian Dancers!

LADY VERE: Are you going crazy! How can he make them?

BILL: I don’t know yet. That is what I have to find out – But he makes them somehow – with chisels and putty, I daresay.

The theme of the “made up” dancers is carried further in the scene where Maestro effectively manufactures Lord Vere and Karissima’s child – the stage directions read:

MAESTRO returns carrying a bag and an easel [...] The canvas is an incomplete picture of a baby which must be very like LORD VERE [...] Evidently he is making a child to pass off as Lord Vere’s. He produces a chisel and putty (Barrie 25).

The theme is then persistently reiterated throughout, and towards the play’s ending the conversation is read as a generic example of ekphrasis, praising Karissima as an exclusive object of art:

MAESTRO: It was I who made her – fashioned her so exquisitely.

LORD VERE: Made her? That strange tale is true?

MAESTRO: Just as I made the child – just as I made them all. But there was none so wonderful as Karissima (Barrie 29).

Yet again, the reference to the myth of Pygmalion is what immediately comes to mind in these lines: the world of the Russian Dancers as an admirable icon of perfection – a muse and a source of creative inspiration, which dazzles everyone who happens to step into its light. Within the symbolism of the play, the exuberant and emotionally charged Russian tradition (Karissima) is regarded as a potent injection capable of rejuvenating the conservative rigidity of English life: as Maestro puts it, “there is no feeling for art in this country” (Barrie 29). Its obsolete conventionality is playfully mocked by Karissima’s effort to translate the high-rhetoric of wedding vows into her own language of gestures and mime, showing all its incongruity and inaptness when presented in its literary sense:

“And keep him in sickness and in health? - *She shows this by giving him medicine.* / And forsaking all others keep thou only unto him as long as ye both shall live? - *She kisses LADY VERE and BILL, then runs to LORD VERE to indicate she’s done with all but him for ever*” (Barrie 21).

Within the symbolic spectrum of Barrie’s playlet, the marriage of the young couple, Karissima and Lord Vere, is hailed as a positive way forward – hence the child, who in no time acquires the language, “spoken” by his Russian side, chasing butterflies specifically on his toes:

MAESTRO: She is glad that he is chasing butterflies. Does he chase them on his toes?

LORD VERE: Yes.

MAESTRO: Then all is well (Barrie 29).

Not unlike the union between Pygmalion and Galatea, blessed with their son Paphos, the future is bestowed upon the offspring of the traditional and the exotic, who according to Maestro, is “by far more beautiful than those who come in the common English way” (Barrie 29). Even the most conservative seemed to be persuaded, and as a token of appreciation, they happily attempt at “talking *à-la-Russe*”: “They all join in the dance on their toes. Even LORD VERE, LADY VERE and BILL are on their toes. It should be wildly gay” (Barrie 30).

When looking deeper into *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*, one can say that the meaning of the playlet goes, nonetheless, far beyond a simple tribute to the fashionable sway with the exotic. And although Barrie belonged to the generation of the Edwardian authors, often dismissed by the emerging modernists as those devoid of the new sensibilities for the new age, he, with his remarkable sense of irony and artistic intuition, was keen enough to perceive that at the beginning of the 1920s, Western fascination with the exotic was hardly taken as a radically new shift. Since the years of the industrial revolution, the arts of the East have been regarded as an antidote to the corrupt capitalism of the European civilisation. The trend drew further upon elements of Japanese art (“japonisme”), which flooded Western markets after trading rights were established with Japan in the 1860s, becoming one of the key elements of the avant-garde style that may be loosely defined as Art Nouveau. By the end of the century, however, the exotic, as appropriated by the West, had become a mass-produced commodity in itself; Oriental images were used to sell everything from cigarettes to candy, and the exoticism in interior design became associated with the fantasies of glamour, opulence and “barbaric splendour”.

In the generation that came of age after 1918, this vision extended its authority but altered. Western civilisation failed to prevent the horrors of World War I. The material aesthetic grandeur glowed more richly, but its justifying moral righteousness faded. The superlatively rich crown jewels (especially the treasure houses of the southern colonial lands) looked like loot. To be born the heirs to such loot induced a moral unease, for which the “otherness” provided the natural mode of representation; the examples are manifold and can be found beneath the surface of Evelyn Waugh’s novels, and in the theatricality of the Bloomsbury group’s life style, as well as in the gaudy gatherings at the salons of Ottoline Morrell. The “otherness”, in this context, represented not only a recoil from dominant and respected values, but also an attack on them by aesthetic and ethical means. And it is exactly in this sense that the Russianness was employed in Barrie’s humorous playlet.

5. Conclusions

Barrie’s *Truth about the Russian Dancers* should be regarded as a modernist rather than Edwardian reflection on the question of cultural dialogism and the double-edged cultural critique. It highlighted the playfully ironic, self-referential aspect of Barrie’s particular genius and his ability to exploit (always with a light touch) the contrast between the exotic ‘otherness’ of the Russian dancers, and the lack of creative spark and conformism of the English social elite. Through a straightforward juxtaposition of the “the conventional” and “the other” one’s sense of decorum was considerably disturbed, one’s self-respect as an aesthete fell into question, undermining the entire notion of traditionalism and the norm. True, the Russianness in his sketch was largely taken as “otherness” rather than in its specific cultural context, but it worked as a lens for casting light on the idea of “authenticity” and “the real”. It did indeed have the effect of alienating the audience from the object of its humour, challenging the conservative forms and conventions, and producing this unique type of modernist cultural critique, which was at once original and witty, thought-provoking and playfully engaging.

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