

A RITE OF PASSAGE

"I am a Negro. I am a Chinaman. I am a foreigner, a stranger"

"I am a madman who loves mankind. My madness is my love towards mankind" **Vaslav Nijinsky**

"One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" **Thus Spoke Zarathustra - F. Nietzsche**

Classical, telluric, shamanic, revolutionary?

Since 29 May 1913, date of the first performance at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées, in Paris, the Rite of Spring has bewitched us all. It was a memorable scandal, withdrawn from the theatre after just eight performances.

Although Igor Stravinsky's music, which proved controversial initially, quickly established itself and led to a myriad of choreographic adaptations (over 200) over the past century, Vaslav Nijinsky's original choreography, on the other hand, was swept under the carpet until 1987, when it was partially recreated by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer, and more recently in 2014 by Dominique Brun.

Laurence Louppe stated in her "Poétique de la danse contemporaine":

"It is worth mentioning, yet not without some bitterness, that the element that links the choreographic work most to its identity is... the musical score."

Whenever we talk about the Rite, there is the musical work and the choreographic work, there is the recreated work and the remakes of the work, Dominique Brun even talks about "spin-offs".

If the work has garnered so much attention, it is because the music and the choreography were not associated with any known code until now, a sort of 'neither-here-nor-there' located between classical references and contemporary forms. Jean Cocteau compared the Rite to a sort of "musical Fauvism" and François-Xavier Roth said: *"It is the cornerstone that is going to help create a new type of music for the coming century"* (cf. extract from "Une Vie, une œuvre : Igor Stravinski", France Culture, 6 April 2013).

This work is designed around two acts: a daytime one (worshipping the Earth, celebrating the light and the return of spring) and a night-time one (the great sacrifice, the virgins and the magical circles).

Initially, the work drew its inspiration from the archaeological and ethnological research undertaken by the painter Nicolas Roerich. The

painter, who created the decors, had been carrying out a study on human sacrifices in ancient Russia. The composer and the choreographer decided to draw their inspiration from ancient powers and from inner impulses of human beings and of nature.

In the music, we are struck by the expressive power of the rhythms, climaxed, juxtaposed, diverted through fragments of ceremonial and ritual chanting.

In the dance, which is like an echo, we are fascinated by the figure of the circle and the round, real staging of energy and the eternal return. A figure that we also discover in Nijinsky's illustrations, which are almost all 'possessed' by the circle. This choreographic work is an incredible creation on rhythm and on the dissociation of rhythms between the different parts of the dancers' bodies. The dancer Marie Rambert, who worked with the choreographer, talked about Nijinsky's "inward position".

Feet were parallel, or even en-dedans (turned inwards), the dance evoked the ordeal, the hindered body, at a time when beauty, elegance and en-dehors (turned outwards) were the reference codes. The painter and costume designer Valentine Hugo would witness this through the many illustrations that she produced when she attended the rehearsals and performances of *The Rite*. She would sketch the dancers' movements live and direct, then would rework them at length afterwards and would comment the dance movements.

She has, as such, left several dozen series of drawings, a real graphical notation forming one of the rare visual traces of the work, along with two musical scores annotated by Igor Stravinsky and Marie Rambert.

When watching this dance and, more particularly, the reproduction that Dominique Brun has recently created, we cannot help but think of the torments of the soul, the personal chaos that possessed Nijinsky and the chaos that European society was experiencing at the beginning of the First World War.

We cannot help but think of the archaisms, which trigger the rituals and folklore, which constitute us.

If the *Rite* has inspired so many artists and has touched so many spectators, it is because what it talks about, what it evokes, is fundamental and foundational.

Julie Charrier

SOURCES

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- *Nijinski : sa vie, son geste, sa pensée*, Guillaume de Sardes, Hermann Danse, 2006, p. 102.

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<http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-une-vie-une-oeuvre-igor-stravinsky-1882-1971-2013-04-06>

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