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Sjeng Scheijen’s book, Diaghilev: A Life, presents a biography of the impresario and director of the Ballets Russes, Serge Diaghilev. According to Scheijen, Diaghilev’s genius was derived from his fixation with both the past and the present, creating a powerful synergy that gave life to his works. Scheijen describes Diaghilev as “a man driven by an overpowering need to explore the mystery of human creativity in its highest form” (7). Scheijen’s book attempts to justify this statement by providing a broad overview of Diaghilev’s upbringing, education, artistic productions, as well as the relationships Diaghilev maintained with friends, lovers and critics. The biography can be conceptually grouped into four sections: Diaghilev’s upbringing, his move into the artistic world, the Ballets Russes, and WWI onwards, all of which address the traits Diaghilev possessed that both helped and hindered him in becoming one of the most influential cultural forces of the early twentieth century.

Scheijen’s book is engaging and easy to read, with a comfortable pace set by relatively short chapters. The first section, encompassing the first eight chapters, considers Diaghilev’s upbringing and details his aristocratic origins, exploring formative elements of his familial realities, including his estranged father, the death of his mother, and his close relationship with his step-mother. All of these factors influenced the development of Diaghilev’s strong will, or stubborn adherence to personal values, perceived in his period of artistic maturity. Scheijen hints, however, that nature should not be held entirely responsible for the impresario’s future,
highlighting that his step-mother observed his natural talents of “inquisitiveness and powers of observation” (17) while he was young. Scheijen foreshadows the financial crises Diaghilev would succumb to later in his life by emphasizing the example set by Diaghilev’s father who “was constantly running up large debts with … disregard for how they would be paid off” (11). Simultaneous to his commentary on Diaghilev’s artistic opinions, Scheijen also outlines the political climate of the late nineteenth century, indicating that Diaghilev’s anti-reformist tendencies were, at least partially, a product of zeitgeist (29).

Scheijen goes on to discuss Diaghilev’s university experience where his first romantic relationship developed with his cousin Dima Filosofov. This affair would be the first of several intimate homosexual relationships Diaghilev would pursue over the course of his lifetime, all of which were highly influential not only in his life, but also in the development of the Ballets Russes. Scheijen addresses and contextualizes homosexuality in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe by describing the experiences of other homosexuals, such as Oscar Wilde. Scheijen also presents relevant social commentary that is particularly effective in identifying opinions from the time period and creating distance from contemporary perspectives toward homosexuality, including one particularly effective quotation from poet Alexander Blok where he states: “Everything about Diaghilev is terrible and significant, including his “active homosexuality” (145). Clearly, despite a shift towards progressive opinions in tsarist Russia, certain individuals maintained a “revulsion at Diaghilev’s lifestyle” (145).

Adding to the effective portrayal of a potentially sensitive topic, Scheijen incorporates his discussion of homosexuality seamlessly into the book’s narrative. This methodology stands in contrast to Joy Melville’s abrupt chapter, “Gentlemen’s Mischief” in Diaghilev and Friends, where Melville inserts a historically interesting chapter about Russian male homosexuality that does not match the tone and intent of her book. Indeed, Diaghilev is not even mentioned in Melville’s chapter until halfway down the second page of text after several salacious suggestions, such as the comment that infers that sodomy defines homosexuality: “[homosexuality] was an accepted part of private life in Russia, despite sodomy having been legally banned in 1832.” While Melville does not attempt to situate this opinion, Scheijen clarifies it in his text by stating that homosexuality was “always referred to as ‘sodomy’” (144) by the tsarist society. Unlike Melville, Scheijen purposefully contextualizes and clarifies ideas that seem problematic from the contemporary perspective. Also of note, Scheijen describes Filosofov and Diaghilev’s relationship as having “an intimacy and affinity that permeated their professional lives and nourished their aesthetic ideals” (140). Rather than sensationalizing or emphasizing Diaghilev’s orientation, Scheijen attempts to

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objectively situate the realities facing homosexuals during Diaghilev’s lifetime and indicates how Diaghilev’s homosexuality informed his relationships, career, and artistic productions.

The second section of the book addresses Diaghilev’s move into the artistic world, which began with the formation of a group of friends that would eventually become the Mir Iskusstva circle. Mir Iskusstva, Russian for “World of Art,” was a small group of artists who worked with Diaghilev on producing a publication that was also called Mir Iskusstva. While Scheijen adequately introduces this concept, Janet Kennedy provides an excellent and in-depth study of the Mir Iskusstva group in her dissertation, entitled “The “Mir Iskusstva” Group and Russian Art 1898-1912.” Published much earlier, Kennedy’s insight into the Mir Iskusstva provides the details and depth that Scheijen’s introductory description of the circle lacks. Despite the comprehensive and ambitious breadth of Kennedy’s dissertation, it is also accessible and interesting, making an excellent supplementary text for anyone interested in the Mir Iskusstva or the specific artists of the Mir Iskusstva circle.

After outlining Diaghilev’s university experience, Scheijen focuses on the creation of the Mir Iskusstva group (henceforth referred to as “the circle”) and journal. Here, Scheijen also details Diaghilev’s initial critical reception in the Russian art scene, emphasizing the growing rift between the avant-garde and traditionalism. The origins of the Mir Iskusstva journal are described along with a strong analysis of Diaghilev’s first public statement entitled “Difficult Questions,” an article he published in an early edition of Mir Iskusstva. Scheijen not only provides excerpts from the article, but also contextualizes the piece historically, along with its ideas on aesthetics, nationalism, and utilitarianism, stating that “a sense of national consciousness had been growing across Europe throughout the 1800s, but in Russia the issue was so pervasive that it coloured all other debates … Diaghilev, too, had to take a stance in this debate” (100). The manner in which Scheijen incorporates historical politics into these chapters is particularly effective, serving to reveal how Diaghilev was a product of his time, as well as how he differed from it.

Having taken the Russian art scene by storm, Diaghilev explored various artistic forms of expression by producing operas and ballets. The third section of Scheijen’s book addresses the creation of the Ballets Russes, where Diaghilev’s effective networking skills and charismatic personality are emphasized, especially in his communications with Rimsky-Korsakov. Amidst the narrative of Diaghilev’s professional life, this section also introduces his relationship with the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky and attempts to clarify some of the common misconceptions about their interactions. Most prominently,

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Scheijen refutes Romola Nijinsky’s portrayal of the two men found in her biography, *Nijinsky*. Referring to problematic examples from Romola’s text, Scheijen insists that Nijinsky was not forced into the relationship but chose and desired to be with Diaghilev, stating that “Nijinsky was not the passive victim later observers claimed him to be” (162). The writing in this section walks the line between highly entertaining depiction and pure provocation. Scheijen nonetheless explores the exoticism of Diaghilev’s productions and their critical reception in addition to his developing relationships with those in his intimate circle. Culminating in the premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps*, the biography continues through brief descriptions of the stagings and premieres of the ballets—*LOiseaux de feu, Scheherazade, Petrushka, L’Après-midi d’un faun* and *Jeux*—that led up to Stravinsky’s *succès du scandal, Le Sacre du printemps*.

The last section of the text—perhaps as a direct result of the exciting nature of the previous chapters—is a tedious denouement that meanders through the historical events of World War I and the Russian Revolution, while depicting the impresario’s increased financial crises and deteriorating personal health. Scheijen does discuss a few pieces, such as *Pulcinella* and *Les Noces*, as well as Diaghilev’s anti-climactic religious project that never came to fruition. The biography ends with a brief paragraph summarizing the lives of the family, friends, and co-workers who outlived Diaghilev, an ending that inadequately, and in a manner distinctly lacking in profundity, concludes this narrative about Diaghilev. The conclusion to this 500-page biography thus fizzles out anticlimactically. While Diaghilev’s death was not particularly glamorous, the weak ending to such a large biographical undertaking left this reader feeling unfulfilled. Perhaps Scheijen intended his lacklustre finish to demonstrate how heavily Diaghilev’s success had relied on the people who surrounded him, or to argue that Diaghilev’s legacy lives on in those who worked with him. The framing of the end of the book, however, leaves matters open to speculation.

Each of the four sections contributes to the literature on Diaghilev but, overall, Scheijen tends to paint with broad strokes. Consequently, his biography would be an appropriate starting point for any research on Diaghilev, the *Ballets Russes*, and the *Mir Iskusstva* circle, all of which led to the “silver age” or “renaissance” of Russian art. 3 Besides taking us through Diaghilev’s life, the text also explores a constellation of themes, including Diaghilev’s appreciation of Wagner’s ideologies, especially the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and Diaghilev’s constant search for creative perfection and innovation. Because of its broad, surveying approach, Scheijen does not provide specifics concerning *Ballets Russes* performances, such as their choreographies, artwork, costumes, or music, and instead focuses on the artists involved with the company and

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the general creative processes leading up to premieres. For this reason, prior expertise is unnecessary to appreciate this text, and those with prior knowledge will benefit from Scheijen’s historical narrative and contextualization.

Methodologically, Scheijen draws upon a variety of sources from the extant literature and photographs, prints, and primary sources, including memoirs and diaries. Because of Scheijen’s fluency with the Russian language, he uses many primary Russian sources and often discusses the legitimacy and biases of previous sources, such as those produced by Romola Nijinsky. Scheijen’s ability to criticize Russian texts is perhaps the strongest contribution made in his text. Similarly, his more recent chapter, “Diaghilev the Man,” in Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, 1909-1929, uses letters and journal entries written by Diaghilev to help shape his portrayal of Diaghilev. In Diaghilev: A Life the manner in which Scheijen employs quotations, especially of those close to Diaghilev, helps to depict an image of the impresario that is not entirely marred by controversy or scandal and attempts to highlight, or at least identify, a given quote’s potential bias and historical context. The book compiles many of the existing primary sources, including interviews with Diaghilev’s contemporaries that were published by BBC controller and foreign correspondent, John Drummond, in 1997. Such quotes serve to add an interesting social component to the text and involve the reader in the book, allowing the reader to formulate her or his own thoughts on Diaghilev’s life without feeling confronted by the Scheijen’s perspective.

On the other hand, though accessible to a wide readership, the resultant text lacks a rigorous critical analysis of the overall effect that Diaghilev or his productions had on the artistic community at large. Instead, Scheijen situates Diaghilev within historical events without analyzing the impact such events had on the impresario, and vice versa. The text discusses and answers questions such as how Diaghilev was perceived both publicly and intimately and how he was able to organize his circle of artists to produce the theatrical works of the Ballets Russes. But aside from generating a desire for additional analysis, it only provokes questions concerning how his historical context influenced Diaghilev on a more psychological level and the amount of ownership of his ballets owed Diaghilev, especially in light of the collaborative efforts of the Mir Iskusstva circle. Yet, despite these drawbacks, Diaghilev: A Life is a useful starting point for any exploration of the Ballets Russes, the Mir Iskusstva, or the impresario Serge Diaghilev himself, and serves as an accessible biographical overview of one of the most culturally influential members of the twentieth century.

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5 John Drummond, Speaking of Diaghilev (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).
For further reading:


