

THE BALLETS RUSSES AND AFTER

THE BALLETS RUSSES of Serge Diaghilev brought ballet to the forefront of the arts, as if with a thunderclap. From its first sensational season in Paris in 1909, this was the most exciting dance company in the world – but Diaghilev went far beyond that, creating a meeting place for all the arts. Dance-lovers were bowled over by such stars as Vaslav Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina and Alicia Markova, and choreographers such as Mikhail Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska, Léonide Massine and George Balanchine. Diaghilev also helped to launch musical careers from Stravinsky to Prokofiev, commissioned ballet scores from established names such as Ravel, Debussy, Richard Strauss and Satie, with designs by Bakst, Benois, Picasso, Matisse, and costumes by Chanel – the list is dazzling. Where Romantic ballet had been part of a wider cultural movement, the Ballets Russes *led* cultural fashion, driving innovation in dance, music and design. Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes was a whirlwind of creativity, innovation, scandal and wonder. It lasted for twenty years, and planted the seeds of future ballet companies wherever it went.

Yet the company was created, not by a dancer or choreographer, but by an impresario. There have been many bright and influential managers in ballet’s history – Louis-Désiré Véron at the Paris Opéra, Ivan Vsevolozhsky at the Imperial Theatres – who encouraged and supported revolutions in art. But Diaghilev caused them. He was not a choreographer, musician or painter, though he was knowledgeable in all three fields. His great gift was in bringing artists together, fostering collaboration and talent, then creating a blaze of publicity to launch it into the world.

Diaghilev was born in 1872 in Novgorod, into a provincial gentry family. In 1890 he came to St Petersburg to study law, quickly joining artistic circles. He wasn’t immediately interested in ballet, but his new friends included the