

The legacy of Félix Fernández García in the development of ballet and Spanish dance

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Abstract

An overview of the valuable influence flamenco dancer Félix Fernández García had on Léonide Massine during his collaboration towards creating *The Three-Cornered Hat* ballet for the Ballets Russes, and on other artists that have performed, restaged or created works inspired by his legend.

1. Introduction

Most people in the arts world have heard about the Ballets Russes, the most glamorous ballet company of the 20th century; its stars (Nijinsky, Pavlova), choreographers (Folkine, Massine, Balanchine), composers (Stravinsky, Debussy), artists (Picasso, Chanel), and memorable works such as the *Rite of Spring*, *Petrushka* and *Le Spectre de la Rose*. But, not many know about how crucial the period from 1915 to 1919 was to Léonide Massine and Félix Fernández García in their process of entering and leaving the Ballets Russes; gaining fame or being secluded from society. In 1915, Massine debuts as lead dancer with the Ballets Russes, and in also in 1915, he creates his first choreography for the company. During the summer of 1916 Diaghilev and Massine see Félix dancing at the Café Novedades in Seville, and hire him in the fall of 1917 to join the Ballets Russes as dancer and Spanish dance teacher. Less than two years later, in July 1919, the Ballet Russes premieres *The Three-Cornered Hat*, the Spanish master piece by an outstanding creative team: Manuel de Falla – Composer–, Pablo Picasso –Costume and Scenic designer– and Léonide Massine, Choreographer and lead dancer. The premiere marked Massine’s international recognition as dancer and choreographer, but also Félix’s tragedy, as he was arrested before the premiere and placed in a mental asylum for life.

The two years that Massine and Félix worked together had such an impact on Massine’s artistic development and personal performance aesthetics, that it changed the way Massine dressed, danced, and performed. Before the creation of *The Three-Cornered Hat*, Massine had only created five ballets, progressing in his artistic skills with each one, but after *El Sombrero de Tres Picos* (or *Le Tricorn* as the ballet is also called), he was considered the best choreographer in the world, and remained so for many years. The international tours of his Spanish ballets further the appreciation of Spanish dance and culture through out the world, especially as he taught flamenco workshops in some cities. His collaboration with one of the greatest stars, choreographer, producer and directors of Spanish dance, Antonio Ruiz Soler, brought back to Spain the ownership of creative choreographic developments of this Spanish ballet, which to this day, continues to evolve in the hands of contemporary Spanish choreographers. The elusive, brief, and significant collaboration of Félix with the Ballets Russes has motivated writers, playwrights, choreographers, and filmmakers into creating works about him continuing the legacy of Félix Fernández García, the silent ambassador of flamenco dance in the ballet repertoire.

2. Objective

The primary objective of this paper is to promote the appreciation of the legacy of Félix Fernández García in ballet and Spanish dance repertoire, as well as the work of those artists inspired by his life. In order to do so, biographical information related to Félix Fernández García is shared chronologically as it appears through references from Léonide Massine, Sergei Diaghilev, Lydia Sokolova, and Serge Grigoriev in their autobiographies, bibliography related to them, and to their artistic work. Through the observation of this chronology and references by the artists mentioned above, the reader can sense the importance Félix Fernández García has had on the artistic development of ballet and Spanish dance, particularly on Léonide Massine.

3. Research methodology and reference

The research findings presented in this paper comes from the passion with which I started looking for information on Félix Fernández García as I was doing my master’s thesis about the chronological development of *The Three-Cornered Hat* ballet through the twentieth century. As I encountered sources repeating the same few phrases of information on Félix which faulted in assumptions, prejudice and neglect, I gave myself the task of finding as much information possible on Félix and share his story.

Research for this project includes bibliographical references, Laban analysis, video analysis from archival footage and personal papers from the archives at the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library, the Getty Museum, Fundación Archivo Manuel de Falla, Centro Andaluz de Flamenco in Jerez, Joaquin Turina

archives, the Bibliothèque National in Paris, exhibits at the Paris Opera; personal interviews with writers, dance researchers, playwrights, professors and curators, in particular Massine's daughter, Tatiana Massine, and those who have danced or choreographed about Félix such as Javier Latorre, José Antonio Ruiz and Israel Galván.

4. Chronology

Events that lead to the creation of *The Three-Cornered Hat*, its transformation from ballet to Spanish dance repertoire and its eventual transition into becoming an expressive media to tell the story of Félix Fernández García.

1915

- Léonide Massine makes his debut as choreographer creating *Le Soleil de Nuit* premiered on December 20 at the *Grand Théâtre* in Génova (Norton 18).

1916

- May 6

The Ballets Russes travels to Spain. Falla greets Diaghilev upon his arrival (García-Márquez 67).

- May 26

The Ballets Russes season opens at the Teatro Real in Madrid (García-Márquez 69).

- End of May

In Madrid, Falla introduces María and Gregorio Martínez Sierra to Diaghilev and Massine (García-Márquez 70–71).

- June 9

The Teatro Real season ends. Massine, Diaghilev and Falla travel through Spain together (García-Márquez 72).

Diaghilev and Massine see Félix Fernández García dancing flamenco at the Café Novedades in Seville. After the performance, Diaghilev and Massine meet Félix (García-Márquez 72).

- August 25

Massine presents his choreography *Las Meninas* in San Sebastian before King Alfonso XIII (king of Spain) (García-Márquez 75; Norton 24).

- September 8

The Ballets Russes travels back to the United States, but Diaghilev and Massine remain in Spain (Massine, *My Life in Ballet* 91).

- September 22

Diaghilev and Massine go to Italy and later to Paris (García-Márquez 79).

1917

- End of May

The Ballets Russes returns to Madrid (García-Márquez 106).

- June 2

The Ballets Russes season in Madrid opens (García-Márquez 106).

Falla, Diaghilev and Massine continue working on *The Three-Cornered Hat*. Diaghilev asks Falla to make some changes in his score of the Martínez Sierras' pantomime *El Corregidor y La Molinera* ("The Governor and the Miller's Wife") to make the score more appropriate for dance. Massine asks Falla to make his composition less literal to allow him more choreographic freedom (García-Márquez 107; Hess 120).

Diaghilev and Massine re-encounter Félix Fernández García in Madrid and invite Félix to see the Ballets Russes' performance of *Schéhérazade*. After the performance, Diaghilev engages Félix to join the Ballets Russes as a flamenco teacher and dancer (García-Márquez 109).

- June 23–30

The Ballets Russes performs at the Grand Teatre de Liceu in Barcelona (Félix travels with them.) (García-Márquez 110).

Félix teaches Massine flamenco in Barcelona (García-Márquez 110).

Falla invites Diaghilev and Massine to the performance of *El Corregidor y La Molinera* at the Teatro Novedades, where Diaghilev and Massine hear Falla's orchestrated composition for the first time, later to be modified for the *The Three-Cornered Hat* ballet (García-Márquez 110).

- July

Diaghilev, Massine, Falla, and Félix travel through Spain to learn more about Spanish folk dance, music, and culture. The trip includes visits to Zaragoza, Córdoba, Seville, and Granada (García-Márquez 111).

- November 5–18

The Ballets Russes performs in Barcelona (García-Márquez 114).

- End of November

The Ballets Russes returns to the Teatro Real in Madrid (García-Márquez 114).

The Ballets Russes travels to perform in Portugal but arrives at the onset of the revolution (García-Márquez 115). After the Portuguese revolution ceases, the Ballets Russes performs in Lisbon (García-Márquez 115).

- Winter 1917

Massine and Diaghilev leave the company in Portugal and return to Madrid. They meet with Falla, who manages to arrange a Ballets Russes tour through Spain. Diaghilev contacts Oswald Stoll in England and engages a season in London for the fall (García-Márquez 115).

1918

- End of March

Ballets Russes starts its Spanish tour (García-Márquez 116). At the end of the tour, Diaghilev engages the Ballets Russes in a contract for a season at the Coliseum in London (García-Márquez 117).

- July 29

After great effort, Diaghilev and Massine finally get transit visas to go to England through France, in spite of the ongoing war (García-Márquez 119).

- August 1

Félix's contract to travel to Portugal with the Ballets Russes, written and signed in 1917, is modified by altering dates and locations to stand as contract to travel to London in August, 1918 (Diaghilev).

- September 5

The Ballets Russes season starts at the Coliseum in London and lasts until March 29, 1919 (García-Márquez 121).

1919

- April 10

The Ballets Russes rehearses at the Alhambra theatre in London. Félix watches Massine and Sokolova rehearse the lead roles in *The Three-Cornered Hat* (García-Márquez 125).

Félix is offered a chance to dance the tarantella in *La Boutique Fantasque* (Massine's new ballet, about to be premiered), but later is only assigned a minor part in the ballet *Petrushka* instead (García-Márquez 131).

- April 30

The Alhambra season opens. A few days later, Tamara Karsavina, a former Ballet Russes star, returns after years of absence and re-joins the Ballets Russes (Massine, *My Life in Ballet* 133).

The role of the Miller's Wife is taken away from Sokolova and given to Karsavina (Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev* 136).

- May

Picasso arrives to London during the first days of May (García-Márquez 129).

In early May, Picasso creates a pencil drawing of Félix Fernández García depicting Félix while rehearsing with a ballerina from the Ballets Russes. This is the only visual image known to be referenced as Félix's.

At the Savoy hotel, where Diaghilev and Massine were staying in London, Diaghilev asks Félix to show Karsavina his flamenco dancing (García-Márquez 132).

According to Sokolova, a few days after Félix danced for Karsavina, his behaviour became strange. One night Félix did not go on stage to perform, left the theatre while the company was in performance, and never returned to his hotel. Felix was therefore reported missing. Eventually the company was notified that Felix had been arrested after being found dancing in a London church (St. Martin in the Fields), declared insane, and confined to a mental asylum (Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev* 136).

- May 13

Félix is confined in Long Grove Hospital, Epsom (Massine, *My Life in Ballet* 143).

- July 22

The Three-Cornered Hat premieres at the Alhambra Theatre in London. Massine is widely acclaimed by audience, critics, and press (Norton 62).

Massine debuts in his famous solo "The Miller's Dance" based on Félix's flamenco dancing style and technique, incorporating steps or gestures he had seen Félix use in performance, such as the slide drop to the floor and sudden recovery to standing position at the end of the solo.

1941

Félix dies after twenty-two years of confinement in the mental asylum in Epsom (García-Márquez 133).

1952

The Three-Cornered Hat is presented at La Scala de Milan, staged by Massine with the lead role performed by Antonio Ruiz Soler (an internationally recognized Spanish dancer also called Antonio "El Bailarín"). This was the first time since 1919 that Massine ceded the lead role. (García-Márquez 342).

1969

The Three-Cornered Hat is presented by the Joffrey Ballet, staged by Léonide and Tatiana Massine (García-Márquez 373).

Luis Fuente, a dancer from Spain, is selected to dance the lead role. Fuente had previously danced *The Three-Cornered Hat* with the company of Antonio Ruiz Soler in Spain. His performance becomes controversial for being “too Spanish.” One night Fuente exchanged Massine’s choreography of The Miller’s Dance for Antonio’s version, receiving great audience response and temporary dismissal from the company (Fuente).

1984

José Antonio Ruiz, Spanish dancer and later, director of Ballet Nacional de España, participates in the film *Ballerinas* (a video documentary about the history of ballet). In the film, José Antonio dances “The Miller’s Dance” from *The Three-Cornered Hat*, performing the role of Félix Fernández García, as if he were rehearsing for the premiere in 1919 in the presence of Tamara Karsavina (*Ballerinas*).

1990

Marc-Alfred Pellerin publishes *El Loco*, a novel about Félix Fernández García’s combining history and fiction, serving as reference about this legend.

1998

Israel Galván presents *¡Mira! Los Zapatos Rojos*, choreography inspired on Félix Fernández García. The work becomes Mr. Galván’s manifesto, a breaking point in his career and in the creation of a new aesthetic in flamenco dance and scenic works.

2004

Javier Latorre is commissioned by Elvira Andrés (Director of the Ballet Nacional de España at the time) to choreograph *El Loco*, a ballet based on the legend of Félix Fernández García, for the Ballet Nacional de España. The premiere took place at the Teatro Real on September 6, 2004 (*FlamencoWorld; Noticias*).

2008

Gabriela Estrada presents *Appropriation* at the Claire Trevor School of the Arts, a choreographic work created with dancers from the University of California Irvine to share preliminary research on Félix Fernández García in relation to the Ballets Russes.

2011

Gabriela Estrada presents a video choreography titled *Félix* about Félix Fernández García for the Dance Film Association, fiscal sponsor of the documentary *Enigma: The Legend of Félix*, at the 2011 Dance on Camera festival in New York.

2011

The Victoria & Albert Museum presents an exhibit titled *Los Ballets Rusos de Diaghilev, 1909-1929. Cuando el arte baila con la música* at La Caixa forum in Barcelona which includes the castanets that belonged to Félix Fernández García.

5. Conclusions

The chronology presented above does not include information on Félix’s birth, childhood, family, and flamenco dance career before joining the Ballets Russes or information about him after his confinement in Epsom. It has been purposely left out because there is no factual information publicly available yet. Félix’s year of birth (1893) can only be assumed in reference to his age (twenty-four) stated in the contract he signed with Diaghilev on November 1917.

Like many point out, unfortunately, if it weren’t for his engagement with the Ballets Russes, Félix might not have been known at all. From Diaghilev we know he was the best flamenco young male dancer he had seen, and in 1917, in spite of great economic and war difficulties, hired him to join his company on tour as teacher and performer. We know Félix could play the guitar, sing, and dance with tremendous speed, passion and frenetic energy, from bibliography on Massine, who always referred to his Spanish dance and language teacher with kind respect and appreciation.

From Lydia Sokolova we learn about Félix’s personality, how fond the company grew of him, his detailed rehearsals and his irregular behaviour the last night he was seen by the company; we learn that Diaghilev announced Félix’s death in 1921 after the premiere of *The Three-Cornered Hat* in Barcelona (when he was actually alive and did not die until 1941); and can find information on Félix’s actual death from the asylum’s response to her inquiries. It is also through Sokolova that Félix castanets (the only physical item publicly known to belong to him) are preserved and currently (2012) exhibited in Spain through the Victoria & Albert museum. Another reference about Félix is found in Henri Matisse’s personal letter to a friend, where the painter describes an outing with Diaghilev and Massine that included a visit to a mental asylum to visit a Spaniard.

It is interesting to observe the impact Félix and his Spanish dance had on Massine, who danced the lead role of *The Three-Cornered Hat* until his sixties. Massine also worked with Antonio Ruiz Soler in the film *Luna de Miel*, created *Capriccio Espagnol* in collaboration with “La Argentinita” for the American Ballet Theatre (taken latter to Hollywood), and also appeared dancing as the Miller in *The Three-Cornered Hat* in the first scenes of the film *The Red Shoes*. An interesting anecdote Tatiana Massine shared in an interview was that her father would teach her and her brother

flamenco on Sundays (which can be interpreted as a treat after the week's ballet training).

Even though dancers who worked with Massine on *The Three-Cornered Hat* (including his daughter Tatiana), do not recall Massine sharing any references about Félix, the life and story of this enigmatic dancer peaks out often in Massine's autobiography *My Life in Ballet* and leaps onto a plethora of pages of scholars who write about ballet and Spanish dance history.

Félix has inspired artists such as José Antonio Ruiz, in creating his performance as Félix for the ballet history TV documentary *Ballerinas*, Marc Alfred Pellerin's book *El Loco*, triggered Israel's Galván choreography *¡Mira! Los Zapatos Rojos*, launching his creative career and changing the direction of flamenco dance aesthetics into the twenty-first century. Choreographer Javier Latorre also contributed to this collection of works related to Félix with *El Loco*, commissioned by the Ballet Nacional de España, a versatile contemporary Spanish dance production based on Félix in relation to *The Three-Cornered Hat* ballet.

In interviews, these creative artists (José Antonio Ruiz, Javier Latorre and Israel Galván) agree in that the lack of information on Félix reinforces him as a legend, where each individual creates his own perception. Latorre feels that finding the missing details about Félix's controversial figure might demythologize him and emphasizes that even today, challenges in dance companies such as political tensions and lack of sensitivity are often present. Galván sympathizes with Félix in the deconstruction, fragmentation and confrontation an artists can go through stage-dance's creative process and performance. José Antonio Ruiz points out that similar tragic stories are found in many artists such as Nijinsky, and believes Félix did not imagine the difference he made in collaborating in the creation of the first Spanish dance master piece in history and in bringing the audience to the first ovation *The Three-Cornered Hat* receives with "The Miller's Dance", the *farruca* he inspired in both dance and music.

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