On 11 January 1916 Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes steamed into New York harbor for the first of two lengthy tours of the United States. Both began in New York, then crisscrossed the country, giving Americans no fewer than fifty-one cities a taste of Diaghilev’s fabled entertainment. The company that made these 1916-1917 tours was different from the one Europeans knew. There were few stars and many new faces and a repertory that gave only a hint of Diaghilev’s growing experimentalism. The Ballets Russes never triumphed in the United States, as it had in Europe, nor did it immediately influence the course of American ballet. But the tours set in motion changes within the Ballets Russes itself that had lasting consequences. Thanks to American dollars, Diaghilev rebuilt the company temporarily disbanded by World War I while conducting some of the most fruitful experiments in his company’s history. Those same dollars paid for the only ballet to have its premiere in the New World—Vaslav Nijinsky’s Till Eulenspiegel. In size, personnel, and social relations, the Ballets Russes of the American tours marked the birth of Diaghilev’s postwar company.

Diaghilev had long toyed with the idea of an American tour. But only in 1914, when debt threatened the very life of his enterprise, did he take steps to convert the idea into a reality. “Have had several interviews . . . Diaghileff about Ballet for New York,” Addie Kahn wired her husband, Otto, chairman of the Metropolitan Opera’s board of directors, from London on 18 July 1914:

[Is] most insistent troupe should go America this winter for urgent reasons too complicated to cable upon which largely depend continuance of organization. Diaghileff willing to go even for 10 New York Brooklyn performances of which several matinees and some in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago simply to keep company together.1

Diaghilev did not get to America that winter. In August war began, and the company that had broken up in London for the summer holidays now found itself scattered across a divided Europe. Diaghilev himself was in Italy, and it was here on 10 October that he signed a contract with Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the Met’s managing director, for the tour that began in January 1916. A man without a company, Diaghilev cajoled the Met into providing the means to create one. With a $45,000 advance, Diaghilev got what most company directors only dream of—a period of subsidized artistic freedom.2 He spent the summer and autumn of 1915 in Switzerland, and it was there that he gradually assembled his new company. He had promised the Met forty-seven dancers and his three biggest stars—Nijinsky, Tamara Karsavina, and Michel Fokine—although at the time he signed the contract he had no idea whether he could get them. From Petrograd (as St. Petersburg had been renamed at the start of the war) he summoned Serge Grigoriev, his trusted régisseur. The purpose of the visit, Grigoriev later wrote, was “to ask [my] help in collecting a company in Russia.”3 Returning home via London (where he engaged the Polish dancer Stanislas Idzikovsky), Grigoriev went to work. He called on Karsavina and discovered she was expecting a baby. He had no better luck with Fokine, who refused to leave Russia in wartime. Nor was Olga Spessivtzeva, an up-and-coming Maryinsky ballerina, tempted to join Diaghilev. A number of old hands decided to risk the journey, such as Grigoriev’s wife, Lubov Tchernicheva, and several youngsters, among them Maria and Gala Chabelska. Grigoriev next went to Moscow, where he recruited the Bolshoi ballerina Xenia Maclezova and, from Lydia Nelidova’s private studio, Vera Nemchinova, her sister Lida, and Valentina Kachouba. While Griigoriev labored in the East, Diaghilev worked the Western front. Although he could not free Nijinsky from house arrest in Budapest, his
figure 1
Le Soleil de Nuit, New York, 1916, cat. no. 97.

figure 2
Le Soleil de Nuit, New York, 1916, cat. no. 96.
agent Stanislaw Drobecki secured Léon Woizikovsky and other much-needed men from Poland. Lydia Sokolova and Nicolas Kremnev arrived from England; Flore Revalles, a strikingly attractive opera singer hired for mime roles, came from France. With the exception of Adolph Bolm, who joined in Switzerland, none of these dancers were well known. But in the postwar years, Sokolova, Woizikovsky, Tchernicheva, Idzikovsky, Vera Nemchinova, and Massine all would become Ballets Russes stars.

By autumn 1915 the company was hard at work. To whip the dancers into shape, Diaghilev reengaged Enrico Cecchetti, the Italian master teacher whose pupils included Nijinsky, Karsavina, and Anna Pavlova. Just before Christmas, the company gave its first performance—a gala matinee in Geneva—and just after the holiday, a gala benefit in Paris. On New Year’s Day 1916 the company set sail from Bordeaux.

The repertory was calculated to please rather than tax local audiences. Of the fourteen works, most were by Fokine. The list included some of his best ballets—*Les Sylphides*, *Firebird* (as L’Oiseau de Feu was translated in the United States), *Petrouchka*, *Carnaval*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*, the *Polovtsian Dances*, and *Schéhérazade*—and also a few of his lesser ones—*Le Pavillon d’Arnaud*, *Cléopâtre*, *Thamar*, and *Narcisse*. From Petipa’s *Sleeping Beauty* came the Bluebird pas de deux (presented as *La Princesse Enchantée*). Only Nijinsky’s *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* and Massine’s *Le Soleil de Nuit* (figure 1) hinted at the modernism now transforming the company’s identity. In anticipation of the tour, Diaghilev had spruced up several works. Both *Schéhérazade* and *La Princesse Enchantée* arrived in America with “new décors and costumes by Léon Bakst,” and the program included a similar credit for the *Polovtsian Dances*, designed by Nicholas Roerich. Bakst also created new costumes for Ivan Tsarevich and the Beautiful Tsarevna in *Firebird*.

On 17 January the company of fifty-six gave its first performance before a glittering New York audience at the Century Theatre. Although Diaghilev’s dancers had taken Paris by storm, New York was cooler to the company. There was enthusiasm but little love, and for the many who knew it firsthand, not even the excitement of novelty.

Actually, one could sample many of Diaghilev’s wares without going abroad. At the Met were the sets and costumes from his *Boris Godunov* and even a version of his *Polovtsian Dances*. On Broadway, in 1911 Gertrude Hoffmann’s “saison des Ballets Russes” offered a program that included three of Diaghilev’s most popular works—*Cléopâtre*, *Schéhérazade*, and *Les Sylphides*. Another enterprise that cashed in on the fame of the real Ballets Russes was Mikhail Mordkin’s All-Star Imperial Russian Ballet, which made its debut at the Metropolitan in 1911 and carried the banner of Russian dance to no fewer than 120 towns in seven months. More longlasting was the company of Anna Pavlova, which, beginning in 1910, made extensive tours throughout the United States with a repertory that owed much of its inspiration to Fokine. If none of these troupes measured up to Diaghilev’s, they exposed the American public to genres, styles, and personalities associated with the Ballets Russes. Not unexpectedly, then, reviews of the company were mixed. There was high praise for the visual aspect of the ballets, for the ensemble (“as near to perfection as is possible in this imperfect world,” wrote the *New York Tribune*), and for the orchestra (described by the *Sun* as an ensemble of “uncommon excellence”).

The principal dancers were another story. As the Met had anticipated, Nijinsky and Karsavina were sorely missed. Nearly every critic remarked on the weakness in the upper ranks, and most had something to say about the shortcomings of specific individuals. In a rare, signed review, the *Tribune’s* Grenville Vernon came down especially hard on Macle佐va:

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The weak point in "The Fire-Bird" was the Bird herself. Mlle. Xénia Maclezova is an accomplished technician, but she displayed little fancy or poetry. In Tschaikowsky's "La Princesse Enchantée" her technical powers were shown to better advantage, though M. Bolm was no Mordkine, and certainly no Nijinsky.5

The critic had good words, however, for Massine's dancing in Le Soleil de Nuit (figure 2), as well as for his achievement there as a choreographer, and, later in the season, for his performance in Petrouchka, where he took over the title role created by Nijinsky. The Tribune called the performance a "remarkable creation of poetic fantasy," describing Massine's puppet as a "figure of intense pathos."6 As the season progressed, other company members attracted notice: Flore Revalles, whose Zobeide in Schéhérazade (figure 3) was "an impersonation of truly splendid sensuality and abandon"; Adolph Bolm, who "displayed his really remarkable abilities" as the warrior chief in the Polovtsian Dances; Lubov Tchernicheva, an "alluring" Chiarina in Carnaval; and Lydia Sokolova, "a lovely picture" as Papillon in the same ballet.7

The Met had insisted on stars. But there was one star whom the Met—or at least someone within the organization—wanted no part of. Lydia Lopokova had made her debut with the Ballets Russes in 1910, then left it (and the Maryinsky) for the vaudeville circuits of America. Puckily and unconventional, she spent the next five years in the country, working as a dancer, cabaret artist, model, vaudeville performer, and Broadway dramatic actress. Late in 1915, Otto Kahn or someone in his confidence apparently broached to Diaghilev the idea of engaging Lopokova. With no female stars in the offing, Diaghilev jumped at the chance of adding a Maryinsky graduate to his roster, one, moreover, who had actually danced with the Ballets Russes. "Delighted to engage Lopokova," he wired Kahn (in English) on Christmas Day. "Cable her lowest terms." A week of silence followed. On 2 January he wired the Metropolitan: "No answer for Lopoukova. If you haven't already engaged her, please take an option on her until my arrival. Am counting on her."8 Unbeknown to Diaghilev, strong objections to her engagement had been raised. The day after Christmas, Otto Kahn received a letter that presented the case against her: I do not know whether you have suggested the engagement of Lopokova, but I do know that the public will not accept her with this company as a five dollar artist and if we must have someone in place of Karsavina it must absolutely be someone from abroad. I can feature a new name and get the public to accept it, but please, I beg of you, do not attempt it with Lopokova who has appeared not only at Keith's Palace [a vaudeville house] and other theatres charging dollar and a half prices, but at other theatres far below the standard set for the Ballet. Even taking her as one of the ensemble would be most inadvisable. We have advertised a complete organization from Abroad—and the public will accept nothing less.9

Whoever wrote to Kahn (the surviving carbon copy is unsigned) was wrong. When Lopokova made her debut in Carnaval at the third performance (suggesting that opposition to her only ceased with the appearance of the first, critical reviews), the critics were enchanted. "Miss Lydia Lopokova did not arrive with the Diaghileff Russian Ballet," wrote the Tribune. "She has been with us in America for several years. The glamour of novelty does not cover her. And yet last night at the Century Theatre she won the first great personal triumph of the Diaghileff Ballet season."10

Lopokova's triumph notwithstanding, Carnaval had detractors. As in Europe, music critics usually had the dance beat, and they looked upon Diaghilev's rifling of the concert repertory—in this case, Schumann's Carnaval: Scènes mignonnes sur quatre notes, Op. 9–
as nothing less than sacrilege. For the company’s two Stravinsky scores, on the other hand, there was only praise. For critics who knew only his quartets (first heard in America two months before the opening of the Diaghilev season), Firebird was a revelation. Rich in fantasy and descriptive detail, it revealed the composer as a master colorist, a bold delineator of poetic atmosphere. Petrouchka caused an even greater stir. Wrote W. J. Henderson in a Sunday piece for the Sun:

What is to be said of this opulent and yet marvellously simple score of “Petrouchka”? There are pages which baffle the ear, yet are perfect in their achievement of delineative purpose. The confusion of sounds which is heard in the street before the show booths is a masterpiece of orchestration. It is impossible to seize upon its constituent elements; but the result is precisely what the artist intended it should be, that of two or three musical instruments or collections of instruments, the cries and talk of the street and the fundamental roar of the city. . . . What else can we demand?¹¹

Music was not alone in drawing the ire of critics. Some took offense at the “immorality” of ballets that depicted scenes of unbridled lust. Schéhérazade (figures 4 and 5) was not the only work to end in an orgy, but it was the one most often charged with immorality. Early twentieth-century America had more than its share of puritans, but it
had an even larger number of racists, and in Schéhérazade the spectacle of black men embracing white women was more than many in the audience could bear. No matter that the setting of the ballet was Persia of the Arabian Nights or that the "Negroes" were actually Caucasians in dark body paint. America’s ultimate racial taboo had been broken. “Even to Northern minds,” wrote the Tribune, the spectacle was “repulsive.”

Critics were not the only guardians of public morality. Members of the Catholic Theatre Movement came to a performance (Schéhérazade and L’Après-midi d’un Faune, another sexually explicit ballet, were on the bill), then circulated a bulletin against the company. Complaints, meanwhile, had been pouring into the Police Department, and Diaghilev was summoned to answer the charges. There wasn’t much he could do. At the next performance of Faune, the end was changed: instead of lying down on the Chief Nymph’s discarded scarf, Massine merely gazed at its silken folds. The orgy in Schéhérazade was also toned down. The censors were satisfied, but the ballet, thought the Tribune, was spoiled. No wonder Diaghilev found Americans crude and unsympathetic.

The critics certainly gave Diaghilev a hard time. In a way he had invited it. Long before his arrival, the press agents had gone to work. “For months,” wrote the New York Times after the company’s first performance,

the newspapers and magazines have been printing the bright-hued colors of its costume plates, or black and white reproductions of its artists and scenes. For months they have been devoting their reading columns to exposition, illustration, and argument concerning various phases of its being, until finally there seemed nothing left for pictures or printed words in their task of explaining the fame the organization had won.

If critics stood ready to pounce, part of the reason lay in the massive publicity campaign orchestrated by the Met.

Heading this campaign was one of the more remarkable of the many remarkable people whose lives crossed paths with the Ballets Russes. Today, outside the business world, few know the name of Edward L. Bernays. But this nephew of Sigmund Freud was the father of modern public relations. In his early twenties, Bernays was a newcomer to the Metropolitan Musical Bureau, to which the opera company had turned over the task of promotion. In a stroke of genius, the Bureau appointed him the company’s general press representative. For Bernays, the experience was eye-opening:

I learned a lot working with the Metropolitan Musical Bureau; but never more than when I handled Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet in 1915, 1916 and 1917. These three years taught me more about life than I have learned from politics, books, romance, marriage and fatherhood in the years since.

Relying on what he called “hunch and intuition,” Bernays mounted a campaign that publicized the ballet, first “as a novelty in art forms, a unifying of several arts; second, in terms of its appeal to special groups of the public; third, in terms of its direct impact on American life, on design and color in American products; and fourth, through its personalities.” He bombarded magazines, Sunday supplements, the music and women’s page departments of daily newspapers with “reams of stories and photographs angled to their various reader groups.” He persuaded manufacturers to make products “inspired by the color and design of Bakst decors and costumes, and arranged for their advertising and display in department and other retail stores through the country.” Much of this “ballyhoo,” as he called the months of intense, nationwide publicity, centered on the
company's principals: Nijinsky, Karsavina, and Diaghilev. When neither Karsavina nor Nijinsky turned up, he prepared the ground for their replacements, on the theory that “glowing descriptions of one Russian-named dancer . . . could be applied to any other.” He draped a snake from the Bronx zoo around Flore Revalles in her Schéhérazade costume, a stunt that brought pictures of this unknown dancer to America's breakfast tables. He planted interviews and glowing accounts of “stars” who had never performed with the Ballets Russes in Europe, and published them under a variety of pseudonyms.\textsuperscript{16}

No wonder critics felt a little miffed.

On 20 January the New York season ended. The next morning the company boarded two special trains for Boston, the first stop on a two-month tour of fifteen cities. More than two hundred people packed the trains—dancers, stagehands, supers, and musicians—along with scenery and costumes for eleven ballets. Once out of New York, Diaghilev fired Maclezova, whose roles went to Lopokova, now the company's undisputed star. (Maclezova, as Diaghilev explained to Otto Kahn, had refused to dance unless he paid her $150 more a performance. He demurred, whereupon she and her mother tried to have him arrested!\textsuperscript{17})

In some cities houses were full. But in many others, including Chicago, the company faced rows of empty seats.

For Merle Armitage every moment of the day was filled with incidents “beyond belief.” Diaghilev, he wrote, “detested our democratic ways.” He treated subordinates, including those in executive positions, as menials. He had no use for Ben Stern, to whom the Met had entrusted the management of the tour, and on even minor matters he insisted on wiring Kahn for advice. Diaghilev's high-handedness raised tension behind the scenes. In one particularly unpleasant incident, he struck a busy stagehand with his walking stick when the worker refused to carry out an order. A dozen men rushed to their coworker's defense, and only Armitage's timely appearance saved Diaghilev from harm. Later that night, a chunk of pig iron fell from the grid ninety feet above the stage, stripping the rim from Diaghilev's derby. An explanation of the “accident” was never found.\textsuperscript{18}

The tour ended on 29 March. Five days later the company began a four-week season at the Metropolitan Opera House. Two works were added to the repertory: Le Spectre de la Rose, which had its premiere on opening night, and Cléopâtre, which the company gave two days later. But the real excitement centered on the arrival of Nijinsky. For months Diaghilev had pulled strings to secure the dancer's release. But it was only when the American government, still neutral in the European conflict, stepped in that the Austrian authorities were persuaded to let Nijinsky and his family go. Otto Kahn played a crucial role in the undertaking, not only because of his prestige as chairman of the Met's board of directors, but because, as a major underwriter of the Allied war effort, he exerted influence at the highest levels of government. On 7 February he received a telegram from Robert Lansing, the U.S. secretary of state, relaying a message from the American ambassador to Austria-Hungary. “Have succeeded getting promise government permit Nijinsky and wife start immediately New York provided you cable personal guarantee that they will return this monarchy immediately conclusion engagement Metropolitan Opera. Nijinskys can start soon as I transmit your agreement to government.” By 28 February Nijinsky was free at Bern.\textsuperscript{19}

Far from ending the Met's troubles, the dancer's release only added to them. In Switzerland Nijinsky demanded money and in early March, not without misgiving, the Met cabled its representative, Henry Russell, the $7,000 the dancer claimed he needed for debts. But this was only the beginning. Having arrived in New York, Nijinsky flatly
rejected the contract offered him by John Brown, the Met's business manager. He told reporters that he was not under contract to Diaghilev (which was true), and that he was astonished to learn on arriving in New York that he was advertised to appear with his former company (which could not have been true given the $7,000 he had already accepted from the Met). Nijinsky also threatened to begin legal proceedings against Diaghilev for back pay. The newspapers went to town; armies of lawyers went to work. On 9 April a truce was reached: Nijinsky would dance. Two days later Diaghilev agreed to give Nijinsky $13,000 in back pay. He also agreed to pay Nijinsky $1,000, considerably more than the annual income of most Americans, for each of the eleven performances he was to dance in New York.20

Nijinsky made his début on 12 April in Le Spectre de la Rose and Petrouchka. For some critics his performance was disappointing. It "scarcely provided," as the New York Times said, "the sensational features that this public had been led to expect." Others, however, recognized the dancer's genius at once. "Mr. Nijinsky is a male dancer such as New York has not seen in this generation, and perhaps, in any," stated the Tribune. "As a dancer pure and simple, as an interpretative artist, as an original personality, he stands alone." In the two and one-half weeks remaining in the season, audiences saw him in other guises—the Poet in Les Sylphides, the Golden Slave in Scheherazade, Harlequin in Carnaval, the title roles in Narcisse and Faune. All of these revealed additional facets of his artistry. He was praised for his gift of impersonation, his fantasy in reimagining the different roles of his repertory. There was praise, too, for his polished technique, his mastery of detail, and the way every part of his body—head, limbs, torso, face—seemed alive with expression. Several critics commented on what today we would call his musicality, the subtle dialogue of his body with the music. Many also spoke of the inner rhythm and flow of his dancing, and the effect this created of uninterrupted movement.21

Nijinsky's presence had a bracing effect on his colleagues, who danced now with a brilliance and vitality that before they had not always shown. The ballets also benefited from his presence. In Petrouchka the New York Times remarked upon the many new touches that clarified the action, while in Les Sylphides the Sun noted that some of the groupings had been modified for the better and that in several places the poses and steps of the principals had been altered to their advantage. Changes were also made in Spectre, and these, too, were mentioned approvingly. Several critics referred to tales of Nijinsky rehearsing the ballets in which he appeared, and he may well have done so. Certainly, in one of his first statements to the press after reaching New York, he expressed a desire to rehearse the company so as to bring Fokine's ballets into the "shape in which they were originally created."22 Nijinsky's concern for the integrity of Fokine's works speaks of the high regard in which he continued to hold them. But his concern also implies that in the brief period since Fokine's departure from the company, his ballets had changed. What America was seeing was the first copy of an original, rather than the original itself.

The changes in Scheherazade, however, went far beyond details. With only a modest troupe at his command, Diaghilev had drastically reduced the number of dancers. For photographer Baron de Meyer, who knew the original ballet well, the small scale of the American version had unfortunate artistic consequences:

"Scheherazade," as shown in New York . . . was but an interpretation, in a minor and reduced key, of the amazing and bewildering orgy which we saw in Paris in former days when a multitude of dancers seemed to whirl in a frenzy. Now the multitude is reduced to eight bayaderes, eight negroes, six fruit-bearers and a half-dozen or so principals. There is
no doubt that a certain spirit and atmosphere remains . . . but to anyone like myself who actually was present at the première in Paris, “Sheherazade” . . . is a poor performance and, at times, far from enjoyable.²³

The Sheherazade we know today is a descendant of this imperfect American copy, not Fokine’s 1910 original.

There was one aspect of Nijinsky’s dancing that did not go down well with New York critics—the elegance that many perceived as effeminate. “There was a discordant note,” wrote the New York Times of his performance in Spectre, “in a super-refinement of gesture and posture that amounted to effeminacy.” Some critics, while noting the absence of virility, qualified their remarks, drawing attention to the masculine “strength” of his dancing. Narcisse, however, proved too much for the critical brotherhood—and for many in the audience as well. There were giggles in the house and thundering reviews in the newspapers. The critics had a field day with Nijinsky’s costume, not one of Bakst’s happiest inspirations. Wrote one: “It was to laugh, as the French say. Such a lovely costume! A nice white shimmy and a nice white knee skirt, and such dear little white unmentionables underneath!”²⁴ Not surprisingly, Narcisse never received a second performance.

In the main, however, Nijinsky’s appearances drew large and enthusiastic houses, and the season ended on a high note. As the curtain fell on the last performance word came that the company would return to America in the fall, on a visit that would include a long coast-to-coast tour. Although sponsored by the Met, the project was described as “a personal artistic enterprise” of Otto Kahn.²⁵ Three days later the company, minus Nijinsky, sailed for Spain.

Kahn had had enough of Diaghilev. He wanted to show the company to America, but he wanted none of the backstage hysterics and intrigue that had accompanied the first tour with Diaghilev. Even before the season ended, Kahn decided to throw his lot in with Nijinsky. In late April he relayed the Met's new and alluring offer—a twenty-week contract beginning about 1 October in which Nijinsky was engaged both as leading dancer and artistic director of the “Diaghilev Ballet Russe.” Diaghilev himself would remain in Europe (as would Grigoriev), while Nijinsky ruled the roost in America. If Kahn thought the first tour had gone badly, he had no idea what was in store for him on the second.²⁶

A lesser man than Diaghilev might have balked at the scheme. But Diaghilev was full of plans, and he welcomed the prospect of being quit of the company “to plan a whole new repertoire in peace.” “When telling me of this arrangement,” Grigoriev observed, “he evidently felt quite happy.” From a financial point of view there was ample reason for Diaghilev’s optimism. There was the Met’s $20,000 advance, which would tide him over the summer, then $9,000 for each week of the twenty-week engagement, in addition to half the tour’s net profits. The Met assumed responsibility for the orchestra and all travel and administrative costs, in addition to Nijinsky’s $60,000 salary. Diaghilev’s commitment was limited to the salaries of conductor Ernest Ansermet, company managers Stanislaw Drobecki and Randolfo Barocchi (who had just married Lopokova), a chief machinist, and forty-one dancers.²⁷

Over the summer of 1916 the tour took shape. Dancers were signed up, among them Bolm, Lopokova, and Revalles. Seasoned performers and audience favorites, they would carry the major burden of the repertory, as Massine, Tchernicheva, and Izidikovsky were to remain with Diaghilev in Europe. The Met, anxious to strengthen the distaff side of the company, was deep in negotiations with Captain Philip Lydig, an Allied munitions agent who headed the American Ambulance in Petrograd and served as a Special Assistant at the
Embassy, to secure the services of a Maryinsky ballerina. The Met hoped to bring over Karsavina, but when this proved impossible, it settled for Margarita Frohman and Olga Spessivtzeva. Fokine’s *Papillons* ("rearranged" by Bolm) and a new version of *Sadko* (with choreography by Bolm and designs by Natalia Goncharova) were added to the previous season’s repertory (see figures 6 and 7). In addition, the Met undertook to produce two brand-new works—*Till Eulenspiegel* and *Mephisto Valse*. Both were to be choreographed by Nijinsky, and like his salary, they were to be paid for by the Met.

On paper the tour looked good. But there was reason for the forebodings Grigoriev confessed to Diaghilev as the troupe sailed from Bordeaux on 8 September. Most concerned the administration. Neither Drobecki nor Barocchi got on well with the dancers, and Nicolas Kremnev, the newly appointed regisseur, lacked both tact and authority. And Nijinsky, even in the best of circumstances, had no aptitude for administration. Within days of the company’s arrival, trouble was brewing. There were disputes over casting and disagreements among the company’s factions. The dancers, wrote Sokolova, were at "sixes and sevens. . . . We didn’t seem to belong to anybody." Although the company was smaller, it had several newcomers, and fitting them into the repertory was no easy task. Nijinsky’s new ballets were scheduled to open during the New York season, and the company arrived three weeks early to rehearse them. But the task proved beyond his
figure 7
Adolph Bolm in Sadko, New York, 1916, cat. no. 98.
capacity, and Mephisto Valse was temporarily laid aside. The rehearsals for Till were a shambles: "Nijinsky would appear and disappear. As ever he had great difficulty in explaining what he wanted, and sometimes it was clear that he did not know himself."

Hours at a time were wasted, and the dancers in exasperation went on strike. Things reached such a pass that when Nijinsky sprained an ankle, delaying the premiere by a week, the dancers regarded his injury as a bid for extra time. But even with the extra week Nijinsky could not finish the ballet. Arguments broke out at the dress rehearsal; when Nijinsky left in a huff, the company was called together and asked if it could pull the ballet through. From the "scrapy bits" that Nijinsky had choreographed, the dancers pieced together the second half, and the show went on.

The season at Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House began on 16 October, a week late. Nijinsky did not dance, and Sadko, rather than Till, provided the novelty of the evening. With its brilliant colors, fantastic plot, and exotic music (from Rimsky-Korsakov's opera), Sadko mined the Russian vein of Diaghilev's most popular works. The New York Times compared it to Firebird and Petrouchka, and had nothing but praise for Bolm's choreography, which evoked the strange creatures of an underwater kingdom. Papillons, by contrast, sparked little enthusiasm. A spin-off of Carnaval, the ballet was one of Fokine's minor efforts, and the critics—despite some praise for Lopokova as the Young Girl and Bolm as Pierrot—treated it accordingly. On 24 October Frohman and Spessivtzeva made their debuts in Les Sylphides.

The high point of the season came with the long-awaited premiere of Till. The eleventh-hour patch job had worked: the ballet impressed the critics as being one of the finest things the company had done in America. Summed up the Tribune: "'Till' has but one fellow in the repertory of the Russian Ballet, and that is 'Petrouchka.'"

Till was Nijinsky's fourth and last ballet and the only one he created independently of Diaghilev. The idea came to him in Budapest. "He had for quite a while thought of creating a ballet of the mediaeval age," his wife Romola later wrote. But it was only when a cousin of hers played Richard Strauss's tone poem "Till Eulenspiegel" that the bits of angular movement he had already choreographed came together as a ballet. The libretto, with minor changes, followed the plan of the music. The rogue-hero of the piece, like the pranks that made up its various episodes, derived from medieval German legend. Till's waggerys were legion, and the score was packed with incident, as was Nijinsky's ballet: Till upsetting the carts of the market women, masquerading as a priest, playing the cavalry, falling in love, mocking the learned; finally, Till on the gallows. By the time the Nijinskys left Europe, most of the ballet's details had been worked out.

In late spring 1916 Nijinsky was introduced to Robert Edmond Jones, the scenic artist who would design both Till and Mephisto Valse. Jones was then at the beginning of his career, but already his work revealed the imprint of what came to be known as "the new stagecraft." In Bar Harbor that summer, the two went to work. With Nijinsky watching, criticizing, and exhorting, Jones drew. Together they mapped out the design for the front curtain—a huge sheet of parchment emblazoned with Till's device of the owl and the looking-glass. The marketplace of Braunschweig began to take shape in front of the brooding black mass of the cathedral, a Braunschweig seen through Till's own eyes. One by one, the characters came alive: the rosy-cheeked apple woman, the fat blond baker, the scruffy sweetmeat-seller, the cobbler with his rack of oddly shaped shoes, the professors in long robes and ridiculous shovel hats, the three châtelaines in towering headdresses and streaming trains, even members of the crowd (figure 8), and Till himself in his various guises—imp, lover, scholar, victim.
Till was performed twice in New York (the second time at the season’s only sold-out house) and several times on tour. Because the ballet was never seen in Europe, it has been regarded as a footnote to Nijinsky’s career, a retreat from the experimentalism of his earlier works. But the manner of the ballet's creation and the character of the overall design suggest otherwise. Prompted and guided by Nijinsky, Jones went far beyond the aesthetic of the World of Art movement (see Bridgman essay). In their exaggerated proportions and semi-cubist forms, his designs acknowledged the revolution of modernism. Neither Bakst’s creations for Faune and Jeux nor Nicholas Roerich’s for Sacre had done this. Indeed, as Roger Fry noted, the choreography and music of Sacre had far outstripped Roerich’s “rather fusty romanticism,” had “arrived at a conception of formal unity which demanded something much more logically conceived than the casual decorative pictorial formula of the scenery.”

Quite independently of Diaghilev, Nijinsky, in Till, plowed new artistic ground. But Till broke new ground in still another way. In working with Jones, Nijinsky took Diaghilev’s collaborative method as his model. Within the Ballets Russes, however, designers had always had the upper hand, even in ballets like Firebird and Petrouchka where Fokine had worked closely with the artists. In Till, however, Nijinsky imposed his own vision on the ballet. Seizing the initiative, he made Jones the servant of his imagination, the means of giving flesh to his own creation. In so doing, Nijinsky added a new and essential ingredient to the definition of the modern ballet choreographer—the role of artistic director.

Lincoln Kirstein and others have also remarked on Till’s choreographic conservatism. Like Petrouchka, Nijinsky’s ballet was a social epic, rich in character and historical particularity. The curtain rose on a medieval marketplace with its peasants, priests, knights, noblewomen, and beggars. There were props: a huge roll of cloth, a scholar’s parchment, apples, bread, sweetmeats. And there was action, as rapidly changing as a motion picture. In her biography of her husband, Romola Nijinsky claimed that Till was “sheer dancing from beginning to end.”

As for the chorus movements, Mr. Nijinsky has furnished abundant proof of his genius as a stage director. There is almost none of what the average audience would call ‘dancing.’ It would be out of place as Nijinsky has conceived the ballet. Instead, the members of the company have been drilled in strange posturings and queer little movements that constantly pique the interest and remind you that you are in the midst of a medieval fantasy.

More than any other work, Till revealed Nijinsky’s debt to Fokine. But the ballet also underscored the extent of their differences. Where Petrouchka emphasized naturalism, Till aimed for stylization. Nijinsky’s very steps, wrote H. T. Parker in the Boston Evening Transcript, “were as the tracing of his mockery,” and the same might be said of the other characters, whose grotesquely exaggerated forms—rounded, attenuated, thickened—became, in Jones's words, “the impossible figments of an imagination enchained by some ludicrous nightmare.”

On 28 October the company danced its last performance in New York. A four-month tour lay ahead, and Kahn no less than Diaghilev laid great stock on its success. Unfortunately for both, the tour was a fiasco. Despite generally good notices and occasionally good houses (some of the best were in San Francisco), the Metropolitan lost a quarter of a million dollars. Its goal of taking between $6,000 and $7,000 a performance proved illusory. In Fort Worth receipts fell as low as $7,07, and during the first week of December alone the losses amounted to nearly $15,000. Much of the responsibility for this
disaster lay with the Met; the high ticket schedule it had insisted on, incompetent advance men who alienated local newspaper editors, and a failure, generally, to assess what the market would bear in places like Wichita and Tacoma. But part of the blame rested with Nijinsky, who dithered over programs until press deadlines were missed and whose failure to dance as scheduled entitled ticketholders on a number of occasions to refunds. To the chagrin of local managements, he often refused to appear more than once on a program, no more than ten minutes if the scheduled ballet happened to be Le Spectre de la Rose. "Just think," complained Will L. Greenbaum, the manager of San Francisco’s Valencia Theater, “of asking $5.00 for a show such as you are giving us certain nights and think what Pavlova gave us for $2.50 and how that wonderful little woman used to work. Nine times a week and on the stage all the time.” And, of course, Nijinsky’s Mephisto Valse, which as late as November was scheduled to enter the repertory in San Francisco, failed to materialize. Then.

Nijinsky was not the only “prima donna” to cause difficulty. Despite the Met’s generous salary ($500 a week), neither Frohman nor Spessivtzeva was prepared for the rigors of a cross-country tour. Typical of the grueling schedule were the company’s dates for the week beginning 13 November: Monday, Worcester; Tuesday, Hartford; Wednesday, Bridgeport; Thursday, Atlantic City; Friday and Saturday, Baltimore. Frohman began missing performances, and by 8 December Ernest Henkel, the tour’s New York-based business manager, thought there was “very little use in carrying these two girls around the country” and that they should “leave at the end of the week of 16 December in Omaha.” Frohman and Spessivtzeva left the company in San Francisco. Their dismissal, however, was only one sign of a general belt-tightening by which the Met hoped to stave off the worst of what was obviously a disaster. In late November Henkel proposed eliminating one of the company’s railway cars; a few weeks later, he spoke of dropping two musicians and charging to Drobosch the fares of two Russian women traveling with the company as chaplains.

In addition to trimming expenses, the Met also cut back its remittances to Diaghilev. By early January he claimed that the Met owed him $37,500 of the $108,000 due to date. On 11 February he wired both Henkel and Rawlins L. Cottenet, a Met board member then in Paris, to cable $47,000 immediately to his bank. “Delay in payment inexcusable. Have urgent bank drafts.” Later that month he brought consular pressure to bear on the Metropolitan through the Russian embassy in Rome; by this time, he claimed, the outstanding balance had mounted to $75,000.

The records show that between 22 December 1916 and 18 February 1917 the Met ordered the Foreign Trade Department of the Wall Street branch of the National City Bank to credit $51,500 to Diaghilev’s account. Obviously, some of this went to pay the troupe ($22,500 was forwarded to Drobosch on tour), and doubtless, a fair amount ended up in the pockets of Diaghilev’s creditors. But surely there was another reason behind the January-February panic: the commitments Diaghilev had just made to produce Fireworks, Parade, Le Chant du Rossignol, and an untitled project with music by Maurice Ravel that (with the exception of the Ravel ballet) were to be the high points of his spring seasons in Rome and Paris. A factor in dropping Le Chant du Rossignol and the Ravel project may well have been the unanticipated loss of revenue from the American tour.

Theoretically, the Met’s remittances should have covered expenses on both sides of the Atlantic. In practice, they did not. Indeed, as Diaghilev signed up artists in Rome, his company virtually starved in America. On 4 December R. G. Herndon, the Met touring manager, reported from Houston:


41 For the Met’s remittances, see Metropolitan Ballet Company, Inc., letters to National City Bank, 22 December 1916, 28 December 1916, 4 January 1917, 11 January 1917, 24 January 1917, 25 January 1917, 10 February 1917, 19 February 1917. On 16 November 1916, Diaghilev commissioned Fortunato Depero to
design the decor, thirty-five costumes, and other accessories for le chant du rossignol. Less than three weeks later, on 2 December, he commissioned another Futurist, Giacomo Balla, to design the “plastic setting” for Stravinsky’s fireworks. Diaghilev signed letter contracts with Pablo Picasso and Erik Satie for parade on 11 and 12 January 1917. On 12 January Ravel accepted Diaghilev’s commission for a ballet that would have a libretto by yet another Futurist, poet Francesco Cangiullo. For le chant du rossignol, see Leonetta Bentivoglio, “Danza e futurismo in Italia 1913-1935,” La danza italiana i (Autumn 1984), 66; for fireworks, see Melissa McQuillan, “Painters and the Ballet, 1917-1926: An Aspect of the Relationship Between Art and Theatre,” Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1979, vol. 2, 353-354; for parade, see Richard Buckle, in search of diaghilev (New York, 1950), 93-94; for the ravel-Cangiullo project, see catalogue of ballet material and manuscripts from the serge lifar collection, Sotheby’s (London), 9 May 1984, lot 203.


43 R.C. Herndon, letter to Ernest Henkel, 11 December 1916, “Diaghilev Ballet Russe 1916-1917,” box 2, Metropolitan Opera Archives. Franklin was the tour’s concertmaster.

44 Doris Faithfull, letter to Otto Kahn, 11 November 1916, box 57, Otto Kahn papers, Princeton University. Faithfull was writing on behalf of Anna and Lubov Sumankeff [Sumanrova], Mechikova, Galina Chabelska, Stan Paerska, and Lila Kachouba.


Well, the Diaghileff faction is not leaving a stone unturned to keep going until Diaghileff has instructed the bank to pay over the money. . . . The corps de ballet have had barely enough to keep alive, most of them haven’t a cent to eat with. I have been giving those few small amounts out of my own pocket. Drobecki and Barocchi have sent Diaghileff some singing cables, as they explained to me they asked him if it is his desire to see his company starve and stranded if not to wire immediately to the bank and release the cash.32

By the time the company reached Tulsa, the situation had worsened. “The company,” reported Herndon, “are on their last dollars as Lopokova, Monteux, Revalles, Bolm have given up all the money they have at their command, and unless money is forthcoming at Kansas City, I don’t think they can go further.”33 The money came through, and the company limped on.

But even when salaries were paid, they barely covered living expenses in costly America. Early in the tour Doris Faithfull, an English dancer, wrote to Otto Kahn on behalf of herself and six other members of the corps de ballet:

I am writing this on some of the girls’ behalf, also my own. It is concerning our salaries—we wondered if you could intercede with Mr. Diaghilev on the matter. It is absolutely impossible for us to live on the salary we receive—let alone some who have parents to support. When we arrive in a town we have to go hunting about for cheap rooms (carrying heavy suitcases) because we can’t afford to stay at the better hotels. We are very sorry to have to trouble you with our private affairs but we are not in communication with Diaghileff. It seems so futile to think that every penny we earn and work hard for has to go in expenses—so cannot save anything in case of illness etc. A list of the salaries are beneath.44

These were thirty-three and thirty-four dollars a week. Kahn’s response, if any, has not survived.

The company gave its last performance on 24 February 1917 at Harmanus Blecker Hall in Albany. Like so many others, the engagement was a “terrible fliver,” as Ben Franklin, the Albany manager, put it: “Not one fifth of those who saw [the company] here last season, attended the performance last night.”45 On this less than glorious note, the tour ended.

Neither Diaghileff nor the Ballets Russes ever returned to the United States. Despite this, elements of Diaghileff’s aesthetic took root here. Adolph Bolm was among the handful of dancers who remained in America in 1917, and in the next two decades his activities as a teacher, dancer, choreographer, and producer would popularize styles and artistic approaches associated with the Ballets Russes. So, too, would the distinguished collaborations of Robert Edmond Jones, which included The Birthday of the Infanta and Skyscrapers, ballets by John Alden Carpenter, and such dance pieces as Die Glückliche Hand (with Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman) and The Crucifixion of Christ, choreographed by George Balanchine. And in the years to come the inspiration of the Ballets Russes would guide many who first saw the company in 1916-1917 toward the creation of an indigenous American ballet.