

FRANKO, Mark, *The Fascist Turn in the Dance of Serge Lifar. Interwar French Ballet and the German Occupation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, 277 pp.

MARK FRANKO'S LATEST BOOK IS MORE than meets the eye. Though the title focuses on the controversial figure of dancer, choreographer, teacher and director of the Paris Opera Ballet for decades, Serge Lifar (1905-1986), the text extends beyond Lifar's persona and delves into fascinating insights surrounding the cultural, intellectual and philosophical contexts in which dance operated in France during Lifar's regime. As Franko himself explains: «this book treats the emergence of dance history, aesthetics, criticism, and ethnography in France during the first half of the twentieth century and the development of a French dance discourse as an intellectual formation.» (p. 7).

Franko's fascination with Lifar, as he introduces in the *Preface* to the book, is linked to his first viewing of Lifar's famous ballet *Suite en blanc* in 2012, in New York. Having studied with French ballet teachers, Franko knew of the importance this work has always had in the repertoire of the Paris Opera Ballet, where it is given regularly as part of the company's national choreographic legacy. However, Franko knew that this apparently «abstract, neoclassical ballet» was created in 1943, that is, during the Nazi Occupation of Paris. This fact made him wonder how it was possible, at such uncertain and tragic times, to create a ballet that, far from showing any signs of its context, celebrated French ballet technique and, more specifically, Lifar's style as if presented in a historical vacuum.

Serge Lifar was born in Ukraine in 1905 and became a well-known figure in ballet thanks to Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which he joined in 1923. He became a leading dancer for the company, where he created many ballets with Bronislava Nijinska (who had also been his teacher in Kiev) and George Balanchine. After Diaghilev's death, Lifar became director of the Paris Opera Ballet in 1929. He would remain with the company until 1958.

Besides his role at the Paris Opera Ballet as dancer, teacher, choreographer and director, Lifar also tried to position himself as an intellectual in the Paris society he inhabited. However, as Patrizia Veroli already unveiled in an article published in 2012, Lifar's writings were not of his making, as he used Modest Hofmann as his ghost writer¹. Thus, in the last decade, Lifar's reputation as an intellectual was questioned and refuted, which left his role as dancer, choreographer, director and teacher to be further researched. This is what Mark Franko has done in his book.

As it has been said, the book does not only cover Lifar's career in France, but it also analyses the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical context that allowed him to position himself at the centre of intellectual Parisian life. Thus, the first chapters deal with the often-misused term 'neoclassical' and what this meant for the different actors that operated in the French artistic scene during this time. This is a most welcome contribution that Franko has made to dance aesthetics as it opens new paths of understanding the dance writings from the first decades of the century, particularly in the West.

Franko analyses in depth the writings of the influential critic André Levinson (1877-1933), who was a Russian émigré that would help shape dance criticism for decades. Dance criticism and historiography had developed greatly in Russia since the eighteenth century. Levinson's views on classical dance and his belief in the classical canon and language were part of a long tradition in Russian dance history and criticism, which figures like Lydia Nelidova or Akim Volinsky had helped develop. In fact, Levinson's indebtedness to Volinsky is something that Franko keeps reminding readers, as it is important to understand that the origin of the aesthetics and beliefs that would travel from Europe to America were well rooted in Russia, where they had been part of the education of dancers and artists. Lifar was well aware of these beliefs.

As Franko's research progresses, it seems obvious to the reader that the term 'neoclassical' was central to French art during the first dec-

1 Veroli, P. (2012). «Serge Lifar historien et le mythe de la danse russe dans la Zarubezhnaja Rossija (Russie en émigration) 1930-1940», en *Omaggio a Sergej Djagilev. I Ballets Russes (1909-1929) cent'anni dopo*, a cura di Daniela Rizzi e Patrizia Veroli, Avellino, Vereja.

ades of the twentieth century and if there was a choreographer who insisted on using this term in reference to his works, that was Serge Lifar. So much so, that, in Spain, Lifar's ballet terminology has penetrated dance history and criticism to this very day.

It is also clear that, though Lifar owed his career success to the time he spent with Diaghilev's troupe, in his Parisian times he moved from Diaghilev's beliefs in modernism to those of neoclassicism as advocated by the intellectuals of his time.

However, what is fascinating to discover in Franko's research is how the term changes its meaning from person to person and yet, how Lifar seemed to appropriate the word and its ideology to establish himself as the epitome of its meaning. As Franko acknowledges, «what was to become twentieth-century neoclassical ballet was at its inception an amalgam of the seventeenth-century French and eighteenth-century German characteristics alternating between attempts at reconciliation or recurrence of the original conflict. If Lifar is significant to dance history, it is because he embodied this conflict» (p. 128).

Next, Franko presents how the term 'neoclassical' was used by the avant-garde artists in France, especially Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), whose writings would also help shape new artistic trends and aesthetics. Cocteau's idea of the neoclassical also incorporated the vernacular and popular, which explains his contributions to the ballet *Parade* (1917) and his praise of Bronislava Nijinska's *Les Biches* (1924). In contrast to Cocteau, Paul Valéry (1871-1945) also played an important role in the development of French dance theory. However, Valéry's writings focused on the dancing body itself, not so much on the choreographic process. In a way, Valéry's philosophical essays would be echoed in W. E. Yeats's poem «Among School Children» (1937), when the poet posed the question:

«O body swayed to music, O
brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?»

According to Franko, Valéry's approach to dance perception and criticism benefitted Lifar, too, as «it bypassed the question of the choreographic work itself to focus uniquely on the act of dancing» (p. 166).

The book then analyses André Varagnac's definition of folklore and how this could also be interpreted as neoclassicism, following Theodor W. Adorno's theories. According to Adorno, neoclassicism was a vital element of objectivism, and in underdeveloped, agrarian countries, folklore constitutes the objectivism needed for its constitution. His views contrasted with those of Lifar, for whom folklore was but «a deformation of academic dance» (p. 132). Lifar had written in his book *La danse: Les grands courants de la danse académique* (1938) about the connection between the antiquity of folklore and the Aryan race². Varagnac's theories and his beliefs that folklore could penetrate urban France and develop into new forms would soon be displaced by the Vichy regime that confined folklore to the expression of national identity.

Thus, Franko presents in his book a complex web of meanings attached to the word 'neoclassicism' that sparks the reader's attention and interest and that creates a plausible background for the rise and success of Serge Lifar in Paris during those early years. Having established his figure as dancer and choreographer, as well as «intellectual», Franko proceeds to throw some light into his role as collaborationist with the German authorities during the occupation of Paris (1940-1944). This is the most controversial part of the book, at least for some potential readers, as Lifar still enjoys support from ballet critics, historians, and journalists. The chapter dedicated to Lifar's collaborationism with the Germans appears self-explanatory, as the author presents evidence from the archives and the press. Despite Lifar's friends and artistic collaborators attempts to erase all traces of his active support of the Nazis in occupied France, the testimonies and the evidence presented in the book leave Lifar's name tainted. It is in this chapter that Franko returns to the book's point of departure: the ballet *Suite en blanc*. Franko's observation that the ballet is an anomaly within Lifar's choreographic output is a well-made point. In fact, that is possibly the reason why it has survived in the Paris Opera Ballet's repertoire in a way no other work by Lifar has done. When I travelled to Paris in 2007 to see the company's programme *Hommage à Serge Lifar*, only *Suite en Blanc* and *Les Mirages* (1947) seemed to have been handed down to the younger generations of dancers. Of these two, only *Suite en Blanc* had some inter-

2 Lifar's references to the Aryan race would be omitted in the book's English translation.

national standing. As Franko notes, the ballet seemed to be «designed to enhance the perception that Lifar was a major choreographer at the height of his career at a major European opera house» (p. 224). The ballet's lack of story, its starkness and nakedness in the presentation of ballet technique under Lifar's code of neoclassicism clashed with the context in which it was created and marked Lifar's attempts to be seen as a possible leading figure in European ballet. This leads Franko to end his presentation with «a caution to dance studies about the indiscriminate celebration of corporeality as such» (p. 236). This word of caution alerts dance historians and audiences alike to identify the contexts in which artists operate and the works that evolve out of these contexts. The issue here is whether we can ignore the circumstances under which art works are created and enjoy them as if they are worlds of their own or if we have an obligation to see beyond the surface. This is highly problematic, especially in dance, as ballets need to be embodied in performance. Perhaps the future generations will have to make the choices that we cannot make at present.

The last chapter of the book is dedicated to the return of Baroque in the French dance scene. I found this last part a bit confusing in reference to what had come before. Perhaps, it would have been better if this chapter had been developed further, especially in the definition of the term Baroque in the context of postmodern dance and the notion of the body as archive.

Nevertheless, Franko's book provides plenty of food for thought in terms of dance theory. At times, the reading becomes complex and a bit obscure, but his contributions to the notion and use of the term 'neoclassical' provide insightful connections between dance theoreticians and practitioners, something that on many occasions tends to be ignored when discussing dance. The tremendous influence that intellectuals have had on the dance that was made during their time and how this dance has been handed down to us is something that needs to be analysed more in the field of dance studies. Mark Franko has provided a great example on how to accomplish this.

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