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Pomo Retro Rite

IF YOU WERE IN NEW YORK IN 2007, you could have seen at least half a dozen different dance versions of *The Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du printemps*). Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes premiered the original ballet, with choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky and music by Igor Stravinsky, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on the 29th of May 1913, to a volatile audience of aristocrats and aesthetes. After less than ten performances it disappeared, never to be seen again. Stravinsky's score outlived the *scandale*, consolidating its initial shock into canonical fame, but the ballet itself dissolved into myth. Its loss—and its lurid reputation—have proved an irresistible challenge to choreographers, reconstructors and historians ever since Léonide Massine remounted the music for Diaghilev in 1920. The composer himself reinforced the myth by issuing contradictory opinions of those first two stagings.

It was the myth, not the ballet, that Yvonne Rainer set out to examine in *RoS Indexical*, commissioned by Performa 07. Rainer's *Rite*, shown twice in November at the Hudson Theatre, was a many-layered project that asked the question, what can we know about a legendary dance if it exists only as legend? Rainer's oddly challenging work led me to a universe of *Sacre* far more expansive than the creators could have imagined, but the ballet remained an elusive artifact. Rainer not only destabilized the notion of *The Rite of Spring* as an iconic achievement in dance history; she allowed us to see that a work may live on in greatly altered form, and that its status can actually get validated as it detaches itself from a deceptively permanent identity.

The first thing I thought as *RoS Indexical* began was how really retro it looked. Four women (Emily Coates, Sally Silvers, Patricia Hoffbauer and Pat Catterson) wandered out, dressed in motley practice clothes, and sat at a small table. Facing each other chattily like lunch companions, they began humming under their breath, as if they were trying to remember a tune, to get it back. On tape, the overture to *Le Sacre du printemps* was playing. The friends caught bits of its phrases, lost track, agreed on wispy melodic threads, much as Stravinsky's "Introduction" does. They gradually discovered a pulse that cohered into an irregular rhythm, anticipating the barbaric meters of Stravinsky's opening scene, "Auguries of Spring."

But the women seemed oblivious of the urgency and strangeness of

the music. Instead, with a fumbly, funny but earnest plainness, a calculated spontaneity, they were reconstituting another lost icon, the signature performing style of the postmodern dance generation. I thought of Yvonne Rainer's low-key but suggestive pedestrian dances of the '60s, and of the improvisational group the Grand Union, which she founded in 1970. By the end of the '70s Rainer had left dance and was making feminist films, fractured, depersonalized narratives of resistance and crisis. Now here was Rainer, choreographing again, retrieving the off-handedness, revisiting the ambivalence about the power games inherent in performing that had propelled a generation of dance revolutionaries. Today's dance avant-garde, if there is one, has gotten over the '60s. New dancers now use the tools of postmodernism—nonlinearity, random mixtures of styles and stimuli, infringement of mainstream values—but they've reclaimed the glamour and physical thrills that were scorned by the postmodernists. Their politics are easier.

Like other choreographic appropriations of the *Rite*, *RoS Indexical* took Stravinsky's music as a text. But rather than adopting a straight-up orchestral accompaniment, Rainer set her dance over the soundtrack of a 2006 BBC feature film, *Riot at the Rite*, directed by Andy Wilson. She eliminated the film's visual image. *Riot at the Rite* was a docudrama about the making of *Le Sacre*, with the last half-hour devoted to the ballet's chaotic first performance. As of this writing, *Riot at the Rite* hasn't been released on DVD, but the "Premiere" section could be seen in four parts on YouTube. With the music fading in and out under catcalls, arguments, shrieks of outrage and approval, the film bumps back and forth between a tumultuous audience; an anxious Nijinsky, Diaghilev and backstage entourage; and dancers of the Finnish National Ballet performing the dance as reconstructed by Millicent Hodson. Well-known English actors are cast as rich patrons, journalists, painters and ballet notables. Hodson herself can be glimpsed scribbling on a hand-held sketchpad as the artist Valentine Gross. Gross's drawings were a major source for Hodson in recovering the *Sacre's* movement.

Hodson's prodigious research culminated in a full revival, produced in 1987 by the Joffrey Ballet. With backdrops and costumes reproduced by art historian Kenneth Archer from the designs of Nicholas Roerich, the reconstruction was probably the closest thing we'll see to Nijinsky's original. Still controversial, it's been hailed as a miracle by some critics and scholars, dismissed by others as inauthentic. By the time *Riot at the Rite* was filmed, Hodson and Archer had set this version on ten ballet companies in Europe, the United States and Japan. They were called in to work as consultants on the film from the outset, but the producers' goal of a good story sometimes snagged against Hodson's scrupulous notions of *vérité*. She and Archer published an extended documentation of their involvement with the film in the British publication *Ballet* (February 2006). Tactfully, they didn't say whether they objected to the fact that the ballet surfaced only in brief clips, intercut with the audience's rude response. Their reconstruction was filmed for Dance in

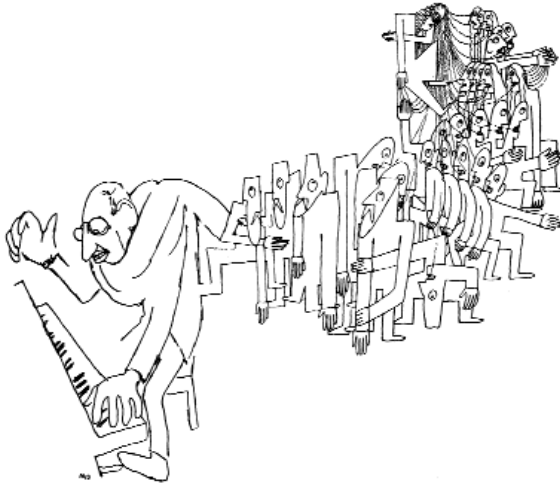
America in 1989, but the very fact that *Riot at the Rite* sacrificed the complete ballet suited the designs of Yvonne Rainer.

RoS Indexical was a palimpsest of absence and recall. Not only did it evoke the innocence and determined iconoclasm of the '60s counter-culture, it referred us to the *Rite of Spring* as a potent but forever occluded source of energy. As soon as the music on the TV soundtrack swooped into the eerie cadence that signals curtain-up, Rainer's quartet of women left the table and clustered together facing each other. On the erratic accents of the music they began the stamping, gesturing dance of Nijinsky/Hodson's choreography. Reconstructing the reconstruction, they tapped into the dance that appeared on the invisible film.

I recognized these chunks of the choreography in their performance, but as I studied a rehearsal film provided to me by the Performa office, I realized how substantial Rainer's borrowings were, and how they were very deliberately matched to the music and then just as deliberately separated from it. My hunch is that these excerpts were precisely those you could have seen on the film, downsized for four dancers. When the film editors cut away, the *RoS* dancers abruptly left off doing Nijinsky and had to fill in for the missing stage footage. So Rainer's dance is a partial recovery of the BBC's partial portrayal of *Le Sacre*. She filled in the gaps with her own variations on Nijinsky, and with other things. Sometimes the women seemed to ad lib in Grand Union style, using other movement remembered from other movies, or that might have randomly come into their heads. There are other episodes prompted by Stravinsky and Nijinsky/Hodson. During the "Spring Rounds" section, the ritual groups of young men and women throw their upper bodies forward to touch the earth. The Rainer women sit on an overstuffed sofa and double over, as if stretching tense backs or recovering from exertion, on the same music as the originally choreographed foldovers.

There was even an abduction, though nothing like the implied rape scene of Nijinsky's overheated tribal celebrants. It happened during Stravinsky's musical entr'acte. Silvers, Coates, Hoffbauer and Catterson slumped on the sofa for a minute, then took off their sneakers and encased their feet in Kleenex boxes. They were trying to dance in this extraordinary footwear when a mob of people, including a man and a woman in replicas of Roerich's Russian peasant costumes, rushed up to the stage from the audience, yelling and swarming around them. They picked up Coates and carried her offstage.

One of the things that makes any recovery of *Le Sacre du printemps* problematic is that it isn't a conventional narrative. Its action is ritualistic, de-familiarized. To observe the return of the sun and ensure its own survival, an ancient tribe enacts certain prescribed dances, games, and commemorations. Finally, it yields up one of its maidens; she dances herself to death, symbolically uniting with the sun in



Jean Cocteau. *Stravinsky Rehearsing The Rite of Spring*, 1913.
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exchange for the renewal of life, the continuation of the tribe. Written notations and descriptions tell us that there were mystic lines, circles, acts of devotion, but nothing spells out exactly how Nijinsky translated these formulas into dancing. For her massive research, Millicent Hodson scoured eyewitness accounts, annotated scores left by Stravinsky and by Nijinsky's assistant Marie Rambert. She looked at drawings and photographs, interviewed survivors, pieced together the enormous canvas that was the original ballet. She also had to exercise a fine judgment, sifting out feverish partisanship, literary license and imperfect recollections, interpreting poetic images, learning how to move archaic shapes and raucous rhythms, establishing floor patterns for some forty dancers in counterpointed groups. Probably the most reliable and incisive contemporary observer was the critic Jacques Rivière, writing in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, but even he speaks in aesthetic terms, not graphic ones. The further away from 1913 you get, the less dependable people's memories are, the more the writer is subject to distortion and favoritism. In at least two editions of George Balanchine and Francis Mason's popular *Stories of the Great Ballets* (New York: Doubleday, 1975; London: W. H. Allen, 1978) we get a two-page synopsis of what may be a *Rite of Spring* choreographed in 1962 by Kenneth MacMillan. It differs significantly from the most dependable accounts of Nijinsky's work in the distribution of the personnel, their actions, and the sequence of actions.

The ballet described by Mason and Balanchine interprets the music romantically and adapts the scenario to feature the male-female pairings. In the original, the men's and women's groups were strictly segregated except for brief instances when couples joined in contact during the first act. The later ballet sounds like a modern mating dance instead of a primal invocation of fertility. These notions are similar but

not identical. Choreographers ever since have focused on the sexual implications of the *Sacre*. Pina Bausch staged it in 1975 as all-out sex war, with the Chosen One as a battered, martyred victim. Maurice Béjart's 1959 version converted the "Danse Sacrale" into a duet: the men and women of his tribe choose one couple to mate and thus incite a mass orgy. Béjart's 1960 *Bolero* might be seen as an even more suggestive interpretation of Nijinsky's sacrificial dance. A woman undulates on a platform surrounded by lecherous males. This piece was performed in the US by Béjart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century, with a female sex object and later with an all-male cast.

These titillating precedents linger on in the 2001 version by Angelin Preljocaj. His "Danse Sacrale" begins as one woman is stripped by the other men and women. Dancing stark naked as they watch, she's brutally groped, lifted and thrown around, then abandoned. (YouTube X-rated one version of this.) Preljocaj combines Bausch's violent love-pursuit with Béjart's voyeurism, cycling ballet's old equation of sex=death=dancing into the current craze for physically daring duets. In a weird defense of what is on one level an artistic peep show, Preljocaj and dancers in his company have insisted that this *Sacre* is a feminist statement.

Prior to the *Sacre*, Diaghilev's audience had been shocked, then dazzled, by the exotic Fokine/Léon Bakst ballets—*Firebird*, *Schéhérazade*, *Narcisse*—and Nijinsky's sensual *l'Après-midi d'un Faune*. Confronted with the *Sacre*, they were jolted again. It must have been the ballet's refusal of eroticism, as much as Stravinsky's orchestral clangor and broken rhythms, that caused the riot. Far from exploiting sex, *Le Sacre du printemps* was a venture in dance abstraction. Jacques Rivière begins his famous essay with this remarkable perception: "The great innovation of *Le Sacre du printemps* is the absence of all 'trimmings.' Here is a work that is absolutely pure. Cold and harsh, if you will, but without any glaze to mar its inherent brilliance, without any artifices to rearrange or distort its contours."¹ Rivière is talking about a theater work that insists on drawing attention to the body but deprives the viewer of anything that sentimentalizes or sexualizes it. Nijinsky's movement was disconnected, asymmetrical, anti-histrionic, presenting the viewer with "a thousand complex and mysterious objects that need only to be looked at." Rivière finds himself uneasy, even depressed, despite his appreciation of this achievement. He seems overpowered by the pre-human forces it evokes, the senseless march of evolution, ". . . the terrifying labor of the cells."

Abstraction in dance probably causes the viewer more anxiety than it does in painting. The loss of the figurative is harder to come to terms with when the figure is so palpable before us, insisting on its own effacement or transfiguration. Jacques Rivière speaks of Nijinsky's dancers as severe and centered, containing movement inside the body rather than

¹ Jacques Rivière, "From 'Le Sacre du printemps,'" November 1913. Trans. by Miriam Lassman. Reprinted in *Nijinsky Dancing*, by Lincoln Kirstein (New York, 1975), pp. 164–168.

letting it flow out vaguely, as he thought they did in Fokine's choreography. Any latent eroticism in the *Sacre's* theme was contradicted by these totemic figures. The dance was impersonal, anti-illusionistic, and in the end pitiless, ageless and amoral. In its resistance to flattery and romance, its downplaying of individual glamour, and its denial of the audience's expectations of beauty, *Le Sacre* anticipated the postmodern dance of half a century later.

A whole line of dispassionate contemporary renderings of the music has paralleled the flagrant ones, from Molissa Fenley's minimalistic solo marathon (*State of Darkness*, 1988) to *RoS Indexical*. In November, Performa 07 produced another *Rite of Spring* inspired by a musical performance of the work, Xavier Le Roy's *Le Sacre du printemps*. Where Rainer engaged the music and the dance by minimizing them, Le Roy created an additive piece. He learned the movements of Simon Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in a videotaped performance of the *Sacre*, then presented them as a choreographed solo. Dancers learn by imitating their choreographers and teachers. Who was to say Le Roy's performance wasn't a dance? For his accompaniment, he'd placed speakers under the audience's seats, each playing an electronically separated section of the orchestra. I didn't get to see this piece, but presumably you'd experience being in the orchestra yourself, with Le Roy cuing and prodding you as he simulated the conductor's hyper-physical performance.

One of the postmodern dancers' primary strategies for reform was to declare that anyone could be a dancer. Away with the polish, the star persona, the exclusivity of technique and stage effects. Yvonne Rainer's 1966 *Trio A* is a six-minute paradigm of this democratizing principle. The performer, essentially remaining in place, executes a series of unrelated moves, none of them pantomimic or dancerly, but all of them precisely choreographed and requiring some skill. The performance must be continuous but without emphasis or special accents, without smiles, twinkles, or any other sign that would arouse the spectator's feelings. Rainer filmed the dance in 1978, taking particular care to avoid meeting the eye of the camera that was standing in for an audience. *Trio A* could be done by any type of professional dancer or civilian, and in *RoS Indexical*, it didn't look at all out of place as the four women did a few of its phrases huddled together in a *Sacre*-like grouping. In some bizarre leap of imagination, I can almost see *Trio A* as a "Danse Sacrale" for our times.

The postmodern agenda dissipated, and dancing returned to its highly specialized, glamorous ways. But the anyone-can-dance idea persists. Besides giving dancers like Xavier Le Roy a set of non-technical options, it has filtered out into pageantry and community events. In a highly visible form of outreach, *Le Sacre du printemps* made still another appearance in New York in November, when Simon Rattle, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, and choreographer Royston Maldoom

restaged their 2003 Rite of Spring Project for the Berlin in Lights Festival. Since 1980, when he began choreographing for teenagers and laypersons, Royston Maldoom has developed community dance projects in Britain, Europe and Africa, often working with socially challenged populations like street gangs and prison inmates. More than a hundred New York public school students were enlisted to learn Maldoom's choreography and to make their own musical variations on Stravinsky. In a three-disc documentary of the original project released as "Rhythm is It!," Maldoom exhorts a studio full of German teenagers. "Don't think we're just doing dancing. You can change your life in a dance class!"

Yvonne Rainer envisions no such transformation. In the second act, the four women dance quite strenuously, recovering parts of the ritual dances that lead up to the accidental selection of the Chosen Maiden. Sally Silvers trips twice as they weave in and out of their pattern. But instead of becoming a sacrificial victim, she rejoins the other women, to perform zany gestural solo turns and more remnants of the *Sacre* group work. The sofa where they've retreated more than once to rest or kill time becomes the site for some feminist parody. During one of the musical buildups, they form a line behind the sofa, then one by one they slither down over its arm into unmistakable odalisque poses. They return to their gesturing solos, but as the music signals the expiration of the Chosen Maiden and the end of the ballet, Emily Coates does a sudden swan dive onto the sofa. She has literally overturned the posture in which painters like Manet fixed their models as objects of desire.

Coates's action also reminds me that another sofa played a prominent part in Diaghilev's next great transgressive ballet, *Les Biches* (1924) by Bronislava Nijinska. The sister of Nijinsky had returned to Russia after *Le Sacre du printemps* and worked there for nearly a decade, alongside the constructivists and theater experimenters of the pre-Stalin period. When she returned to the Ballets Russes in 1923 she had become an innovative choreographer, applying modernist ideas to the classical ballet vocabulary. *Les Biches*, set in a sophisticated house party in the South of France, proposes unconventional gender relationships including a lesbian duet. It isn't the only Nijinska ballet that subverts traditional gender designations.

Despite its '70s look of disaffection and randomness, *RoS Indexical* makes me think about how long-term change happens, how the triggers get lost while the remnants get fixed onto film and other substitutes for firsthand experience. Rainer could have chosen any pantomimic movements for her gestural solos; her models were the extremists, Sarah Bernhardt, Groucho Marx, Robin Williams. She could have used anything as a prop—the sofa could have been four motorcycles or a mattress. In identifying with *Les Biches* at the climax, rather than Nijinsky's depersonalized sacrificial victim, Yvonne Rainer denies us the pleasure of a woman dancing herself to death, and rewrites the history of *Le Sacre du printemps* yet another time.