

Diaghilev and London,

A Talk by Graham Bennett, Crouch End and District U3A member

We are not exactly the best of friends with Russia these days - But just over a century ago, Russia exported something that actually transformed the cultural life of London.

This talk is about a quite extraordinary Russian Impresario and two equally extraordinary women who were part of his project

The project was a Russian Dance Company that created a revolution in the world of dance, and London was to play a big part in its success. This company is the Ballet Russes.

The impresario is **Serge Diaghilev**, born in 1872 in Perm in deepest Russia, who would create the Ballet Russes.

Lydia Lopokova from St Petersburg, born in 1892, one of Diaghilev's star ballerinas.

And last but not least, our very own **Hilda Munnings** from Wanstead in East London, born in 1896. Also to become a vitally important member of the company

The story starts in St Petersburg in 1901, the heart of the Russian Empire, at the famous Mariinsky Theatre. Their choreographer **Marius Petipa** and composer **Tchaikovsky** had already created masterpieces such as **The Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker and Swan Lake**. These are such familiar names to us today but they were virtually unknown outside Russia at that time.

Over in England we were still having **a jolly knees up and sing-along** at the Music Hall and even in France, ballet had degenerated to a pale shadow of its former glory.

In 1901, **Lydia Lopokova**, just 9 years old, auditioned for a place at the prestigious **Imperial Theatre School** in St Petersburg. Thousands had applied, but only thirteen were chosen that year, and Lydia was one of them.

But over in the administration department of the Mariinsky, a young man was unfortunately getting the sack. The 29-year-old **Diaghilev** had a prestigious job as assistant to the Director, but he was rather arrogant and strong willed, had a bitter dispute with the Director and was given his marching orders after two years.

But the Mariinsky's loss would turn out to be our gain.

over in England **Hilda Munnings** just 5 years old, was taken on a trip down to London docks and was fascinated by the wild dances of the costermonger girls. When she got home she tried to copy them. The start of her dance career.

Diaghilev at that time was an accomplished musician and art expert and in 1906 took an exhibition of Russian art to Paris. It was so well received that Diaghilev realised there was a real hunger for Russian culture in Western Europe. **He had spotted the gap in the market.** In 1908 he returned to present the complete Mussorgsky opera **Boris Godunov**, starring the famous Russian bass **Feodor Chaliapin**.

To tour a complete Opera Company and Orchestra was hugely expensive and it was conveniently paid for by the Russian Imperial purse, so the next year, 1909, Diaghilev drew up even bigger plans, to present both opera and ballet but unfortunately his subsidy was withdrawn.

Lack of money rarely stopped Diaghilev and he scaled the tour back to concentrate on the ballet, purely and simply because ballet was cheaper to present. But the ace up his sleeve was to present the crème de la crème of the **Imperial ballet**, including **Anna Pavlova**, **Tamara Karsavina**, and, just out of the Imperial school, the young 20 year old **Vaslav Nijinsky**, who was to become one of the greatest male dancers of all time.

Diaghilev asked a hot new talent **Mikhail Fokine** to choreograph the ballets. A wild and charismatic American dancer, Isadora Duncan, who had toured to Russia, had influenced Fokine. Duncan discarded pointe shoes and restrictive clothing and created a new dance style based on improvisation and free-flowing movement.

Diaghilev's ballet company opened in Paris at the **Chatelet Theatre** on May 9th 1909. 110 years ago. It was a sensation. The **Ballet Russes** was born. This first season included **Les Sylphides**, danced by the dream team of **Pavlova, Karsavina and Nijinsky**.

Diaghilev also presented a sensual and exotic ballet **Cleopatra**, featuring **Ida Rubinstein** in the title role. Ida became renowned around Paris for drinking champagne out of lilies and walking around with a panther on a lead. As you can imagine, this went down very well in Paris! Her costumes for Cleopatra were quite risqué for the time.

Word of the success of the Ballet Russes quickly crossed the English channel, and Diaghilev and Nijinsky, already the older man's lover, were invited to London by Sir **Oswald Stoll**, the owner of a brand new Variety Theatre in **St Martin's Lane**, designed by the top theatre architect of the day, **Frank Matcham**.

Variety was the new music hall and this was the largest and most lavish variety theatre in London - Luckily for us, it is still there - **The Coliseum**, opened in 1904

Diaghilev took his seat in the stalls but was appalled by the idea that his Ballet Russes would be just one of the acts at what was basically just a posh music hall, with a boozy and boisterous audience, perhaps sandwiched between a performing dogs act and a lady playing a silver trombone.

"Never, never!" Diaghilev muttered and he stormed off instead to hire the Drury Lane Theatre for the following year. The theatre, very prudently as it happened, asked for £500 up front to confirm the booking, but they never received it as Diaghilev's first Paris season lost money, even though it was an artistic success, **so London had to wait a couple more years before beginning its love affair with the Ballet Russes**.

Nothing kept Diaghilev back and he was soon planning his next season in Paris at the Paris Opera, but much to his distaste, two of his star ballerinas had been offered lucrative contracts in variety over here in London. Anna Pavlova at the Palace Theatre and Tamara Karsavina at the Coliseum. He still had Nijinsky though.

But Lydia Lopokova had now just graduated from the Imperial Ballet School, and joined the Ballet Russes for their Paris season in 1910. Again a brilliant success, new

productions of **Carnaval** and **Scheherazade** and **The Firebird** astonished the Parisian crowds, who were witnessing a completely new art form. The score for the Firebird had been commissioned from a 27-year-old Russian composer, **Igor Stravinsky** and designed by the artist **Leon Bakst**

This was the first time Stravinsky's music had been heard in Western Europe, and the first time that music, story, design and choreography were all commissioned for the Ballet Russes. **For the next 20 years, Diaghilev brought together some of the greatest artists and composers of the time to collaborate on his ballets.**

The designer of both Scheherazade and The Firebird was Leon Bakst, introducing vivid colour combinations, and featuring the exotic and oriental

This being Paris, the Scheherazade costumes and design immediately inspired a fashion revolution and harem pants, turbans and floor cushions became all the rage!

The role of **The Firebird** was created for **Karsavina**, on a month's leave from the Coliseum, But she had to return to London before the season was over so **Lydia Lopokova** was handed the plum role of the Firebird - not bad for a young dancer just out of ballet school. To get more press exposure, Diaghilev took a year off her real age, and claimed she was just 17!

She was so successful that agents started to buzz around her dressing room offering vast sums of money, **rather like football talent scouts these days!** So she signed up for a season in America for the equivalent today of about £16,000 a month. She was just 18, and didn't dance again with Diaghilev for another 5 years.

Over in London, **Pavlova** had been starring in **Variety** at the **Palace Theatre** with her dance partner **Mikhail Mordkin**. The **Palace Theatre**, happily still standing in Cambridge Circus, was commissioned by **Richard D'Oyley Carte**, founder of the **D'Oyley Carte Opera Company**. It opened in 1891 grandly titled **The Royal English Opera House**. But Opera didn't go well and it became another Variety theatre, **The Palace Theatre of Varieties**.

Now we meet **Hilda Munnings** again - she was now a student at London's best dance academy - Mrs. Stedman's at 41 Great Windmill Street, off Shaftesbury Avenue, and desperate to see Pavlova dance she used her lunch money to buy a ticket in the upper circle.

Now **Mordkin** fell out with **Pavlova** after she slapped him on the face on stage during a performance - which he didn't take kindly to! He promptly set up his own company, grandly named **All Star Imperial Russian Ballet** and Hilda Munnings along with three other English girls auditioned and were accepted into the company and set off on an American tour. She was just 15 years old. In New York, **Lydia Lopokova** also joined the company for a short while and **Hilda Munnings and Lydia Lopokova** met for the first time.

Lopokova wisely left before the **ALL Star Imperial Russian Ballet** set off on an ill-fated tour of the States. Russian dance didn't sell so well away from New York and Box office receipts fell away, the Russian dancers and management all quit, leaving 15 year old Hilda and the three other young English girls stranded and penniless in New Orleans.

Their hotel owner took pity on them and waived their bills and the New York promoter eventually booked them on a boat back to New York and then their passage home. They had no money at all and the driver taking them to the boat took pity on them and gave them a few dollars so they could at least eat on board. What an adventure.

1911 and at last it was the turn of London to see the Ballet Russes. The **genteel suburb of Muswell Hill** was being rapidly developed, its shopping centre claiming to be one of the best in London, including **William Martyn's first store** - and reached by steam trains chugging up the hill from Highgate to Muswell Hill station and on to Alexandra Palace.

Diaghilev's first London season is at the **Royal Opera House, Covent Garden** in 1911. It was built in 1858 and this is the third theatre on the site - the first two burnt down - a very common fate for theatres.

The Russians were astonished to discover the theatre was in the middle of a vegetable market, surrounded by piles of cabbages, potatoes and carrots, and many of us will remember the market - and the streets jammed with lorries when you came out of the theatres there.

The season was a big hit and Diaghilev was given the great honour of presenting a ballet at the **coronation Gala** for the new King, **George 5th**.

Diaghilev was cautious in his programming for the first season in England, probably because he wasn't yet familiar with London audiences. He discovered that they preferred the romantic ballets to the more exotic and sensual Cleopatra and Scheherazade and he didn't feel he could present the new Stravinsky ballet, The Firebird as he thought the style too advanced for the English! As it turned out, how wrong!

Ballet fans will know that The Royal Ballet still has this production in their repertoire and it was recently performed at Covent Garden.

The only change is that they use the costumes designed by Natalia Goncharova for a later production for the Ballet Russes rather than the original Leon Bakst designs and there is currently an exhibition of Natalia Goncharova's work at Tate Britain until September.

Diaghilev was promptly invited back for an autumn season at Covent Garden and persuaded Pavlova to rejoin the company and she once again danced with Nijinsky, the last time they danced together. Shortly after Pavlova made her home in London, renting, and then buying **Ivy House**, in **North End Road**, Golders Green, where she lived for the rest of her life. In later life **Karsavina** also became a North London resident, living in Hampstead.

The next year 1912 Diaghilev had another huge success in Paris, this time with the first work of choreography by his young lover and protégée **Vaslav Nijinsky**. This is the **L'Après midi d'une faune** with music by **Debussy**.

Nijinsky introduces a completely new dance form with this ballet, the dancers having their chests facing front but heads, arms and legs in profile, as Diaghilev had encouraged

him to study in Ancient Greek and Egyptian images. The dancers found this very difficult, with their formal ballet training completely reversed.

It is a short ballet; a faune lies sleeping on a rock in the forest and is woken by a group of maidens. One goes to bathe - they all leave but the bather leaves behind her scarf, and the faune returns to the rock with the scarf and, how can I put this delicately, pleasures himself with it.

This final scene caused an outrage in Paris, both boos and cheers rang out. But of course, nothing wrong with a bit of scandal to sell tickets and it guaranteed full houses with extra performances put on to deal with the demand.

Diaghilev finally let London see Stravinsky's **Firebird** that year, the first time that Stravinsky's music had been heard in England, and conducted by Thomas Beecham, son of the industrialist Joseph Beecham. Diaghilev needn't have worried about Londoners taste as they loved this work and it became a favourite.

Around this time Mikhail **Fokine**, the first choreographer, quit the company, as Diaghilev now favoured Nijinsky as his choreographer Nijinsky had developed from being the most extraordinary dancer, but under Diaghilev's, forceful encouragement and guidance, his new choreographer.

Ballet Russes was always on the lookout for new dancers, and next year 1913 our very own **Hilda Munnings** auditioned and was accepted into the company, one of the first English dancers to join and straight into rehearsals for Nijinsky's new ballet **Le Sacre de Printemps - The Rite of Spring**, with another commissioned score by **Stravinsky**,

Stravinsky's score for this piece is fiendishly complex and a familiar name to us joined the company to help the dancers with the rhythms of the piece. This is **Marie Rambert**, who will go on to found Ballet Rambert in London and which is still with us today as **Rambert dance company**, now in very swanky purpose built studios behind the National Theatre on the South Bank.

The Rite of Spring is a primitive tribal ritual celebrating the advent of spring, with a young girl chosen as a sacrificial victim who dances herself to death. The premiere in Paris is renowned through theatre history as one which nearly provoked a riot - the conservative Parisian audience booted and jeered and the young bohemian Ballet Russes fans cheered and shouted to drown them out.

Some say..... that Diaghilev himself organised the latter. The pandemonium, which greeted the first sounds of the ballet, was so huge that the dancers couldn't hear the music and Nijinsky stood in the wings counting out the beats. How exciting for the young **Hilda Munnings** to be part of that performance and event - and just 17 years old.

It was the scandal of the year, of course, unsurprisingly guaranteeing full houses every time it was performed.

This extraordinary piece of music has inspired over 200 different ballet productions - One of the most powerful and dramatic versions is by the German choreographer Pina Bausch. This is performed on a stage covered in tons of earth.

This production was seen earlier this year at Sadlers Wells danced by the English National Ballet.

Nijinsky's Rite of Spring was only ever performed four times in London. Those performances took place at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane.

This is the fourth theatre on the site; the first was built in 1660, making it the oldest theatre site in London still in use. Both the first and third theatres burnt down and the owner of the third, **Richard Sheridan** was discovered drinking wine in the street while watching the fire and he was famously reported to have said: "**A man may surely be allowed to take a glass of wine by his own fireside**".

Diaghilev was a very superstitious man and hated to cross water. A gypsy fortuneteller had warned him that he would die by water, so he didn't go with the company on a tour to South America, but at the end of the voyage in Buenos Aires, Vaslav Nijinsky, rather out of the blue, got married. Diaghilev was furious and sacked Nijinsky on his return. **His lover, his male star, his choreographer was gone.**

Such a blow would stop most people in their tracks, but not Diaghilev - it is not long before he discovers another young and handsome Russian actor/dancer that he feels he can mould both as a dancer and choreographer - and who will also become his lover - and this is **Leonide Massine**.

This turned out to be another superb piece of talent spotting as Massine followed Nijinsky in becoming a principal dancer and also creating memorable ballets, including a new version of **Rite of Spring**, when he cast Hilda Munnings as the chosen maiden.

The First World War together with the revolutions in Russia in 1917 brought immense difficulties and change for Diaghilev. Bookings were few and far between but luckily he got an offer to tour in America, and discovered Lydia Lopokova was more than happy to return to the company.

She found a very different company with new works being created by Massine and also met up again with Hilda Munnings.

But she wasn't **Hilda Munnings** any more as she was first renamed **Munningsova**, which presumably didn't go well as she was finally renamed **Lydia Sokolova**. Almost all the non-Russian members of Ballet Russes were given new Russian names to maintain the illusion that it was full of Russians.

But after America, Ballet Russes had no money, no bookings and the dancers were scattered around war torn Europe. But even in the middle of the First World War, Diaghilev brought together the composer **Eric Satie**, one of the new wave of avant-garde French composers, the young Spanish artist **Pablo Picasso** and the French writer **Jean Cocteau** and created a quiet extraordinary ballet **Parade** premiered in Paris in May 1917. One of the dancers in Parade, **Olga Kokhlova**, caught Picasso's eye and became his first wife, and mother of their son Paulo.

Picasso designed quite unique and probably difficult to wear costumes. They represented two fairground managers and Eric Satie used typewriters, ships sirens, pistol shots and an airplane engine as part of the score. It is hard to imagine that just

over 100 miles north of Paris the second battle of Arras was under way with a horrendous death toll.

Out of the blue in early 1918 Diaghilev got an offer from **Oswald Stoll** for the company to perform in Variety at the **London Coliseum**, the same Coliseum that Diaghilev had stormed out of 9 years earlier. But this was a lifeline and the offer was gratefully accepted this time.

Permissions had to be granted for travel and mines dodged in the English Channel but in August 1918, The Ballet Russes were back in London and on a variety bill. They performed twice daily, presenting half the programme - the remainder probably still filled with performing dogs and ladies playing silver trombones. Variety audiences at the time were extremely rowdy, but to their astonishment, the Ballet Russes were received in a totally different way and the audiences were respectful and absorbed.

Once again they were hugely popular, and took dance to a completely new audience in London. And Diaghilev moved back into his favourite hotel in London, The Savoy - just around the corner from the Coliseum.

After their performances on Armistice Day, November 11th 1918 they celebrated with the rest of London just down the road in Trafalgar Square. Hilda Munnings, now Lydia Sokolova recalled ending up on the bonnet of a bus among the crowds.

The season ran for 7 months at the Coliseum, and they had 17 curtain calls on their last night. I reckon they were probably seen by about half a million people in that time, a significant proportion of a Greater London population, then about 7 million, and of course took dance to a very different audience to that of the Opera House.

Lydia Lopokova is now the star of the company and became renowned for an **underwear malfunction** while on stage dancing in **Les Sylphides**. The said piece of underwear fell to the ground, Lopokova stepped out of it, picked it up and threw the offending item into the wings and carried on dancing. This event became legendary and the balletomanes gave her the nickname of Loppie.

Balletomanes were a new breed. The cult of becoming a fan of individual dancers had begun and of course still goes on today.

In 1919, after the Coliseum run, the company moved round the corner to the rather spectacular **Alhambra Theatre** in Leicester Square - now relieved of the necessity of appearing with performing dogs and clowns.

The **Alhambra** had opened in 1854 as the curiously named **The Royal Panopticon of Science and Arts**, built in the Moorish style and dominating Leicester Square. It was then renamed the Alhambra, and presented music hall and variety. Sadly it was demolished in 1936 to make way for the Odeon Leicester Square.

Massine had developed into a very successful choreographer and dancer, and the season at The Alhambra includes two new works, **La Boutique Fantastique** designed by the artist Andre Derain with music by Rossini, the first ballet of Diaghilev's to be premiered in England, and featuring both our Lydias in leading roles. This was followed by **Le Tricorne**, **The Three Cornered Hat** with music by De Falla and designed by **Pablo Picasso**.

To paint the cloths for his ballets, Diaghilev hired a studio in Floral Street, Covent Garden and employed a Russian artist, Vladimir Polunin.

And, next time you are in Covent Garden, if you stand outside Masala Zone in Floral Street, opposite the stage door to the Opera House, you will see a plaque commemorating the event.

In this building Pablo Picasso painted the backdrop for Diaghilev's production of Massine's Ballet Le Tricorne 1919.

The cloth itself had an interesting history. A few years later, Diaghilev, as always short of cash, cut out the central section that was the only section painted and sold it to raise money (with Picasso's permission by the way). It ended up in the restaurant of the Seagram Building in New York until 2015, when it was moved to the New York Historical Society. It is the largest Picasso in the United States!

Diaghilev also employed dozens of London costumiers, shoemakers and wig and prop makers. One of his favourite wigmakers was **Willy Clarkson**, based in Wardour Street now the Wong Kei restaurant in Chinatown but look up as you are going in for your dim sum and you will see his clock still on the building marked costumier and perruquier. But not telling the correct time!

After The Alhambra Season the company moved next door into the Empire Theatre Leicester Square and The Ballet Russes had been resident in London for nearly a year by then and enormously popular with audiences from all walks of life who now had a real taste for this new art form of the Ballet Russes, but what exactly is it?

A complete evening of pure dance, usually 3 works creating the triple bill

Daring new musical scores and eye-catching designs and choreography collectively creating an avant garde art form

prominence to the male dancers - changing their role.

Introducing freedom of movement - that movement comes from within the body, expressed through the entire body

Subject matter that was very deep - Greek mythology, the Bible, folklore and primal legends

These are completely accepted by us today but a century ago this was radical stuff.

History repeated itself a year or so later as Massine fell in love with one of the English dancers in the company, Vera Clarke, renamed Vera Sevina and once again, this causes a furiously jealous Diaghilev to fire him from the company.

Again with no lover and no choreographer, but he has a big new idea. In 1916, a musical, **Chu Chin Chow** had opened in London, and ran for an astonishing 5 years at His Majesty's Theatre. A run not equaled until **Salad Days** in 1954.

Diaghilev wondered if a full length Russian Ballet, **The Sleeping Beauty, Tchaikovsky and Petipa's masterpiece**, could enjoy the same success? Diaghilev was the great persuader and Oswald Stoll was persuaded, and put up about half a million pounds in today's money.

It had to be put on in just three months. Leon Bakst needed a lot of persuading to design and make 250 costumes and all the sets. It was a massive undertaking.

Diaghilev threw himself into every aspect of the project, and asked **Bronislava Nijinska**, the younger sister of Vaslav, to rechoreograph some dances. She went on to choreograph many important ballets for Diaghilev including **Les Noces, Les Biches and Le Train Bleu, The Blue Train**.

The expenditure on the ballet mounted alarmingly and Diaghilev quickly got through the first half million and Stoll had to fund another half million pounds to complete the production. It premiered at the **Alhambra Theatre** in Leicester Square in November 1921

The great and the good were all there to see what no one in the West had seen before, this magnificent score from Tchaikovsky and Petipa's choreography. But the first night didn't go well - part of the scenery got stuck,

Lydia Lopokova was dancing the Lilac fairy and had to wave her wand and cast her spell to make the forest descend but it didn't. The forest got stuck. The curtain had to be brought down and Diaghilev told the orchestra to play Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony while repairs were made. It must have been a long night!

Once they worked, the sets and scenery were magnificent, Diaghilev had succeeded in recreating the splendour of the work, which he renamed the Sleeping Princess, rather than the Sleeping Beauty as we know it today.

But the high ticket price and limited potential audience just didn't justify a continuous run - there were not enough fans to keep the production going and it closed after 105 performances,

But there was one very committed fan, who came just about every night that Lydia Lopokova was performing - He sat on the front row and fell in love with the charismatic dancer.

Lopokova's admirer was none other than the famous economist **John Maynard Keynes**, a member of the fashionable and very intellectual **Bloomsbury set** of Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Lytton Strachey, and Lytton Strachey's cousin, Duncan Grant - in fact Keynes was Duncan Grant's lover.

Keynes Bloomsbury chums thought he had lost the plot. They were shocked to discover that he had actually begun an affair with a woman - and even more surprised that she was a Russian ballerina. - But Keynes courted her with gusto and they quickly became lovers. In all probability this event took place at the Waldorf Hotel in Aldwych where Lydia was staying!

But *The Sleeping Princess* was a financial disaster and Diaghilev made a run for Paris before the final week leaving huge debts and unpaid and out of work dancers. Worse still, Stoll impounded the sets and costumes.

It took two years before Diaghilev could clear his debt and return to England - And he never again attempted to present a complete ballet from the past.

The *Sleeping Princess* costumes were thought to have been destroyed, but they turned up in France in the 1960's and were auctioned at Sotheby's along with other Ballet Russes costumes and many were obtained by the Victoria and Albert museum.

Once again, Diaghilev is broke but as usual springs back into action with new ideas and new collaborators. And luckily he gets an offer to be based in Monte Carlo presenting a winter season every year.

And of course an attractive young Irish dancer **Patrick Kay** caught his eye, joined the company and rapidly became a new lover and favourite - He was renamed **Anton Dolin**, who went on to have a major impact on the development of male dancers in England.

Anton Dolin was immediately given a lead role in **Nijinska's** new ballet **Le Train Bleu, The Blue Train** along with Lydia Sokolova. The score was by Darius Milhaud. The ballet was named after the blue train that took the young and trendy from Paris to the Cote D'Azur every summer, and is set on a beach with a sporty theme. The costume designer was Coco Chanel.

And one of the stars of the show was a superb front curtain by **Picasso**. He didn't paint this one himself; it was scaled up from a very small gouache. This curtain is also now owned by the V&A.

Also joining the company around this time was a very young girl, just 14, named **Alicia Marks**, she was a local girl to us - from up the road in Finsbury Park - and promptly renamed as **Alicia Markova**. Because of her age, Alicia was taken under the wing of an older Irish girl who had joined the company. Her name is **Ninette de Valois**.

Both Markova and Dolin had been suggested to Diaghilev by an original member of Ballet Russes, the grandly named **Princess Serafine Astafieva**, who had set up the **Russian Dancing Academy** at **The Pheasantry in the Kings Road in Chelsea**, where they were students.

Well known in the swinging sixties as a trendy nightclub, now rather sadly a Pizza restaurant. If you look closely you will see the blue plaque on the wall. **Princess Astafieva 1876-1934 Ballet Dancer, lived and taught here 1916 to 1934.**

But Lopokova, once the darling of the company, only appears as an occasional guest as she decided to focus on her relationship with Keynes and they were married in 1926 and she danced with ballet Russes for the last time in 1927.

Already in the company then was a young Russian dancer who had fled Russia with his wife. His name was anglicised as **George Balanchine**, who became the fifth choreographer to work with the company and went on to create 9 ballets. Two well-known works of his are still

performed today - **The Prodigal Son**, with music by Prokofiev and **Apollo**, as it is now known, composed by Stravinsky.

George Balanchine went on to found the **New York City Ballet**, which he directed for 35 years.

Ballet Russes during the late 1920s was relatively stable, with regular seasons every year in London, Paris, and Monte Carlo. The company even ventured out of London and toured England and Scotland, performing in Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and their last season in London was 90 years ago in the summer of 1929 at Covent Garden.

Demand was so high that the Theatre had to squeeze in some extra seats, and **Lydia Sokolova**, in her 16th year with the company danced the role of the chosen maiden in Massine's **Rite of Spring** to enormous acclaim as she had returned to the company after a serious illness. **Tamara Karsavina** danced in Fokine's ballet *Petrushka*, **Anton Dolin** also returned to the company to dance the **bluebird pas de deux** from *The Sleeping Beauty* with **Alicia Markova**. But the dancers were alarmed by Diaghilev's appearance as he had become very ill.

After the season finished and the dancers dispersed for the summer, Diaghilev headed to his favourite city Venice, ignoring his doctor's advice to try and seek a cure. His health deteriorated rapidly and he died in Venice, by water as had been foretold, on the **19th August 1929, aged just 57**.

As in life, he died on credit - his friends had to pay his hotel bill. And Coco Chanel paid for a grand funeral. He is buried in Venice on **Isola de San Michele** with a magnificent tombstone and just a few yards away, the grave of Igor Stravinsky.

Ballet Russes didn't survive his death, it was bankrupt and the figurehead and driving force had gone. There were several reincarnations under different leaders and different names but none had the charisma and drive of Diaghilev. And the Great depression began with the stock market crash of 1929 and that changed the world of finance and patronage.

For us precious seeds had been sown. The Ballet Russes had given more performances in London than any other city in the world - in fact nearly half of their performances and suddenly a pool of talented dancers had returned to England, and there was a will to create a British dance company.

Lydia Lopokova was immortalised on the National Gallery entrance hall mosaic floor as Terpsichore the goddess of dance by artist **Boris Anrep**, you probably have stepped over her without realising, and she and her husband **John Maynard Keynes** were involved in the setting up the **Camargo Society** in 1930, to gather a group of professional dancers together to present work. Their main choreographer was to be a young **Frederick Ashton**, just 26.

Diaghilev's Ballet Russes legacy today

Marie Rambert had founded her first small dance troupe in 1926, and after Diaghilev's death several of his dancers joined group, renamed the Ballet Club, based at the Mercury Theatre

in Ladbroke Road. Some of you may remember that building. This became Ballet Rambert, and now the Rambert Dance Company

Ninette de Valois founded her own dance school after leaving Ballet Russes, and with **Lilian Baylis** who had saved the derelict Sadlers Wells from being redeveloped as a factory formed the **Vic-Wells ballet** in 1931.

In 1939 the Vic-Wells Ballet was renamed the **Sadlers Wells Ballet**., and the first full-length ballet they presented - yes, of course Petipa's Sleeping Beauty. The company became the resident company at the Royal Opera House in 1956, becoming the **Royal Ballet**, still led by de Valois. Later in her life, **Ninette de Valois claimed that everything she knew about how to run a ballet company she learned from working with Diaghilev.**

And **Alicia Markova** also founded a company with Anton **Dolin** in 1935 - the **Markova -Dolin** Company and then in 1950 they founded the **Festival Ballet**, to celebrate the Festival of Britain now renamed as **English National Ballet**.

Both **Lydia Sokolova** and **Tamara Karsavina**, who had married a British diplomat, as you do - returned to teach, coach, work on choreography and occasionally perform.

as well as founding the Camargo society Lopokova and Keynes also founded the **Cambridge Arts Theatre**, Keynes virtually paying for it himself, which opened in 1936 with a gala performance by the Vic-Wells Ballet, featuring **Robert Helpmann, Margot Fonteyn and Frederick Ashton**.

But most importantly in 1940 Keynes, now **Lord Keynes**, became the first chairman of **CEMA, the Council for Encouragement of music and the Arts**, establishing the very important principle of state funding for the Arts - and he was instrumental in drafting the first **Arts Council Charter in 1946**, and it is with Arts Council funding that those and many other contemporary dance companies now thrive and develop today, giving them the financial stability that Ballet Russes never had.

It would have been a very different dance scene today but for one extraordinary Russian impresario a century ago - Serge Diaghilev