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Digital Expressionism and Christopher Wheeldon's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: What Contemporary Choreographers Can Learn from Early Twentieth-Century Modernism

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**DIGITAL EXPRESSIONISM AND CHRISTOPHER
WHEELDON'S ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND:
WHAT CONTEMPORARY CHOREOGRAPHERS CAN LEARN
FROM EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY MODERNISM**

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Abstract

How can classical ballet adapt to a world that is in an ever more rapid state of flux? By uncovering an example of the kind of interdisciplinary artistic collaboration that contributed to the thriving artistic environment of the early twentieth century, a model for artistic success emerges. By examining modernism and Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in relation to Christopher Wheeldon's groundbreaking 2011 ballet *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a correlation between the success of the Ballets Russes and the success of Wheeldon is exposed. I argue that by applying the modernist practice of interdisciplinary interaction to his own productions, Wheeldon has equipped ballet to survive in a dramatically changing artistic world, reach a wider audience, and, as Ezra Pound put it nearly eighty years ago, "make it new."

The time is 8:30pm on May 29th, 1913. Dressed in elegant evening gowns and flaunting their finest top hats, the most fashionable Parisians, international travelers, critics, writers, artists, and musicians have taken their seats in the new Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, France. In fifteen minutes, the curtain will open on one of the most anticipated performances Paris has seen since the arrival of the Russian Ballet in 1909—the premiere of the Ballets Russes's *Le sacre du printemps*. Throughout the months, days, and moments preceding the premiere, Paris has been rife with anticipatory excitement and buzzing with rumors of an unprecedented artistic collaboration: Sergei Diaghilev, impresario of the Ballets Russes and co-founder of the Russian art magazine *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art), is planning a daring collaboration with Igor Stravinsky, Vaslav Nijinsky, and Nicholas Roerich. Stravinsky is composing an original score that calls for a huge, ninety-nine-player orchestra. Nijinsky has the near impossible task of choreographing dances that will complement Stravinsky's polyrhythmic, dissonant composi-

tion. Roerich is painting massive sets and designing intricate costumes for an entire troupe of dancers. News spreads that Nijinsky has held over one hundred rehearsals with the dancers, the orchestra has rehearsed seventeen times, and the entire ensemble will rehearse five times before the premiere. In short, the curtain opened that night on one of the most ambitious, not to mention costly, productions the Ballets Russes ever attempted.¹

The ballet was as controversial as it was expensive. It told the story of a pagan ritual in prehistoric Russia wherein a virgin is selected by her tribe for sacrifice and forced to dance herself to death. Even more controversial than the subject matter was Nijinsky's choreography, which combined violent stomping with awkward, turned-in positions and bore no resemblance to any step in classical ballet. Gossip about the financial risks, Stravinsky's groundbreaking score, the barbaric subject matter, and the unconventional choreography of the production managed to secure the Ballets Russes a sold out performance on the night of May 29th at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (Kelly 282). The beau monde of Paris came in droves, equipped with whistles and other noisemakers, primed for scandal. Yet for all the suspense that *Le sacre* created, no one could have predicted the chaos that would ensue when the curtain went up. The theatre was split between those who cheered, applauded, and cried "bravo!" and those who hissed, laughed, blew whistles, and cat-called the performers. Despite an audience approaching a riot, Diaghilev ordered his dancers and the orchestra to keep calm. His dancers recall him saying, "Whatever happens, the ballet must be performed to the end" (Grigoriev 83).

Unfortunately, *Le sacre* was a financial flop. The Ballets Russes only held five subsequent performances over the remainder of their Champs-Élysées season (Kelly 293). "The whole thing has been done by four idiots," proclaimed Italian ballet master Enrico Cecchetti, "first, M. Stravinsky who wrote the music. Second, M. Roerich who designed the scenery and costumes. Third, M. Nijinsky who composed the dances. Fourth, M. Diaghilev who wasted money on it" (Kelly 257). Despite clear financial failure and an ongoing rift in critical reception, *Le sacre* nevertheless traveled to London for four more performances in 1913 and the scandal did not prevent the company from traveling to the United States in 1916. For all the uproar, *Le sacre* remains the Ballets Russes's most famous production over one hundred years later. It is reconstructed for major ballet companies, discussed in university

¹ These details from the premiere of *Le sacre du printemps* are outlined and thoroughly expanded upon in Thomas Forrest Kelly's *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres*.

classrooms, and scrutinized by scholars and devotees alike. In 2013, *Le sacre* was performed by major orchestras and ballet companies worldwide in centennial celebration of the ballet's premiere. The truth is that these so-called "four idiots" came together for a monumental collaboration that remains one of the most significant contributions to music, art, and dance to date.

Why is this story relevant today? To begin answering this question it is useful to consider the final chapter in Jennifer Homans's *Apollo's Angels*, "The Masters are Dead and Gone." Homans concludes her influential 2010 history of ballet with the discouraging assertion that "ballet is dying." She argues that the art form has entered an irreversible decline since the death or retirement of a great number of artists who, in her opinion, were the geniuses responsible for the success and widespread popularity of ballet throughout the twentieth century (549). George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Anthony Tudor, Frederick Ashton, and Agrippina Vaganova are among the select few that Homans mourns, insisting, "their students and heirs have been curiously unable to rise to the challenge of their legacy." (540-541) She also blames the weak connection between the general public and the "ballet world" for the imminent death of the art form. "Dance today has shrunk into a recondite world of hyperspecialists and balletomanes, insiders who talk to each other... and ignore the public," she asserts. "The result is a regrettable disconnect: most people today do not feel they 'know enough' to judge a dance" (548). Despite identifying these two key issues—a lack of innovators and disconnect between the public and the ballet world—Homans offers no solution for the death sentence she has given ballet, and *Apollo's Angels* ends on a frustratingly somber note.

In an article for *The Hopkins Review* titled "New Ballets for a Silver Age," Jay Rogoff disputes Jennifer Homans' negative conclusions, asserting, "Homans, however, forgets that ballet endures such crises cyclically." He references the rise of Russian choreographer Marius Petipa after the decline of ballet in the French courts of Louis XIV and the dramatic transition from Tchaikovsky to Stravinsky that "propelled Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes to world renown" as evidence of ballet's historically cyclical nature. Rogoff further disagrees with Homans, pointing out that "we can't, in fact, predict the coming of the next ballet genius, or how such a figure might make dance simultaneously traditional and new... a new messiah might or might not now promenade among us" (582).

However, Rogoff *does* go on to predict the "next genius," joining a chorus of contemporary dance critics that praise the artistic vision of former New York City Ballet dancer turned choreographer, Christopher Wheeldon.

Wheeldon lends credence to Rogoff's "cyclical nature of dance" theory as an heir to Balanchine's legacy at City Ballet and by frequently referring to his admiration of Sergei Diaghilev's knack for spearheading artistic collaborations. The mission statement for Wheeldon's former company, "Morphoses," alludes to the Ballets Russes's impact on the director. The company's artistic vision is to "revitalize the art form of dance by fostering cutting-edge artistry and collaboration among various media to present theatrical experiences that challenges assumptions and moves ballet forward into the 21st century." Wheeldon also seeks to "build an audience for dance by presenting a multi-media experience that bridges the gap between artists and our audience." (morphoses.org) These excerpts from Wheeldon's mission statement could hardly contradict more directly Homans's contention that ballet is going nowhere in the twenty-first century and that the gap between "balletomanes" and the general public only continues to widen.

In "New Ballets for a Silver Age" and "Christopher Wheeldon, Between Ballet's Past and Future," Rogoff struggles to decide whether to let praise or criticism reign in his reviews of Wheeldon's ballets. In the latter article, he alludes to his support of Wheeldon's collaborative mission and advises him to continue deriving "structural guidance" from the Ballets Russes (283). However, Rogoff is not convinced that Wheeldon has followed through with his "gospel of artistic collaboration" since he has failed to commission a librettist, completing the Diaghilev-style quartet (Cecchetti's "fourth idiot"). Rogoff fails to acknowledge Wheeldon's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in his criticism, the first full-length ballet commissioned by the Royal Ballet of London in nearly twenty years, premiering February 2011 (a year and a half before the publication of Rogoff's most recent article on Wheeldon). Wheeldon collaborated with famous playwright Nicholas Wright to adapt Lewis Carroll's timeless children's story. Joby Talbot composed an original score for the ballet and Bob Crowley created original sets and costumes. Wheeldon's collaboration included a choreographer (himself), a librettist (Wright), a composer (Talbot), and a designer (Crowley). In emulating Diaghilev and bringing a variety of media artists together, Christopher Wheeldon clearly brought his mission of artistic collaboration to fruition. The result was a critically acclaimed, full-length production that redefined the use of multimedia in ballet. By granting digital art a principal role in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Wheeldon brought classical ballet into the twenty-first century. While I agree with Rogoff that Diaghilev's influence on Wheeldon was vital to Wheeldon's success as a young choreographer, I believe Rogoff's decision to disregard *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* ties him to Homans and other dance critics who lament the death of ballet rather than recognize the advancements oc-

curing before their eyes. I also disagree with Rogoff's theory that "ballet endures crises cyclically." Instead, I believe the art form is constantly evolving to the needs and appetites of contemporary audiences.

With the viewpoints of Homans and Rogoff in mind, it is appropriate to return to the question, "Why is the story of the premiere of *Le sacre du printemps* relevant today?" I believe it represents a model with the potential to remedy the supposedly "irreversible decline" of ballet identified by Jennifer Homans and other dance critics. The buzz *Le sacre* created in Paris, Europe, and the United States in the early twentieth century helped to bridge the gap between, as Jennifer Homans puts it, "hyperspecialists" or "balletomanes" and the general public. *Le sacre* and other Ballets Russes productions attracted diverse audiences who could be considered external to the "dance world." For example, artists attended *Parade* to admire Picasso's sets and costumes, musicians attended *Petrushka* to hear Stravinsky's music, and the general public might have attended a production simply because it was fashionable, highly entertaining, the subject of intense gossip, and unlike any other production being staged. In 2014, how are we to engage the general public and artists from other disciplines in dance as the Ballets Russes did in Paris from 1909 to 1929? The answer is, as Wheeldon shows us, by adopting the interdisciplinary interaction of early twentieth-century modernist artists and thinkers as a model for public engagement and artistic success. While contemporary critics acknowledge Wheeldon's triumphs in innovation, they fail to acknowledge the importance of modernism and the Ballets Russes to his art, an oversight that prevents other choreographers and artists from learning from Diaghilev's methodology.

In order to discover what contemporary choreographers, dancers, artists, and musicians can learn from the Ballets Russes and the defining artistic movement to which they belonged—modernism—we must first journey back to Paris in the early twentieth century and unravel modernism's relation to different artistic media. We must ask complicated questions: What is modernism? What defined artistic success for modernists? What did it take then and what does it take today to make something truly new? In asking such questions, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of the conditions necessary to create a thriving artistic environment on a global scale. Furthermore, these questions may illuminate how artistic collaboration can be productively facilitated and how it can enhance the quality of productions, extend public engagement, and ensure the lasting impact of a ballet, propelling the art form forward into the twenty-first century.

Unlike many artistic and cultural movements of the twentieth century, there is no single definition of modernism, whether in terms of its scope, timeframe, or impact. To make sense of the term, it is helpful to define the modernist movement by analyzing parallels between the modernist arts, including literature, music, visual art, and dance. I will focus on two artistic spheres of activity in the early twentieth century—the self-identified “modernist” and international literature and art magazine, *Rhythm* and Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. *Rhythm*, a British magazine that frequently reviewed and published illustrations of Ballets Russes productions, attained a wide audience in the age of print media, when the little magazine and advertisements were skyrocketing in popularity. The characteristics shared by the works featured in *Rhythm* and the Ballets Russes were threefold: 1) the equal expression of artistic elements within a work, whether it be a balanced use of line, color, shape, or movement in one of *Rhythm*’s visual artworks, or an exhibited unity between music, costumes, scenery, and movements in a ballet, 2) the fascination with primitive and exotic themes, and 3) a shift away from aestheticism and towards expressionism. These parallels expose the idealistic principles that shaped the international modernist movement and permit a deeper understanding of the movement, revealing an interdisciplinary ideological connection between artistic fields that united the modernist movement.

With this definition of modernism that embraces the Ballets Russes and *Rhythm* magazine, I would argue that the interdisciplinary interaction defining modernism has increasing relevance in a world where many critics, like Jennifer Homans, argue that ballet is dead or dying. If contemporary choreographers apply the modernist practice of interdisciplinary interaction to their own productions, as Wheeldon did in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, they will be equipped to survive in a dramatically changing artistic world, reach a wider audience, and, as Ezra Pound put it nearly eighty years ago, “make it new.” (Scholes 26)

Oxford students John Middleton Murry and Michael Sadler founded London-based *Rhythm* magazine in 1911 (Snyder). The inaugural issue of the magazine began with a manifesto titled “Aims and Ideals,” applauding an “ideal new art” taking from “Fauvism,” an avant-garde movement emerging in early twentieth century France that translates to “the wild beasts.” It is so named for the characteristic unnatural color choices and wild brushstrokes of Henri Matisse and André Derain, who spearheaded the movement. In prais-

ing Fauvism, Murry and Sadler claimed that Fauvist artwork was essentially “rhythmic” in quality. In this respect, the title of the magazine reflects what Murry and Sadler deemed the most important element of an artistic work.

Sadler and Murry described Fauvism as “a reaction on the one hand against the lifeless mechanism of Pointillism, on the other hand against the moribund flickerings of the aesthetic movement.” (1:1, 14) Pointillism, popularly-known as Georges Seurat’s method of Neo-Impressionism, employs a technique in which tiny brushstrokes and dots of contrasting light and color are applied to form huge, detailed compositions. The aesthetic movement, which enjoyed widespread popularity in nineteenth century England, was grounded in the belief that art should only communicate “beauty.” By distinguishing Fauvism from these two methods, Sadler and Murry distanced the movement from artistic creation that utilized a mechanical process (Pointillism) or only embarked on the quest for beauty (Aestheticism).

This was an early declaration of the magazine’s revolutionary disapproval of *any* artistic style that was lifeless, mechanical, aesthetically-driven, or realistic. In many ways, this disapproval was a reaction to a rapidly-industrializing Europe that many artists found alienating and impersonal. With the rise of factory labor, mass transportation, and cold, self-serving capitalism, it was difficult to feel connected to others amongst the masses. As a result, artistic focus shifted towards the primitive, savage, or prehistoric in an effort to flee from refinement, civilization, and anything that was connotative of the industrial or mechanical. The principles of this new artistic style presented by *Rhythm* to an educated elite laid the foundation for the magazine’s success.

During a Christmas vacation to Paris in 1910, John Middleton Murry became fascinated with the art scene he encountered there and the people he met who shared in his artistic philosophy. He became obsessed not only with French artists, but French philosophers, musicians, choreographers, and enthusiasts as well. The substantial number of French contributions to the magazine is can be largely attributed to this first French excursion. There are so many French contributions that one might easily mistake *Rhythm* to have Parisian origins, emphasizing the transnational nature of the magazine’s credo. The magazine was proudly displayed in select Parisian shops (Demoor 130). In this vein, one of the most important influences over the magazine’s credo came from the ideology of French philosopher Henri Bergson. Murry interpreted Bergson’s philosophy of creativity in the very first issue of the magazine:

The philosophy of Bergson has of late come to a tardy recognition in England. In France it is a living artistic force. It is the open avowal of the supremacy of the intuition, of the spiritual vision of the artist in form, in words and meaning. (Murry, 1:1, 9)

Later in the first issue, in one of the earliest uses of the term, Murry goes on to define modernism in a manner that alludes to the underlying influence of Bergson's creative philosophy:

Modernism is not the capricious outburst of intellectual dipsomania. It penetrates beneath the outward surface of the world, and disengages the rhythms that lie at the heart of things, rhythms strange to the eye, unaccustomed to the ear, primitive harmonies of the world that is and lives. (Murry, 1:1, 12)

Bergson's philosophy emphasizes the power an artist's intuition has to reflect spiritual or elemental truths about him/herself. This corresponds with Murry's definition of modernism as something that pursues an elemental understanding of the human experience. He believes the best way to capture the experience of humanity is through the abstracted concept of "rhythm." Hence, the title of the magazine reflects not only the artistic quality that the magazine believed was the most important in a work of art, but representing the magazine's philosophy of art as a means of communicating the human experience.

As Murry and Sadler's endeavored to share a budding French artistic style—Fauvism—with their native Britain, they were reflecting a belief that their ideas were best expressed and developed through international artistic interaction. A similar international spirit occurred simultaneously with a band of Russian artists. Sergei Diaghilev, Alexander Benois, and Léon Bakst, a ballet and theater impresario, a designer, and a painter, respectively, shared an enthusiasm for art criticism and promotion of the arts in Russia. In 1899, Diaghilev, Benois, and Bakst founded the Russian art magazine *Mir iskusstva*, which translates to "world of art." Diaghilev was named Chief Editor and effectively set up the Russian equivalent of *Rhythm*, which would find its way onto international shelves only twelve years later.

Before falling out of favor with Imperial management, this trio of critics worked together on productions at the Imperial Theater, today known as the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg (Homans 297). The status of ballet in Russia, combined with the escalating possibility of revolution, played a

significant role in Diaghilev and his affiliates' decision to leave their homeland.

Prior to the revolution, classical ballet was performed only as an elite form of entertainment for the tsar and his Imperial court. It was an art form imported from the court of Louis XIV in Paris, where Diaghilev would, rather ironically, return the art form later years. The tradition of strict Imperial management of the theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow continued for some two hundred years, ensuring that every production satisfied the tastes of the tsar and wealthy theater attendees (Demidov 6). Without Imperial support to finance the ballets, productions were impossible. Artistic growth was often stunted as a result and artists began protesting their lack of voice.

Fearing the breakdown of the Russia he had grown up in and the loss of many Russian artistic and folk traditions, Diaghilev set out on a mission to preserve and protect "primitive" Russia, just as *Rhythm* set out to give voice to primitive humanity as a form of liberation from the industrial world. He felt that the only way to preserve the past was to embark on a journey to share with the world Russia's vast, hidden artistic heritage (Homans 299). Diaghilev, Benois, and Bakst departed for Paris in 1909 with just this ambition. After successfully showcasing Russian visual art in a Paris exhibition, Diaghilev was ready to move on to a bigger production. Unable to acquire the money to produce an opera, he decided he would try his hand at a ballet. The tsar granted Diaghilev permission to borrow rising stars from the Imperial ballet, seeing an opportunity for increased cultural exchange with France. Amongst the dancers who followed Diaghilev, Benois, and Bakst to Paris were Michel Fokine, Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, and Vaslav Nijinsky (Homans 300). The dancers, along with many Russian citizens, desperately desired more control over their art form and more freedom of expression. With an exceptionally talented company of Russian dancers, Diaghilev formed the Ballets Russes and by 1911, most of the dancers established themselves as permanent company members and did not return home to Russia (Homans 300).

With newfound freedom of artistic expression, the Ballets Russes joined an array of artists, including the Rhythmists, who found a haven of artistic liberation in Paris. They formed a thriving artistic community, full of artists who were eager to express themselves no matter how daring (and oftentimes controversial) their art turned out to be. Many artists, including the Rhythmists and the Ballets Russes, had displacement in common, both political and ideological. Interaction helped them to survive in a foreign land.

What follows is an exploration of how deeply the interaction between artistic fields penetrated the works produced during the modernist movement.

A unified expression of artistic elements defined the art published in *Rhythm* and the methodology for creating a work for the Ballets Russes. The art of *Rhythm*, primarily Fauvist, incorporated a balanced use of line, color, shape, movement, and rhythm. Similarly, the Ballets Russes ensured that the choreography and movement was unified with the music, the costumes were relevant to the work, and the scenery was not an inconsequential backdrop. In both artistic spheres, equal emphasis was placed on each artistic element, ensuring that no aspect overpowered another. The Rhythmists valued the inherent sense of unity that distinguished their art, just as the Ballets Russes criticized the Imperial Theatre's failure to achieve unity in a theatrical work. The Imperial Theatre was known for re-using costumes even if they were irrelevant to the story and ignoring the context offered by effective scenery in a production.

In July of 1912, Georges Banks wrote and illustrated the first review of a Ballets Russes production for *Rhythm*. She described their performance of *Petrushka* as an "exquisite imaginative fantasy," having "extraordinary unity of sound and visual representation," and "one of the most complete achievements in stagecraft seen in the modern theatre" (2:6, 58). Anne Estelle Rice, who supplied numerous illustrations of Ballets Russes productions to *Rhythm*, contributed a similar review in August of the same year in her piece titled "Les Ballets Russes."

The genial and dominant idea of the Russian Ballets is based upon line. They have given a practical and artistic realization of what can be done with a fusion of theatrical elements, most successfully where the scenic decorator, costumier, musician, 'maitre du ballet' and poet, by their harmonizing qualities, have created a scheme of one palette (2:7, 107).

While Banks and Rice did not possess the language necessary to analyze the ballets from a balletic or choreographic standpoint, they could analyze the productions as if they were moving paintings. The idea of achieving unity through a fusion of artistic elements, balancing sound with visual representation, and harmonizing an entire production, made the Rhythmists feel as though their ideals of rhythm, balance, and equality in painting were being represented through dance. This accounts for *Rhythm's* fascination with and admiration of the Ballets Russes; it was as if their philosophy of painting was applied to the stage before their eyes.

Additionally, the Ballets Russes was famous for collaborations. Diaghilev brought together the most prominent artists, designers, composers, and writers in an effort to give equal weight to each aspect of a production. By putting experts in charge of each individual area of the production, the quality of the dance was just as high as the set and costume design, music, and storyline of the ballet. Diaghilev wanted all elements of a production to make sense together, with no aspect of production overpowering another. One of the most famous collaborative efforts was *Parade*, which premiered in Paris on May 18th, 1917 at the Théâtre du Châtelet. With music by Erik Satie, a libretto by Jean Cocteau, set and costume design by Pablo Picasso, and choreography by Léonide Massine, *Parade* had, as Lynn Garafola describes in “The Making of Ballet Modernism,” “impeccable modernist credentials.” (23) Eleven years later, fashion designer Coco Chanel would create the costumes for *Apollo*, a ballet choreographed by one of the Ballets Russes’s most famous alums, George Balanchine (Homans 337). Equality in artistic expression was ingrained in the philosophy of the Ballets Russes and artists who associated themselves with the company.

In a modernizing art world, there was no more room for art created purely for aesthetic purposes. The preferred “new art,” showcased in *Rhythm* and elsewhere, was only considered successful if it expressed something powerful, abstract, and human. The aspirations of the Ballets Russes were similar. In contrast to classical ballets that existed only for courtly entertainment, the movements of Michel Fokine’s choreography expressed abstract ideas. This shift from aestheticism to expressionism is an essential trend in the development of modernism across artistic fields—expressionism made art personal, emotional, and meaningful.

When interpreting the title of the movement literally, impressionism served to “impress” something from the physical world onto the retina of the eye. The goal of impressionist art was to find the best way to translate something from real life into another visible format, such as a painting, drawing, or illustration. This process can be mechanical in its focus on the literal and physical appearances of an object or scene. Fauvism, on the other hand, takes a physical reality and abstracts it. In so doing, the modernists believed they could come closer to understanding the deeper essence of life in its different manifestations. If one takes an idea and depicts only the essentials of its character, oftentimes through abstraction, its truth or essence may be more fully revealed.

The Ballets Russes similarly denounced the lifeless and mechanical rules of strict classicism that embodied the classical Russian ballets they left

behind in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The choreography of the Ballets Russes took the movement vocabulary of classical ballet and abstracted it to convey emotion and feeling. For example, Michel Fokine's *Le Spectre de la Rose* was a moving interpretation of an abstract idea. The movements performed by the male role imitated what Fokine believed the actual "spirit of a rose" might look like were it to manifest in human form. The arm movements or "port de bras" of the male dancer were graceful, flowing, full of breath, and repeating circular shapes, mimicking rose petals drifting through the air and alluding to a spiritual, ethereal understanding of a rose.

While *Rhythm* writers lacked the language to critique the Ballets Russes's movement as a modern dance critic might, they were able to evaluate what they saw on stage as a holistic visual art, particularly one that communicated an abstract idea about life. The interaction between the Ballets Russes and visual artists, as represented by the illustrations of artists such as Anne Estelle Rice in *Rhythm*, ensured the lasting impact of the ballets. Companies would not be able to perform *Le Spectre de la Rose* with visual accuracy without the artistic documentation of modernist illustrators that found their way into little magazines. (See **Figure 1**.)

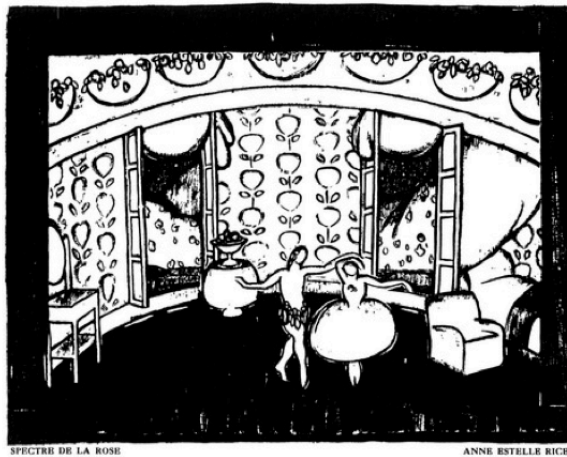


Figure 1. Illustration of "Le Spectre de la Rose" by Anne Estelle Rice (2:7, 93)

The parallels and influences of these two concurrent artistic forces become clear on examination. Both the international, British-based modernist magazine *Rhythm* and Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes incorporated 1) an exhibited equality in artistic expression, 2) an emphasis on elemental, primitive, and exotic life, and 3) a desire to shift away from aestheticism and towards expressionism into their artistic philosophies. These two seemingly-disparate artistic spheres crossed paths both directly and indirectly as a result of the modernist movement, amplifying public recognition and ensuring accuracy of reproduction through sheer breadth of artistic representations.

Ballets were painted, the paintings were written about, the art critics saw the ballets, and so forth. The core artistic philosophies of the Rhythmists and the artists of the Ballets Russes were nearly identical and their artistic principles can be applied to all artistic spheres of the modernist movement, not just visual art and ballet. With this in mind, a better scholarly definition for “modernism” can be constructed. It is all of these artistic principles combined, representing a change in what motivated the creation of “new art” and re-defining what constituted “new art” in any given artistic medium. The shared philosophy of artistic fields represents extensive interdisciplinary interaction, a methodology that modernist artists embraced and resulted in their success in their time and into the twenty-first century.

The time is 7:15pm on February 28th, 2011. Clad in everything from fine evening gowns to designer jeans, a diverse crowd of fashionable Londoners, critics, artists, balletomanes, newcomers, and tourists alike, both young and old, have taken their seats at the Royal Opera House, in London, England. An elderly theatergoer reads over the program, lamenting the absence of names she recognizes. All the dancers of her generation have retired from the stage. Next to her, students at the Royal Ballet School snap selfies with their iPhones in front of the stage, which they immediately post to Facebook to make their classmates jealous. In exactly fifteen minutes, the curtain will open on the world premiere of Christopher Wheeldon’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The Royal Ballet has not commissioned a choreographer to create a full-length ballet for the company since Twyla Tharp’s “Mr. Worldly Wise” in 1995 and the London Underground has been covered with *Alice* advertisements for weeks (Sulcas).

The curtain finally opens on a scene that is nothing out of the ordinary. A Victorian era Alice sits between her sisters, listening to Lewis Carroll (a photographer in Wheeldon’s production) read to them from a book and take their portrait. Devotees of the Royal Ballet immediately recognize Alice and Lewis Carroll as two of the company’s leading Principal Dancers, Lauren Cuthbertson and Edward Watson. The ballet’s first act, centering around a garden party, remains conventional until Alice falls asleep as Lewis Carroll takes her photograph. As soon as the flash of the camera goes off, the stage goes dark with a spotlight on Alice, signifying her entrance into a dream. In her dream state everyone at the garden party continues to act normally as if she weren’t there, except for Lewis Carroll, who begins to show early signs of his transformation into the White Rabbit—he comically taps his foot on the ground and uses one of his legs to scratch the other, ducked underneath his focusing cloth. Next, a fluffy white tail abruptly sprouts from his pants, trig-

gering a roar of laughter from the audience. His photography bag expands to about five times its normal size, and Alice falls down into the bag after the rapidly transforming Carroll. Fifteen minutes into the ballet, the audience is taken aback by the unconventional presence of a massive digital screen, onto which an elaborate animation of Alice's monumental fall into a magical realm is projected. The animation tricks the eye into thinking it is three-dimensional, making the audience feel as though they are falling *with* Alice. The theme of digital animation is incorporated throughout the ballet, using projections to enhance what transpires onstage.

Although they premiered nearly a century apart, one cannot help but draw parallels between *Le sacre du printemps* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Although Alice did not provoke a riot, the audience was genuinely flabbergasted by the performance. They laughed, gasped, and applauded, fully immersed in Wheeldon's comical, horrific, beautiful, and engaging theatrical experience, aided by the incorporation of multimedia. Christopher Wheeldon broke the rules just as Diaghilev did with a contemporary twist. He seamlessly bridged the gap between digital graphics technology and classical ballet—an art form that prides itself on its technology-free traditions and its survival as an art passed down verbally through generations. By incorporating a significant amount of technology into his ballet, Wheeldon symbolically brought classical ballet into the twenty-first century, the digital age. When Alice fell down the rabbit hole it is as if she left Victorian England behind and landed in the contemporary world, one where students tweet about a show, critics blog about performances, and audiences abroad watch the premiere via a live stream of the performance from a movie theater four thousand miles away.² This is the contemporary reality of classical ballet that Wheeldon keenly recognized and adapted to, using Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes as a model.

We must again ask ourselves, why is this story relevant? At the very least, the words of an array of critics support the relevance of *Alice*, with praise and excitement overwhelming the tone of reviews, accompanied by minor critiques of the production. For example, Judith Mackrell wrote in *The Guardian* on premiere day, "Watching the production lets us forget the hype. He [Wheeldon] and his team have created an Alice whose wit, speed and in-

² This is a reference to Emerging Pictures' "Ballet in Cinema" series, which brings alternate content, such as opera, ballet, and art films to a network of 400 movie theaters across the United States. Audiences can see performances by such renowned companies as the Royal Ballet, the Bolshoi Ballet, and Paris Opera Ballet. Visit www.emergingpictures.com/ballet for more information.

vention have lifted the whole story ballet genre into the 21st century.” Similarly, Roslyn Sulcas of the *New York Times* called Joby Talbot’s score, “the trump card for ‘Alice.’ It’s a dazzling array of melodies and shimmering percussion, usefully atmospheric and dancey, yet sophisticated enough to feel like more than a mere support.” The Royal Ballet revived *Alice* for spring performances in both 2012 and 2013. Two years after the ballet’s premiere, praise for the production continued pouring in. In March of 2013 Sarah Crompton of *The Telegraph* described the ballet as “both recognisably traditional and joltingly contemporary at one and the same moment.” Wheeldon’s success with *Alice* earned him another commission for the Royal Ballet. The company will premiere another full-length Wheeldon story ballet in April 2014, *The Winter’s Tale*, based on the Shakespearean classic. The most widespread criticism of *Alice* was the overwhelming length of the first act, which was originally a full seventy minutes. Wheeldon divided the two-act ballet into three acts in response to complaints from audiences and critics.

With critics raving that Wheeldon has “lifted the whole story ballet genre into the 21st century” and created a production that is both “traditional and joltingly contemporary,” it is difficult to agree with Jennifer Homans’ argument that the world’s major ballet companies are stuck in the past and becoming “museums for the old.” (542) She firmly believes there is nothing “new” in contemporary ballet and “contemporary choreography veers aimlessly from unimaginative imitation to strident innovation.” (541) In October 2013, Homans reviewed *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* for the *New Republic* in “The Crisis in Contemporary Ballet: How emotion left dance:”

The objective, presumably, is family entertainment—nothing wrong with that—expect that *Alice* is a very long and very dull parade of sets and costumes, interspersed with trivial character dances, presumably in the tradition of English pantomime but utterly lacking in charm and wit. It is hard to see this ballet as anything but a sleight of hand and a dumbing down.

In asserting that *Alice* is a trivial family entertainment with mindless, unpleasant dancing, Homans has missed the point. She continues her critique with the claim that *Alice* presents “no new ideas.” While she complains about the lack of innovation in dancing and the “tourist industry” of story ballet in her review, she laments the inability of dancers to push story ballet into the twenty-first century in *Apollo’s Angels*. These contradictory claims fail to recognize Wheeldon’s artistic innovation in collaboration and dismiss the near-universal acclaim of other critics.



Figure 2. Photograph of the Royal Ballet in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, taken by Johan Persson in 2011.

Unfortunately, Jay Rogoff fares no better than Homans in his oversight of Wheeldon. While he is one of the few critics to directly discuss the specifics of Wheeldon's philosophical connection to the Ballets Russes, he suggests that Wheeldon has been unsuccessful in emulating Diaghilev, though he fails to mention *Alice*, despite writing a year after the ballet's premiere.

The story of the premiere of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is relevant today because, despite Homans's and Rogoff's claims, Wheeldon has clearly met success in creating a full-length story ballet appropriate for the twenty-first century that engages a wide audience. How did he accomplish this? A near-identical method used by Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes is clearly visible when analyzing the creation of *Alice*. It only takes breaking down one scene from Wheeldon's ballet, Alice's entrance into a Kingdom of Cards, to see the strong connection between his artistic mission and that of Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, as well as the ideals of modernism.

In act two of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, after the Knave of Hearts/Jack, whom Alice loves, is accused of stealing jam tarts from the Queen of Hearts and must stand trial for his crime, there is a break in the music and action, and a blackout on stage to move the sets into the wings. A digital animation is seamlessly projected at the top of the stage, showing a life-size deck of cards rapidly flipping across the stage (See **Figure 2**) accompanied by dramatic drumbeats. Below, eight dancers, wearing tutus that have been shaped to literally look like hearts, spades, diamonds, and clubs



Figure 3. Photograph of Chelsy Meiss's costume, current Second Soloist with the National Ballet of Canada, taken by Aleksander Antonijevic for balletnews.co.uk in 2011.

(See **Figure 3**), mimic the hard-hitting drums and fast flipping of the digital cards with frenzied but exact movements occurring in a precise canon.

In this scene, the audience can see and hear the choreographer, the designers, and the composer working together onstage to create a truly climactic moment. No artistic element on stage outweighs another: the audience is equally engaged with the choreography, the music, and the design at once. Additionally, these three

elements are remarkably cohesive and unified; each aspect complements the others. The overall collaborative spirit of the production is highlighted and each individual artist shines through.

Diaghilev's embrace of primitivism satisfied the needs and demands of an audience fascinated with primitive themes. Wheeldon similarly pinpointed what his audiences had in common—their participation in the digital age. Contemporary audiences are accustomed to constant digital stimulation, with the omnipresence of smartphones, the Internet, and television. By choosing to include a digital aspect in the production—represented here by the digital deck of cards—Wheeldon acknowledges that his audiences can comfortably relate to the “digital.”

Like many choreographers and artists before them, Chris Wheeldon and Bob Crowley have discarded the classical ballet tutu and thought outside the box. The tutus' literal representation of cards, combined with the frenzied, hard-hitting choreography and music, give the audience the same sense of tension that Alice is feeling on stage. This effort to inspire a specific emotional response from his audience indicates that Wheeldon is engaging in the expressionism exemplified by the Ballets Russes. Through an examination of merely one scene from Wheeldon's ballet, evidence of the Ballets Russes legacy clearly shines through, demonstrating Wheeldon's success at achieving his own artistic mission with Diaghilev as a model.

Jay Rogoff theorizes that ballet “endures crises cyclically.” I believe that the art form is constantly transforming and adapting to an ever-changing world. Today's world is defined by the digital age; technology is ceaseless-

ly at our fingertips. In order to allow classical ballet a future, choreographers like Christopher Wheeldon must find ways to adjust to the contemporary world, while keeping an eye on the successes and failures of the past. Wheeldon has seamlessly incorporated the rich new possibilities of multimedia digital art into his works in the model of Sergei Diaghilev's revolutionary Ballets Russes and the modernists, embracing interaction between artistic disciplines with open arms. In breaking down the principles that defined modernism—equality of expression, primitivism, and expressionism—an in-depth understanding of interdisciplinary artistic collaboration and its mutually beneficial nature is made possible. By rediscovering Diaghilev's model and reviving it with elegance, Wheeldon has reinforced a century-old idea that may help future choreographers, artists, and innovators continue to create works that are genuinely “new.”

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