allet is woman,” George Balanchine liked to say. His first star in the West, however, was a young man named Serge Lifar. Lifar, who directed the Paris Opéra ballet from 1929 to 1945 (when he was dismissed for collaboration with the Nazis) and again from 1947 to 1958, was the last of Serge Diaghilev’s leading men, one of the golden boys who made the Ballets Russes famous. Like his predecessors, Lifar was uniquely a product of that company; plucked from oblivion, he was groomed by Diaghilev for stardom and launched on a path that asserted not only his preeminence within the company as an individual but also the preeminent role within its repertory of a new kind of hero.

This hero, who made his first appearance with Vaslav Nijinsky, differed markedly from the princes of the nineteenth-century Russian repertory that formed the early dancers and choreographers of the Ballets Russes. No longer merely a consort to the ballerina or the
exponent of a chivalric ideal of masculinity, he was a protagonist in his own right, projecting an image of sexual heterodoxy that left a deep imprint not only on the ballets of the Diaghilev period but also on their audiences. From the androgynes of Le Spectre de la Rose (1911) and L’Après-mid d’un Faune (1912) to the deco gods of La Chatte (1927), Apollon Musagète (1928), and Prodigal Son (1929), Diaghilev’s heroes traced a spectrum of male roles that transcended conventions of gender while presenting the male body in a way that was frankly erotic. Ballet after ballet celebrated its physique, dramatized its athletic prowess, and paraded its sexual availability. Among the many excellent danseurs who passed through the ranks of the Ballets Russes, the “ballerino” alone haunted Diaghilev’s imagination.

As a type, the ballerino had no historical precedent, so Diaghilev, with typical invention, manufactured him from the material at hand. Nijinsky was the first; Léonide Massine, Anton Dolin, Lifar, and a few lesser lights followed. For Diaghilev, they were sometime lovers, would-be sons, and muses. He made them star dancers and fashioned them into star choreographers; he shared his life with them, and his purse, and the passion, intelligence, and taste he brought to every branch of art. At a time when the memory of Oscar Wilde kept most homosexuals in the closet, Diaghilev made the Ballets Russes a venue where the public medium of ballet and the private theater of his imagination at least partly overlapped—a kingdom of “beautiful boys.” Generous at times to a fault, cunning, quixotic, willful, and perspicacious, he used this peculiar collection of attributes to alter the course of ballet. Before Diaghilev, individual dancers may have been homosexual and homosexual individuals may have been present in the ballet audience. But the terrain itself remained ideologically and socially heterosexual. With Diaghilev,
however, ballet in Western Europe no less than in America became a privileged arena for homosexuals as performers, choreographers, and spectators. It was a feat unparalleled in the other arts, and for gay men (to use a modern term) it was a revolution. The captain of ballet modernism was a homosexual hero who did as much for the cause of gay freedom as its more celebrated advocates.

For women, however, the consequences of this revolution were mixed. If with Bronislava Nijinska the Ballets Russes launched a major female choreographer on an international career, the company did little else to accommodate female talent, even as performers. Indeed, with the partial exception of Tamara Karsavina, the female star of the company’s pre–World War I years, the ballerina went into eclipse. She did so not only as an individual but also as a category and an idea. Reversing the trend of nearly a century of ballet history, the ballerina became a subordinate or an appendage of the new Diaghilev hero, an absence in the poetics of ballet modernism at large.

Although the nineteenth-century ballerina had largely been a creature of men, she had also been a power in her own right. She dominated the stage, just as her roles dominated the ballet repertory, and she stood, in contrast to her male consorts, at the apex of the performing hierarchy, the star audiences paid to see. For choreographers, she was both a medium and an instrument; they gave her steps to dance and imagined characters for her to act, but it was only to the degree that she invested these with charm, eroticism, and the mystique of her own personality that they acquired larger meaning.

Woman, of course, was the great obsession of romantic and postromantic ballet. She came in many guises and in many national variants. But it was in her virginal, ethereal guise, ostensibly beyond class or race, that she left her deepest mark on choreography; in the “white acts” of ballets like Giselle, La Bayadère, The Sleeping Beauty, and Swan Lake, the purity of her young womanhood was identified with an Eden of transcendent form. Even if it sprang from the mind of the prince (and of the ballet masters who imagined it), this kingdom of the ideal belonged to the ballerina, as did the larger domain of subjectivity—poetry, loss, grief, beauty, desire, eroticism. Indeed, in its nineteenth-century
form, ballet was uniquely an expression of the feminine as embodied in the ideology and physical presence of the ballerina.

Diaghilev’s revolution dethroned the ballerina from this seemingly impregnable position within the dance universe. In his company her role was sharply curtailed, her repertory limited, her image radically transformed. At the same time, her eroticism and physical bravura were appropriated as attributes of the new male hero. If Swan Lake and La Bayadère were meditations on the mystique of femininity embodied in the ballerina, works like Schéhérazade (1910), L’Après-midi d’un Faune, and La Chatte (1927) celebrated the mystery of the male androgyne or the prowess of the homosexual athlete as represented by one or another of Diaghilev’s golden boys.

This shift away from inherited conventions of ballet sexuality was not immediately apparent in 1909, when the Ballets Russes first appeared in Paris. Handpicked by choreographer Michel Fokine and chosen to a large extent from the “reform” wing of St. Petersburg’s Maryinsky Theater, the dancers continued to be divided according to traditional categories of emplot. The chief division was between “classical” and “character” dancers, that is, between dancers who excelled in the academic idiom of the danse d’école and those who excelled in the folk-derived idioms of character work. Although this division principally rested on technical ability, it also embraced matters of style and décorum. For the classical dancer this implied attractive physical proportions and a deportment that called for nobility and restraint; for the character dancer, it meant a freer use of the body coupled with a more overt projection of sexuality. Whether upper class or populist, the paradigm in each case was heterosexual.

Four of the five ballets presented in 1909 adhered to this traditional paradigm. The Polovtsian Dances celebrated the muscular masculinity of a tribe of pre-Christian warriors and the serpentine
femininity of their captive maidens; Les Sylphides, a poetic reverie, evoked the virginal play of ballet's traditional sisterhood. In Le Pavillon d'Armide the ballerina came to life in the dream of the protagonist, while in Le Festin classical and character dancers joined forces in a potpourri of preexisting dances.

Only in Cléopâtre, based on Fokine's earlier Egyptian Nights, was there a perceptible shift in the paradigm, and this, significantly, occurred when the work was being revised for Paris. The inspiration for the ballet was Alexander Pushkin's tale "Egyptian Nights," which gave birth to the first of the nineteenth century's "killer-Cleopatras" (in Lucy Hughes-Hallet's phrase)—a lascivious queen who has her lovers put to death once she has slept with them. In the ballet her victim is Amoûn, a youth who abandons the girl who loves him for a night of pleasure with the queen. In the St. Petersburg version of the work, Cleopatra was a minor seductress; her rival, Ta-hor, a passionate innocent. For Paris, Diaghilev enhanced the role of the femme fatale (now performed by Ida Rubinstein) while playing up the ballet's decadent elements, thus transforming the Egyptian queen into an idol of perverse and deadly sexuality. He had her carried onstage in a sarcophagus, wrapped in veils that slaves peeled away one by one, disclosing, as Alexandre Benois wrote, "a divine body omnipotent in its beauty." At her side, crouched like a panther ready to spring, was Nijinsky, her favorite slave, half-man, half-beast, blazing with an erotic fire stoked by her beauty and cold, majestic disdain. By contrast to the thrill of this voluptuous sadism, the romance of Amoûn and Ta-hor seemed tame and irrelevant. In later ballets that explored the same ground, the romantic pretext was discarded.

Cléopâtre proved so popular that it became the matrix of numerous Diaghilev
Olga Preobrajenska, early 1900s

works, all of which exploited the French appetite for exoticism and several of which also milked the theme of voluptuous sadism. In Thamar (1912), for instance, the legendary Georgian queen of the title plunged a dagger into the heart of her captive lover. In Legend of Joseph (1914), Potiphar’s Wife (a role originally intended for Rubinstein) towered over Joseph (a role originally intended for Nijinsky), a youthful shepherd caught in the web of a Venetian courtesan. And in Diaghilev’s version of La Tragédie de Salomé (1913), the period’s most famous nymphet, now tricked out in kiss curls, tattoos, and a huge glittering headdress, danced for an all-male cast of “Negroes” and executioners, as well as the severed head of John the Baptist. It was Schéhérazade, however, that laid out the theme most clearly and emblematically. Here Rubinstein’s “proud, cunning and unrestrained passion” as Zobéïde and Nijinsky’s “half-cat, half-snake, fiendishly agile, feminine and yet wholly terrifying” impersonation of her favorite Negro slave reiterated the sexual dynamics of Cleopâtre. His death, which followed on the heels of a frenzied orgy, was a thrilling reminder of the wages of sexual sin at the hands of a grasping woman. As personified in Diaghilev’s killer-Cleopatras, female sexuality and female power were a deadly combination.

Not all the women of the company found such roles congenial. Anna Pavlova, who danced Ta-hor in 1909, left the Ballets Russes at the end of the first season, miffed, among other things, at the last-minute substitution of Les Sylphides and Le Festin for Giselle, one of her greatest roles, at a Paris Opéra gala. That Nijinsky had received the lion’s share
of the season’s publicity did not help matters, nor was she tempted to change her mind by the promise of the title role in *Firebird*, scheduled for production the following year. Ida Rubinstein was the next to go. Most Diaghilev apologists, echoing Prince Peter Lieven, explain that she departed because she wanted to perform dance roles as opposed to mime ones, and “Diaghileff, who knew perfectly well that she was no good as a dancer, gave her a decisive rebuff, at which she took offence.” Given that in the nine years following her break with Diaghilev she devoted herself to acting rather than dancing, it seems likely that she was, rather, “bored,” as Lieven claims she told Diaghilev, with “caresses, embraces, and stabbing herself.” In any event, like Pavlova, she went her own way. Other women principals came and went as well—Vera Karalli, Yekaterina Geltzer, Olga Preobrajenska, Mathilde Kchessinska, Elena Poliakova. Like Pavlova, all were identified with the classical repertory and its major ballerina roles.

Only Tamara Karsavina, who occupied a rung apart in the company, remained loyal to Diaghilev, although she never succumbed to his entreaties to quit the Maryinsky. And for all the affection she bore him, by 1913 she had become sufficiently restive to demand a work of her own. He rewarded her with *La Tragédie de Salomé*, a work that was familiar to the French public from the versions produced by Loie Fuller (in 1907) and Natalia Trouhanova (in 1911) — yet was sufficiently minor that it would not detract from the season’s other premieres: Nijinsky’s *Jeux* and his monumental *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Unsurprisingly, the fillip endured for no more than a season.
Diaghilev’s dethronement of the ballerina was reflected not only in the diminished importance and overt misogyny of many female roles but also in the progressive devaluation of pointe work. This, more than any other aspect of female technique, defined the ballerina; it was her exclusive province and an analogue of the idealism traditionally embodied in her roles. In the interest of historical authenticity, Fokine typically eschewed the use of pointe except in works identified with the Western past: Les Sylphides, which evoked romantic-era ballets like Giselle and La Sylphide; Le Spectre de la Rose, set in the Biedermeier period; Carnaval (1910), which introduced the commedia dell’arte theme within the context of a nineteenth-century masked ball. In exotic ballets or ballets set in antiquity—which together constituted a majority of his works for Diaghilev—pointe work was either proscribed or sharply curtailed.

In Petrouchka (1911), however, a different sort of authenticity was at stake. Here Fokine’s choreography for the Ballerina exploited the technique of pointe for parody, both of the tricks of female virtuoso style and of the ballerina manners that typically accompanied it. Fokine had no quarrel with femininity; what he loathed was its expression as artifice. Even as he disavowed pointe, Fokine used arms and a newly pliant, uncorseted torso to create a more “natural” female body, one that moved freely and expansively, arching, stretching, twisting, bending, in a way that enhanced its plasticity and three-dimensionality. Although not exclusive to women, this unfettered body, with its curves and softened contours, was the basis of the “femininity” he prized in his women dancers. Even if Fokine never abandoned academic technique as a system of training, in much of his choreography, especially for women, he sought to neutralize its presence.
Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina in Le Spectre de la Rose, 1911
In Nijinsky's three works for Diaghilev—Faune, Jeux, and Sacre—the conventions of the female dance all but disappeared. Only in Jeux, where the ballet’s two women danced on high three-quarter pointe, were they present, albeit treated with the utmost minimalism. Although Fokine had opposed bravura effects in principle, he occasionally made use of bravura steps. Nijinsky eliminated these entirely. He virtually abandoned the duet and with it the system of supports by which the danseur had traditionally presented his partner: the men and women in his ballets almost never touched. At the same time, he hardened the contours of Fokine’s “natural” female body. In Faune this body, both individually and collectively, was little more than an interplay of angles across a two-dimensional plane, indistinguishable in shape from that of the hero, although softened, to a degree, by flowing Grecian tunics. In Sacre, too, men and women shared a common stance and gestural vocabulary, although at certain times, such as in the ring dance that opens the second tableau (the score’s only extended lyrical passage and the only dance sequence performed exclusively by women), these common gestures took on a “feminine” quality that mitigated against their normative unisexuality.

In Sacre as in Faune and Jeux, Nijinsky grounded the choreography in a movement
idiom worked out on his own body and then passed on to his dancers. In modern dance, this is standard practice; in ballet, by contrast, a highly elaborated technique, independent of the choreographer, interposes itself between the maker and the executant of a dance. Most early modern dance choreographers were women, and initially at least, so, too, were most of their dancers. The female body was thus the model and the matrix of an enterprise that was in some measure reciprocal. In Nijinsky’s case, however, both the generative body and the model body were male, and whether from ignorance or inexperience or a combination of the two, he insisted on imposing them on his dancers autocratically. Obviously, in Sacre he imposed them on men as well as women. But in both Faune and Jeux, his most experimental works, he was not only the “star” but also the only male presence onstage. If the female body had dominated the ideology of nineteenth-century ballet to the extent of eclipsing and, in some cases, even banishing men from the stage, in Nijinsky’s ballets the male body not only claimed the stage but haunted the female bodies that shared it.

For all that Nijinsky’s choreography elided traditional differences between male and female dance idioms, his ballets retained a thematic link with other Diaghilev works. Both Faune and Jeux reiterated the theme of male sexual innocence and female sexual knowledge found in Petrouchka. In Faune the Chief Nymph (a role Nijinsky initially wanted Ida Rubinstein to play, in part because of her height) dropped her veils one by one, a striptease that recalled Rubinstein’s unveiling in Cléopâtre. In Jeux the two women engaged the young man in erotic games as provocative and potentially dangerous as those of Schéhérazade. To be sure, none of these temptresses was a classic Cleopatra. In Jeux they wore designer tennis dresses; in Faune, Grecian tunics of a sort favored by at least some of the ladies in Diaghilev’s audience. Like the costumes, the settings—a garden in Jeux, a woodland clearing in Faune—were also shorn of exotica, as was the music, supplied in both cases by Claude Debussy rather than by the Russian neonationalist composers of Cléopâtre and Schéhérazade. In muting the overall tonality of his ballets, Nijinsky domesticated their erotics; instead of killer Cleopatras, his women were everyday seductresses of the international elite. Diaghilev’s exotic ballets typically ended in an orgy of sex. In Nijinsky’s works, by contrast, the hero avoided sexual entanglement, eschewing physical contact with women, as though the female body itself filled him with loathing.

Although Nijinsky left the Ballets Russes in 1913, Diaghilev sought again and again to emulate the pattern of his career. In Léonide Massine, a talented Bolshoi dancer, he found a youth worthy of his passion for mentorship, an instrument capable of realiz-
ing his ambitions. Diaghilev discovered Massine in the turbulent months following Nijinsky’s marriage and immediately cast him in Legend of Joseph in the role originally intended for Nijinsky. Although Massine had completed his studies at the Bolshoi theater school, he was far from being the technical wunderkind Nijinsky had been. He lacked finish, which teachers hired by Diaghilev eventually supplied, as well as the ideal physical proportions and distinguished presence of a danseur noble. Given the nature of the Ballets Russes repertory, this hardly mattered. With his eye for talent, Diaghilev discerned in Massine not only the charisma of a future star but also the raw material of a future choreographer. In the months that followed the outbreak of World War I, Diaghilev took his protégé to museums, introduced him to the futurists, arranged lessons with the great Italian pedagogue Enrico Cecchetti, and watched over his maiden choreographic essays with the modernist painter Mikhail Larionov. Massine was willing, able, and malleable. It was only a matter of time before he fulfilled the high hopes Diaghilev had placed in him.

From 1914, when he joined the Ballets Russes, until 1921, when he left, Massine was the company’s preeminent star, the pivot on which the repertory turned. He was the Chinese conjuror of Parade (1917), the Miller in Le Tricorne (1919), and a leading player in The Good-Humoured Ladies (1917), La Boutique Fantasque (1919), and Pulcinella (1920), all ballets he choreographed. He took over Nijinsky’s roles in Petrouchka, Cléopâtre, Schéhérazade, and L’Après-midi d’un Faune, thus stressing the continuity of pattern between his career and that of his predecessor. And in 1920 he choreographed a new version of Nijinsky’s greatest work, Le Sacre du Printemps.

For all his star quality, Massine was not a classical dancer in the strict sense of
the term. A superb actor (for a time he had contemplated a career on the dramatic stage), he had a strong affinity for character styles of movement, especially the Spanish dance idioms that he exploited so successfully in Le Triorne. He loved the “eccentric” dance forms associated with jazz and incorporated them into his ballets, along with elements from the circus, commedia dell’arte, cinema, and other vernaculars of twentieth-century folklore. Such idioms sat well on his body and formed the basis of his personal style as a performer and his early style as a choreographer. Both left a deep imprint on the company’s dancers.
With Massine the Ballets Russes ceased to be a classical company; it became instead a demi-caractère one. The transformation itself had started before the war; indeed, it dated to the company’s earliest years. But it was Massine who completed the process. Although Diaghilev never abandoned classical technique as the physical basis of the company’s training, with Massine, the danse d’école became irrelevant to the company’s experiments in choreography. What was studied in class had little organic relation with what was danced onstage, even if elements of the technique coded the work as ballet. The divorce between studio and stage was all but complete.

Although rarely called upon to make full use of her powers as a classicist, Tamara Karsavina had remained Diaghilev’s official ballerina up to the war. With the reorganization of the company that coincided with Massine’s early essays in choreography during World War I, the title (now that Karsavina had returned to Russia) fell into abeyance. Like Nijinsky, Massine dominated the Ballets Russes as a performer; his choreography, by contrast, offered a number of women in the company (most notably Lydia Lopokova and Lydia Sokolova) roles that were meaty and challenging. But these roles and the technical idioms associated with them were rooted in the idiosyncracies of Massine’s own style. Their sterling qualities as performers notwithstanding, Massine’s women were formed on the demi-caractère model of his own body. Their classical potential remained largely untapped.

It was Bronislava Nijinska who put the women of the Ballets Russes back on pointe. Indeed, Les Noces, which she choreographed in 1923, was the first ballet created for the Diaghilev company in which the entire female ensemble donned ballerina footwear. Yet Nijinska stressed the percussive rather than the aerial qualities of pointe, an approach that broke with nineteenth-century conventions. Moreover, in choosing to employ the technique in a work inspired by Russian folklore and staged to modern music (the score was by Igor Stravinsky), she also broke with Fokine’s historicism. If technically the pointe-work of Les Noces was uncomplicated, its very use was a milestone, asserting not only its centrality to the female dance but also its adaptability as a means of expression. The following year, in Les Biches, a ballet with a contemporary setting, Nijinska again put all the women on pointe; now they were flappers with the prancing strut of mannequins. This time she also reintroduced the ballerina (albeit in the sexually ambiguous and somewhat ironic role of the Garçonne) and the classical pas de deux (which was not only distilled in form but also, to a degree, treated ironically). With these two works began the “re-classicizing” of avant-garde ballet.
For all this, a tension remained between this reclassifying impulse and the need to showcase one or another of the company's "ballerinos." Thus, in *Le Train Bleu* (1924), choreographed by Nijinska six months after *Les Biches* and intended as a vehicle for Anton Dolin, the gymnastics (at which he excelled) were treated as bravura turns while the classical elements of the duets, along with their romantic entanglements, became occasions for parody. This tension was discernible in Balanchine's works for the company as well. The choreographer whose ballerinas would later be celebrated for the bravura and refinement of their pointe work was remarkably sparing in his use of the technique in the Diaghilev period. Indeed, unlike *Les Noces* and *Les Biches*, almost all Balanchine's ballets employed pointe selectively. But they employed it significantly: more than any other technical element, pointe identified the domain of the hero's female counterpart. This role, although it had a ballerina component, was ancillary rather than primary to the larger character of a work, whose theme remained embodied in the hero. Indeed, whether as the Movie Star in *La Pastorale* (1926), the Cat in *La Chatte* (1927), Terpsichore in *Apollon Musagète* (1928), or the Siren in *Prodigal Son* (1929), the female, however striking her choreography, was essentially a foil to the hero, presenting and complementing him, and showing off his attributes.

In the case of Serge Lifar, who was the star of all these ballets, these attributes included a pronounced athleticism and the striking good looks of a "beautiful boy." The athleticism was partly a compensation for his late start and patchy early training as a dancer. The good looks, on the other hand, were at least partly thanks to Diaghilev, who had arranged for his teeth to be fixed and his nose straightened. Ballet after ballet celebrated the young god and his slim, muscled body, selectively bared and occasionally even stripped à la Cléopâtre (as in the Prologue of *Apollon Musagète* or the penultimate tableau of *Prodigal Son*) to heighten the sensation of its beauty. In *La Chatte* he was borne onstage in a triumphal car formed by six youths—the apotheosis of a deco god. The danseuse, when she appeared at all, was no more than an accoutrement.

Indeed, even apart from *Les Biches*, *Le Train Bleu*, and *La Pastorale*, all of which had contemporary settings, many ballets of the 1920s, including those with mythological or period themes, alluded to contemporary fashion. In Massine's *Zéphire et Flore* (1925), for instance, the Muses wore adaptations of flapper styles, including "chic little pork-pie hats and earrings, quite in keeping with the only Olympus they had ever known—one nearer Deauville than Thessaly." In Nijinska's *Romeo and Juliet* (1926), the dancers in the rehearsal scenes wore practice clothes, and in the "redressed" version of *Apollon Musagète*, the Muses
wore tunics by Gabrielle Chanel, the couturière responsible for Le Train Bleu, draped with scarves from Charveau.

In all these ballets, the accent was on youth and the celebration of the body beautiful. For men this entailed revealing the body; for women clothing it in the styles of fashionable consumption. If in his latest incarnation Diaghilev’s hero was a boy with the physical endowments of a god, his new woman, by contrast, was a girl who looked like a mannequin. Slim, boyish, and decorative, she was a symbol of modern life as this was defined by deco luxury. Like the Bright Young Things (as flappers were known in England) who thronged Diaghilev’s audience, she paraded her worth by what she wore on her back: she embodied a consumerist ideal rather than a physical one.
Chanel once said that Diaghilev did not know how to dress women. More to the point, he did not care to undress them; he kept their bodies hidden, except for the occasional revelation of skin that came with a tutu. What had been daring in the nineteenth century (and even the stuff of pornography), however, was now positively Victorian. At a time when short skirts routinely displayed the leg and tight-fitting bathingsuits showed off the torso, when Paris chorus girls and specialty dancers performed their acts in G-strings, Diaghilev’s women, for the most part, were as sexy as matrons. If their gilt-edged style enhanced the value of the hero, it never detracted from his desirability.

In spite of his overwhelming commitment to new work, Diaghilev did not wholly eschew the traditional repertory. In 1910 he presented Giselle; in 1911 the first of several versions of Swan Lake; and in 1921 The Sleeping Beauty (or as he renamed it, The Sleeping Princess). To mount these productions, however, he faced a problem: he needed the ballerinas his company had jettisoned. His solution (except in the case of Giselle, which Karsavina danced) was to import them. Like Pavlova, one of his 1911 Swan Queens, most of these imports made brief appearances in the “regular” repertory: Mathilde Kchessinska, the Maryinsky’s prima ballerina assoluta and another of the 1911 Swan Queens, in Carnaval; Vera Trefilova, one of his Auroras, in Le Spectre de la Rose and Aurora’s Wedding. None of them stayed with the company. Even Olga Spessivtzeva, the most celebrated of his Auroras and a dancer he assiduously courted, found greener pastures elsewhere, both at the former Maryinsky Theater (to which she returned in 1922) and at the Paris Opéra, where in 1924 she danced the title role in its first revival of Giselle since the 1860s. Compared to such plum roles, Diaghilev’s offerings were scraps: the female lead in La Chatte, the Swan Queen in one or another of his truncated versions of Swan Lake, whose periodic dismemberments he seemed to relish. Nor did it take much discernment on Spessivtzeva’s part to realize that partnering Lifar, with whom she was typically paired, was a mixed blessing. For all his wooing of Spessivtzeva, Diaghilev treated her as cynically and highhandedly as he had her predecessors.

Although Diaghilev pounced on choreographic talent no matter what its sexual packaging, only his favorites reaped the full rewards of his mentorship. Indeed, without him, it is unlikely that Nijinsky or Massine, to say nothing of Lifar (whose first ballet, a remake of Le Renard, was produced by Diaghilev in 1929), would ever have become choreographers at all. His generosity was boundless: he gave them all the accumulated wisdom of his years and all the fruits of his broad experience, in addition to a knowledge of the arts, an appreciation of aesthetics, and an introduction to everyone who was anyone in

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the circles of High Bohemia. Money was no object: he paid for months of experiments in the studio and hundreds of rehearsal hours with dancers, for music by the greatest composers and sets by the finest artists. No Pygmalion ever served his Galatea as devotedly as Diaghilev served his lover-choreographers.

Obviously, women and heterosexual men were at a disadvantage. They might work for him, but they would never be his intimates; and although he might guide them, he would never fashion the company in their image or make them the instruments of his imagination. The progression from lover to star dancer to choreographer was a pattern that repeated itself again and again, and not only in the Ballets Russes. Both Rolf de Maré’s Ballets Suédois and Comte Etienne de Beaumont’s Soirées de Paris were conceived as vehicles for favorites (Jean Borlin and Massine, respectively), who not only starred in virtually every work of these companies but also supplied all the ballets for their repertories. Like the Ballets Russes, these companies were modernist in orientation and private rather than public in ownership. Compared to institutions like the Paris Opéra, tradition sat lightly on them; as one-man shows, they were also unhampered by bureaucracy. In this, they more closely resembled modern dance companies than the traditional ballet troupes of the opera house.

In the traditional companies, custom mitigated against women as choreographers or, more correctly, as ballet masters, for it was only in the twentieth century and in companies formed on the Diaghilev model that the ballet master’s choreographic function was detached from his functions as a producer, teacher, and administrator. Where women did make inroads as choreographers was in venues that lacked the prestige of a major opera house. In music halls and other stages that catered to a popular audience or lyric theaters of secondary category (at least from a dance point of view), one finds all but forgotten choreographers like Katti Lanner and Madame Mariquita. Theoretically, the avant-garde companies should have welcomed women; as enterprises enunciating a male homosexual ideology, they did not. Yet within these companies were any number of women who harbored choreographic ambitions. The most notable (apart from Nijinska, who found favor with Diaghilev partly because of her brother’s claim on his affections) were Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert, both of whom eventually formed their own companies; Carina Ari, a principal with the Ballets Suédois who created a number of works for the Opéra-Comique; and dancers like Karsavina and Lopokova, who choreographed at least some of the numbers they performed on the music hall stage. Indeed, in the post-Diaghilev years a genuine flowering of women ballet choreographers occurred.
a phenomenon encouraged by the marginal status of the companies with which they were typically associated as well as by the fact that these groups, although partly inspired by the Ballets Russes, broke with its cult of the ballerino.

If that cult had proved a serious barrier to the promotion of women as choreographers, its public expression, as evinced in the aesthetic practices of the company and its broader iconography, linked the larger enterprise of ballet modernism with homosexuality. Although Diaghilev made no secret of his proclivities, they were not general knowledge beyond the elite circles in which he traveled. But the image of the ballerino, as depicted in company programs and in numerous books, photographs, and drawings of the period, made the connection with homosexuality explicit, even if the word itself was never uttered. In Nijinsky’s case, the body was progressively feminized. Released from the decorum of conventional masculinity, it openly displayed its erotic attributes—a pliant, supple middle, soft, embracing arms, eyes lengthened and darkened with liner. In the drawings of Robert Montenegro, Paul Iribe, and George Barbier especially, the pose is often languid, its curves dramatized by serpentine scarves and by gestures that circle inward on the body, as if announcing its availability: here was a houri waiting to be taken. The eroticism was heightened by designer Léon Bakst’s exotic packaging and by costume elements that often crossed gender lines—harem trousers in Scheherazade, a peplum skirt in Le Dieu Bleu (1912), tunics in Narcisse (1911) and Daphnis and Chloé (1912), body stockings in Carnaval, L’Après-midi d’un Faune, and Le Spectre de la Rose. Such packaging revealed the con-

George Barbier’s rendering of Vaslav Nijinsky in L’Après-midi d’un Faune, 1913
tours of the male body to an unprecedented degree, as well as expanses of flesh in the midriff and lower reaches of the neckline. At the same time, by identifying such revelations with the exotic, antique, or imaginary, Diaghilev neutralized the “danger” of their effeminacy. In contrast to Fokine, whose choreography for the company’s women celebrated a “natural” body unfettered by corsets and free of ballerina artifice, Diaghilev made the very stratagems of femininity integral to the identity of his new hero.

For all his erotic charisma, Nijinsky was never conventionally attractive. Massine, on the other hand, was beautiful: dark, slender, with enormous Mediterranean eyes and the grave expression of an innocent. His beauty haunted Diaghilev, as it haunts the portraits of Massine that he commissioned from Bakst, Matisse, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and other artists associated with the company as designers. Most of these portraits—like the works that a later group of artists made of Anton Dolin and Serge Lifar—found their way into company programs, making public the sitter’s unique position within the Diaghilev enterprise.

Women, of course, did not vanish from company programs. But the space allotted to them was minimal, and almost always they were depicted in roles from the repertory. For the most part, too, the images reproduced were photographs, as opposed to the line drawings and paintings that associated the representation of the favorite with the prestige of the unique artwork and, more generally, with the modernism of Diaghilev’s newest designers. Only in the numerous drawings made by Picasso in the late 1910s and early 1920s when he designed several company productions did women receive a share of the glamour. But what women! What avar-dupois! If the men in his drawings have the ideal proportions and nonchalant eroti-

Pablo Picasso, Dancers, 1919–1920
Felie Douhowska in
Ode, 1928
icism of the youths of classical sculpture, his women—the charm of their ballerina manners notwithstanding—are as fresh and fleshy as milkmaids.

Ironically, as Picasso added pounds to Diaghilev’s women, they themselves were getting thinner. “She is too fat for us,” Diaghilev remarked about Lydia Lopokova in 1924. And, indeed, compared to Alice Nikitina, the reed-thin newcomer whom he was then promoting as his latest female find, Lopokova did seem positively robust. By the mid-1920s the lean silhouette was high fashion, and it was only natural that Diaghilev’s women, like generations of women dancers before them, would personify in some measure the elite beauty ideal of their age. In its newest incarnation, this ideal had a definite masculine component: it demanded a body as hipless and flat-chested as a boy’s. Ida Rubinstein may have been slim, but her body had revealed the usual female equipment (at least until Gabriele d’Annunzio, anxious that she acquire a “man’s figure” for her role as the travesty hero in his play The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, put her on the diet that made her, according to some accounts, the thinnest woman on the French stage).

If before the war Diaghilev had feminized the male body, now he set about making the female body masculine. Thus in 1922, when he revived L’Après-midi d’un Faune, he cast Nijinska in the role originally created by her brother. The experiment was not a success. However much she strapped in her breasts, she needed more than a body stocking to camouflage her sex, even if she resembled Nijinsky in physical type and musculature. Only in Massine’s Ode (1928), and specifically in the role created by Felia Doubrovska, was the unencumbered female body allowed to be itself. Clad in tights and a leotard (the only time, apart from Nijinska’s appearance in Faune, that Diaghilev permitted a woman of the company to wear such revealing garb), Doubrovska displayed the harmonious line and long, lean silhouette of the prototypical Balanchine ballerina—along with small but unmistakable breasts.

Unlike Nijinsky, in whom the feminine was at least partly associated with sexual passivity, Diaghilev’s heroes of the 1920s wore their sexual plumage like peacocks. Beginning in 1923, when Anton Dolin briefly joined the company, and continuing throughout the years of Lifar’s preeminence, the body was not only bared but its erogenous zones were explicitly sexualized. In a remarkable series of photographs dating to the mid-1920s Man Ray recorded the various elements of Lifar’s erotic uniform—trunks (to show off the legs), belts (to dramatize the waist), laces, garters, and boots (to draw attention to the calves and knees), tunics or tunic-style tops (to reveal a midriff, a shoulder, and sometimes even a nipple). Nearly always the legs were bare. Although the display might be re-
garded as "feminine," the body itself—hard, muscular, athletic—was that of a sexually active, "virile" male. Indeed, in the later years of the Ballets Russes, Diaghilev discarded the trappings of fin-de-siècle androgyny that had made the effeminacy of Nijinsky acceptable. With Lifar, he revealed the homosexual as an openly gay man. No wonder the theaters where the company now performed had become a privileged gathering place for what Vogue's Herbert Farjeon described, with obvious disapproval, as "velvet-voiced youth."

By almost any yardstick, women in the Ballets Russes counted for less than men. In a sense they were triply disadvantaged, for with the exception of Nijinska, their role behind the scenes did not make up for the loss of their traditional preeminence as performers or for their irrelevance to the ideology and practice of modernist ballet generally. That this occurred at a time when women were establishing a dominant presence in other forms of concert dance only emphasizes the antifemale bias implicit in Diaghilev's homosexual radicalism. The 1930s partly redressed this imbalance: the growing trend of neoclassicism demanded women of high technical accomplishment to fill both traditional and newly minted ballerina roles, while a number of fledgling companies were either headed by women or associated with them as choreographers.

Nevertheless, the ballerino remained a force to be reckoned with. At the Paris Opéra, where Serge Lifar directed the ballet troupe for nearly thirty years, numerous works continued to foreground the hero (a role that Lifar typically reserved for himself), even to the point of eliminating women entirely (as in his 1935 revision of Faune). And in companies like the Joffrey Ballet, which in the 1970s and 1980s did so much to keep the Diaghilev repertory alive, or Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the 20th Cen-
tury, which in the 1960s and 1970s reinterpreted works from that repertory from an openly gay perspective, the development of ballerinas has been ancillary to the celebration of male talent.

If ballet in its female-centered variety is about more than women, so, in its male-centered variety, it is about more than men. Liberation, in Diaghilev's book, was for men only, even when this entailed, as it often did, appropriating attributes associated with femininity. In the long run, the cult of "masculinity" offered no more than a temporary antidote to the "problem" of nineteenth-century ballet, which burdened women no less than men with the legacy of the feminine mystique and a system grounded in patriarchy. Nor did Balanchine's cult of "femininity," with its selective privileging of women as muses and of men as Pygmalions. Today, as in Diaghilev's time, full and equal citizenship in the ballet polity remains an elusive dream.