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Exploiting Russian and Oriental Stereotypes: The Ballets Russes Schéhérazade in Paris, 1910

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Abstract

The legendary tales of the Thousand and One Nights, whose heroine Schéhérazade became synonymous with the tales and acquired mythic status within European culture in the early twentieth century, served as the inspiration for the popular and critically acclaimed Ballets Russes Schéhérazade, which premiered in Paris, 1910. My research examines how Ballets Russes audiences confused the production’s femme fatale heroine Zobeida with the peace-making storyteller Schéhérazade, who is named in the ballet’s title but eliminated from the plot onstage, and what this confusion suggests about Schéhérazade’s status in Paris in the 1910s.

Résumé


*Nikoo Paydar completed a PhD in Art History from the Courtauld Institute of Art in 2012 with the thesis: “Performing the Oriental Female: Schéhérazade, Society Women in Orientalist Dress, and Matisse’s Odalisques.”
In 1910 in Paris Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes premiered the ballet Schéhérazade to great acclaim. The production featured set and costume designs by Léon Bakst, choreography by Michel Fokine, and performances by Ida Rubinstein and Vaslav Nijinsky. In 1915 Marjorie Howard wrote in the New York Times of the ballet’s narrative: “Everyone knows the story. How the brother persuades the Shah to test his favorite by pretending to leave for the hunt, how the wives cajole the grand eunuch into opening the metal doors to their swarthy lovers, how they celebrate the reunion, and how the Shah, returning, punishes their unfaithfulness with instant death.”56 Howard wrote this article five years after the Paris premiere and in advance of the company’s first tour of the United States; her statement that “everyone knows the story” demonstrates the far-reaching influence of the ballet and its plot, marked by themes of interracial passion, orgy, androgyny and violent death. Ballets Russes audiences in 1910 viewed Russia and Diaghilev’s company as “semi-Oriental,” and the Ballets Russes used to its own advantage Parisian audiences’ ideas about stereotypical Russianness to enhance the production’s popularity.

The success of Schéhérazade can in part be attributed to Parisian audiences’ perception of the Ballets Russes as positioned in-between East and West. In 1913 in Paris Nights and Other Impressions of Places and People Arnold Bennett describes the Ballets Russes as “semi-Oriental,” discussing the company’s Orientalist ballet Cléophâtre, which premiered in 1909, in the following way: “this Oriental episode, interpreted by semi-Oriental artists, had made all the daring prurient suggestiveness of French comedy seem timid and foolish.”57 An article about Bakst in the January 1914 issue of Harper’s Bazar described Russians as “thinking with the European half of their brains and dreaming with the oriental side.”58 In La Gazette du bon ton Lise-Léon Blum wrote of Schéhérazade:

The Russians are back and still we do not tire of them. Perhaps it is because they so confuse our senses ... Nothing is more foreign to our tradition than these violent outbursts, frenzied and intense dances, instinctive candour and unbridled fantasy. Such is the violent contrast between us that one amazes at the lasting approval we accord these people from distant lands.59

Lynn Garafola in her Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes quotes Le Figaro from 1913: “[T]he taste for oriental art came to Paris as a Russian import, through ballet, music, and decoration. Russian artists have acted as intermediaries between the East and us, and they have given us a rather greater taste for oriental color than a taste for their own art.”60 The view of Russia as possessing some qualities associated with the Oriental stereotype was also found in London as shown by Mica Nava in “The Allure of Difference: Selfridges, the Russian Ballet and the Tango;” she writes that Selfridges described Russia as “a country regarded until a few years ago as semi-barbaric, given to tyranny... and violent revolt.”61

Diaghilev and his team astutely drew upon stereotypical features that satisfied Parisian audiences’ ideas of an exotic fantasy Orient. Prince Peter Lieven recounts in The Birth of the Ballets Russes that in Schéhérazade Bakst “hit upon exactly the right note for Paris, he gave a rendering of the exotic as it appeared to Western eyes.”62 Themes such as interracial orgy fit

57 Arnold Bennett, Paris Nights and Other Impressions of Places and People (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), 68. In the context of the Ballets Russes Cléopâtre, Arnold Bennett writes (p.76): “And this was Russia! This was the country that had made such a deadly and disgusting mess of the Russo-Japanese War.” Russia’s vast territory covered regions that connected with the Western vision of the East. One unique resource for documentation of the diverse cultures encompassed by Russia around the time of the Schéhérazade premiere is the collection of photographs by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorski at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
59 “Les Russes sont revenus et ils ne nous lassent pas encore. C’est peut-être qu’ils furent beaucoup déraisonner ... Bien n’est plus parfaitement étranger à notre tradition que ces éclats violents, ces danses frénétiques et intenses, cette candeur instinctive, cette fantaisie démesurée. La discordance est même si brutale qu’on ne s’attendrait pas qu’il en fût ainsi.”
60 “[Je] goût de l’art oriental s’installât à Paris, à travers l’importation russe, les ballets, la musique, la décoration. Les artistes russes ont été des intermédiaires entre l’Orient et nous et il n’est pas douteux qu’ils aient été les plus grands éleveurs de cette couleur orientale qui leur a été d’autant plus propre.”
the stereotypical vision and, turned into spectacle, could be viewed comfortably in the theatrical setting of the Paris Opéra. In its profusion of color, lust, cruel punishment, and suicide, Schéhérazade displaced internal desires and curiosities onto a distant Oriental setting. The enjoyment of the violent, sexualized, and interracial elements projected in Schéhérazade was contingent on their being set in an exotic location, not France or Europe. Linda Nochlin states in her analysis of Death of Sardanapalus in “The Imaginary Orient” that Delacroix “distanced his fears and desires by letting them explode in an Orientalized setting,” this was also the case with Schéhérazade. In recognition of the fact that the Ballets Russes was presenting stereotypes and fantasy instead of Oriental realities Fokine wrote in his memoirs, “I realize that Orientals do not live or dance in such a manner.” He continued discussing his choreography for Schéhérazade and “authentic Oriental dances:”

After the composition of this ballet, I undertook the study of authentic Oriental dances. But nothing would have induced me to stage my ballet in the authentic Oriental style, for such an undertaking would have required a genuine Oriental orchestra. The symphonic music of Rimsky-Korsakov would be completely unsuited. The Orient, based on authentic Arabic, Persian, and Hindu movements, was still the Orient of the imagination. Dancers with bare feet, performing mostly with their arms and torso, constituted a concept far removed from the Oriental ballet of the time.

By drawing upon stereotypes, the Ballets Russes made Schéhérazade a success. Arnold Haskell writes that “[w]hen a ballet was held in London, in 1925, for the most popular Diaghileff ballet, Sheherazade headed the list, though it was not mentioned on the ballot paper.” Boris Kochno, Diaghilev’s secretary and collaborator from 1921-9, says that “the mere title Schéhérazade—one of the first triumphs of the Ballets Russes—was magic. During the company’s tours abroad, it assured sold-out houses in advance, and every theatre manager who engaged the Diaghilev company asked for this ballet.” As Russians delivering a ballet set in an Oriental harem for a Parisian audience, the Ballets Russes capitalized on its perceived identity to create an influential vision of the exotic that continued to be popular for decades following its 1910 premiere both domestically and internationally as the company toured Europe, North America, and South America.