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Ballets Suédois (1920–25)

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Article

Abstract

Rolf de Maré's Ballets Suédois was active from 1920 to 1925. It was the chief artistic rival to Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and de Maré was often referred to as the Swedish Serge Diaghilev. With Jean Börlin as chief choreographer, the company created twenty-four ballets in collaboration with prominent modern artists and composers, including Fernand Léger, Giorgio de Chirico, Pablo Picasso, Francis Picabia, Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud, and Cole Porter. When first launched, the troupe performed ballets in a style similar to the Ballets Russes, but de Maré's interest in the visual arts and the vibrancy of modern, contemporary life resulted in a greater emphasis on abstraction and popular idioms in both the design and choreography

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Rolf de Maré (1888–1964) was born into an aristocratic family in Stockholm, Sweden. In 1920 he founded the Ballets Suédois, which was heavily influenced by his interest in painting. In the 1910s, after meeting the Swedish artist Nils Dardel (1888–1943), de Maré began collecting modernist art (particularly the works of Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, and Pablo Picasso). Dardel introduced de Maré to modern artists, and served as an intermediary in the purchase of their works. He also introduced de Maré to the future choreographer of the Ballets Suédois, Jean Börlin (1893–1930). After meeting Börlin, de Maré's interest in the arts quickly expanded to include dance.

Börlin trained at the Stockholm Royal Opera ballet school, where Michel Fokine noticed him while serving as guest choreographer at the Royal Opera from 1913 to 1914. Trained in the repertoire of the Ballets Russes, Börlin studied with Fokine at the Royal Opera and privately in Copenhagen before joining de Maré in Paris. Börlin and de Maré met in 1918, and soon thereafter became romantically involved. Börlin's choreography formed the basis of the ensemble's repertoire; he was the company's principal dancer and ballet master,

and recruited a majority of the corps dancers from the Stockholm Opera.

Paris proved the ideal venue for de Maré to form a ballet company. Stockholm, he felt, was too culturally conservative for the art he wished to present, while Paris was the center of the avant-garde art world. The city had a supportive atmosphere, a population of willing creative collaborators, and a suitable venue in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

In running his company, de Maré enjoyed the privileges of wealth, treating the Ballets Suédois like his personal art collection. Liberated from financial worries by his considerable family fortune, he invested in art for the sake of enjoyment and showed little interest in box office receipts. De Maré not only used his considerable wealth to pay for the productions, he also took ownership of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, bought out the newspapers and magazines that reviewed and promoted the company, and founded the monthly *La Danse*.

The Ballets Suédois debuted on October 25, 1920. Parisian critics reviewed the dancers from the North favorably. The company blended dance, drama, painting, poetry, and music with acrobatics, circus, film, and pantomime to create what the dance curator Nancy van Norman Baer has described as “three-dimensional stage pictures.” This first season included nine new works, all choreographed by Börlin, drawing upon successes of the Ballets Russes repertoire. Börlin capitalized on themes and techniques made popular by Diaghilev’s troupe. Spanish Renaissance paintings came alive in *Las Meninas* (1916) before *El Greco* (1920); Spanish customs took center stage in *Le Tricorne* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*, 1919) before *Iberia* (1920). The imitation became repetition when Börlin recreated *Jeux* (*Games*), which the Ballets Russes had originally premiered in 1913.

The similarities between the companies were compounded by the

fact that they occasionally shared the same venue: the fashionable Théâtre de Champs-Élysées. However, the Ballets Suédois developed its own unique character. The company was, arguably, more experimental, and also granted more creative agency to its visual artists (that is, Jean Cocteau, Fernand Léger, and Francis Picabia, who were allowed to control aspects of staging and choreography). The early emphasis on French painting and Swedish (versus Russian) folk arts, and de Maré's interest in allowing painters greater control over staging, set the company apart from its rivals.

Börlin was chosen as choreographer, ballet master, and principal dancer because of his talent, his personal relationship with de Maré, and he and de Maré's shared interest in painting. Concerning the influence of the visual arts on his choreography, Börlin wrote: "Each painting that moves me is transformed in me into dance ... [although] rhythm will always remain the principal and most mysterious element of choreographic creation, painting can be the point of departure [for] the first impression."

The Ballets Suédois created many notable works of Modernism. Paul Claudel and Darius Milhaud first brought the idea for *L'Homme et son désir* (*Man and His Desire*, 1921) to Diaghilev, who rejected it. De Maré, by contrast, embraced the scenario. Claudel sought to create a ballet that would represent the life cycle and soul of man. Audrey Parr's set consisted of a multilevel space with dancers on the top level representing the passing hours of life; below this dancers depicted the moon and its shadow, while the middle plane featured Börlin dressed only in briefs and shiny body make-up. The sides of the stage featured black cut-outs of jazz musicians carrying instruments. The emphasis on Parr's *mise-en-scène*, Börlin's near nudity on stage, and Milhaud's long sections of Brazilian-inspired percussion music helped define the Ballets Suédois as a group dedicated to radical experimentation on stage.

In *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*The Newlyweds on the Eiffel Tower*, 1921) de Maré enlisted the talents of the poet Jean Cocteau and a large

team of collaborators including the artists Irène Lagut, Jean Hugo, Valentine Gross, and the group of young French composers known as “Les Six” (“The Six,” disciples of Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie). The production, overseen by Cocteau, included spoken text amplified through giant megaphones hidden from the audience, and a spectacle of popular culture and modern technology involving pantomime, drama, acrobatics, a Cubist rendering of the Eiffel Tower, photography, circus, music hall, and dance.

In 1922, the Ballets Suédois presented only one new work, *Skating Rink*. Like *Mariés*, *Skating Rink* showcased modern life and featured music by a composer from “Les Six” (Arthur Honegger), but is best known for its abstract backdrops and Cubist-inspired costumes designed by Fernand Léger. Börlin played the madman (an homage to Charlie Chaplin’s character in *The Rink*, 1916), as the corps whirled around before the brightly colored backdrop.

Léger and Milhaud teamed up for *La Création du monde* (*The Creation of the World*, 1923), a ballet with a scenario based on African creation myths by Blaise Cendrars, a jazz-influenced score, and costume designs by Léger that transformed the dancers into African-inspired Cubist sculptures. That same year de Maré commissioned an “American” work for the Ballet’s upcoming United States tour. *Within the Quota* (1923), with music by Cole Porter, told the story of a young Swedish immigrant and his arrival in New York City. Börlin again choreographed and also played the role of the immigrant. The ballet, set against a backdrop of a giant mock-up of an American newspaper, consisted of the Swede dancing around various American archetypes (an Heiress, a Jazz-Baby, a Cowboy, etc.).

The Ballets Suédois offered *Relâche* (*Theatre Closed*, 1924) as their final new work. Appropriately, the ballet’s première was postponed because of illness (Börlin was sick), and patrons arrived on the night of November 27 to find signs indicating that the theater really was closed. A week later, audiences experienced the Dadaist ballet conceived by Francis Picabia and Erik Satie with a cinematic *Entr’acte*

(*Interval*) by filmmaker René Clair. Erik Satie's music for the production consisted of unrelenting repetitive phrases (reminiscent of popular music). The ballet was devoid of dancing. Instead Börlin had the dancers dress and undress on stage, chain-smoke, and measure the floor. Börlin himself wheeled around in a tricycle wheelchair, and Picabia and Satie entered the stage in a five-horsepower Citroën. The backdrop for the performance consisted of 370 automobile headlights, which dimmed and brightened in conjunction with the music and, subsequently, blinded the audience. The work was a direct assault on what Picabia called the "pretentious absurdities of the theatre."

During its short five-year existence the Ballets Suédois set a precedent for collaborative experimentation. It was less a ballet company than a theatrical space for innovative performance art. By giving artists and designers such a large role in the conception and realization of its works, de Maré helped make it possible for new forms of theater to emerge.

De Maré could only bankroll the company for so long, and after 2,766 performances in 157 cities, the enterprise became financially untenable. An American tour in 1923 and 1924 drained resources, and, by 1925, the Ballets Suédois had run its course. The *succès de scandale* of *Relâche* proved difficult to top creatively, Börlin was exhausted, and the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées had been losing money for some time. De Maré announced the end of the company in March 1925; with Börlin's premature death in 1930, its innovative repertoire was lost, although the scores of particular ballets were sometimes used for unrelated productions. Reconstructions have been rare, with the notable exception of Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer's "recreations" of *Derviches* (*Dervishes*, 1920), *Skating Rink*, *Within the Quota*, and *La Création du monde*.

Works Created by the Ballet Suédois

1920

- *Jeux (Games)*
- *Derviches (Dervishes)*
- *Iberia.*
- *Nuit de Saint Jean (Midsummer Night's Revel)*
- *Maison de Fous (Madhouse)*
- *Le Tombeau de Couperin (The Tomb of Couperin)*
- *El Greco.*
- *Pas de Deux.*
- *Les Vierges Folles (The Foolish Virgins)*

1921

- *La Boîte à Joujoux (The Toybox)*
- *L'Homme et son Désir (Man and His Desire)*
- *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel (The Newlyweds on the Eiffel Tower)*
- *Dansgille (Dance Feast)*
- *Chopin.*

1922

- *Skating*

Rink.

1923

- *Marchand d'Oiseaux (The Bird Seller)*
- *Offerlunden (The Sacrificial Grove)*
- *La Création du Monde (The Creation of the World)*
- *Within the Quota.*

1924

- *Le Roseau (The Reed Player)*
- *Le Porcher (The Swineherd)*
- *Le Tournoi Singulier (The Singular Tournament)*
- *La Jarre (The Jar)*
- *Relâche (Theatre Closed)*

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