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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 Scheherazade 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 Scheherazade, who is named in the ballet's title but eliminated from the plot onstage, and what this confusion suggests about Scheherazade's status in Paris in the 1910s.

## Résumé

Les contes légendaires des *Mille et une nuits*, dont l'héroïne Schéhérazade a acquis un statut mythique dans la culture européenne du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, ont servi d'inspiration au ballet russe *Schéhérazade*, acclamés dès la première parisienne en 1910 par le public et la critique. Mes recherches examinent la manière dont les spectateurs du ballet ont confondu la femme fatale Zobeida avec la conteuse pacificatrice Schéhérazade, dont le titre porte le nom mais qui disparaît de l'intrigue, et ce que cette confusion dit du statut de Schéhérazade dans le Paris des années 1910.

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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."<sup>56</sup> 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 *Cléopâtre*, 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."<sup>57</sup> 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."<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup>

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."<sup>60</sup> 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."<sup>61</sup>

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."<sup>62</sup> Themes such as interracial orgy fit

<sup>58</sup> "Léon Bakst," *Harper's Bazar* 49, no. 1, January 1914, 57.

<sup>59</sup> "Les Russes sont revenus et ils ne nous lassent pas encore. C'est peut-être qu'ils font beaucoup déraisonner ... Rien 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 s'étonnerait de la faveur tenace qu'obtiennent chez nous les gens de là bas." Claude Lepape and Thierry Defert, *The Art of Georges Lepape: From the Ballets Russes to Vogue*, trans. Jane Breton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 35 and Claude Lepape and Thierry Defert, *Georges Lepape ou L'élégance Illustrée* (Paris: Herscher, 1983), 32.

<sup>60</sup> "[L]e goût de l'art oriental s'installait 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 ils nous ont peut-être plus donné le goût de la couleur orientale que celui de leur art propre." Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Da Capo Press, 1998), 287, quoting Delhi, 'La Vie de Paris. Le Goût Oriental', *Le Figaro*, June 4, 1913, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Mica Nava, "The Allure of Difference: Selfridges, the Russian Ballet and the Tango," *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference* (Berg, 2007), 26.

<sup>62</sup> Prince Peter Lieven, *The Birth of the Ballets-Russes*, trans. L. Zarine (Dover, 1973, orig. pub. 1936), 117.

<sup>56</sup> Marjorie Howard, "New York Soon to See Famous Russian Ballet; Serge De Diaghileff's Company, That Delighted All Europe, Will Visit Us in a Few Weeks and Will Be a Feature of Metropolitan Opera Season," *The New York Times*, magazine section, December 5, 1915.

<sup>57</sup> 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.70): "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-Gorskii at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

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*.<sup>63</sup> 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.”<sup>64</sup> 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 torsos, constituted a concept far removed from the Oriental ballet of the time.<sup>65</sup>

By drawing upon stereotypes, the Ballets Russes made *Schéhérazade* a success. Arnold Haskell writes that “[w]hen a ballot 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.”<sup>66</sup> 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.”<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient” in Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Pryblyski, eds., *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (Psychology Press, 2004), 296.

<sup>64</sup> Michel Fokine, *Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, ed. Anatole Chujoy, trans. Vitale Fokine (London: Constable, 1961), 154. For information about Fokine as a collector, including Turkish and Persian miniatures and Egyptian architectural drawings, see Elena Fedosova, “Alexandre Benois and Léon Bakst: Their Visual Sources” in John E. Bowlit, Zelfira Tregulova, and Nathalie Rosticher Giordano, eds., *Étonne-moi!: Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, exh. cat., Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, Monte Carlo, 2009 (Milan: Skira, 2009), 69-73.

<sup>65</sup> Fokine, *Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, 154-5.

<sup>66</sup> Arnold Haskell in collaboration with Walter Nouvel, *Diaghileff: His Artistic and Private Life* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935), 223.

<sup>67</sup> “[L]e titre de *Schéhérazade*, un des premiers triomphes des Ballets Russes, était magique: lors des tournées à l’étranger, il assurait d’avance des salles comblées, et tous les directeurs de théâtres, qui engageaient la troupe de Diaghilev, réclamaient ce ballet.” Boris Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, trans. Adrienne Foulke (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1971), 274 and Boris Kochno, *Diaghilev et les Ballets Russes* (Fayard, 1973), 274.

<sup>68</sup> For tour dates and performance details, see Boris Courrèze with the collaboration of Marie-Aude Aumonier, Cristina Barbero, Tiphaine Gaumy and Stefan Kröger, “Chronologie des spectacles des Ballets russes” in Mathias Auclair and Pierre Vidal, eds. with Jean-Michel Vinciguerra, *Les Ballets russes*, exh. cat., Musée de l’Opéra, Paris, 2009 (Paris: Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2009), 249-94. For the Ballets Russes American tour’s influence on cinema (the company’s American tour in 1916 included Los Angeles, where Hollywood directors gained exposure to the Orientalist aesthetic of *Schéhérazade*) see Gaylyn Studlar, “‘Out-Salomeing Salome’: Dance, the New Woman, and Fan Magazine Orientalism” in Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 100. See also Gaylyn Studlar, “Douglas Fairbanks: Thief of the Ballets Russes” in Ellen Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance* (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 107-24 and François Albéra, *Albatros: des Russes à Paris, 1919-1929* (Mazzotta, 1995).