

# PERM NEWS

The newsletter of the Oxford Perm Association

June 2010

## Diaghilev – Perm’s unlikely cultural hero A new biography and a major exhibition

I shall always be grateful to my Perm host Natalia Igorevna Dobrinina for helping to show me round the Diaghilevs' house on Sibirskaya Street. Now part of a school, it modestly has nothing visible to show that here once lived one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great cultural figures, who mixed with – and sometimes vexed - the crowned heads of Europe and Russia, and leading artists from Picasso to Stravinsky. Perm's ambivalence towards Diaghilev is perhaps understandable. His family had to leave Perm when their hereditary vodka business went bankrupt; his formative years were spent in St Petersburg; he lived openly as a flamboyant homosexual – having a long-running relationship with the legendary dancer Nijinskiy – and had his major artistic triumphs, the famous *Ballets Russes*, outside Russia, in Paris, London and across Europe and the States. Although initially popular with the new Soviet regime after the revolution, he was once offered but declined the post of Cultural Minister; and subsequently fell out of favour.

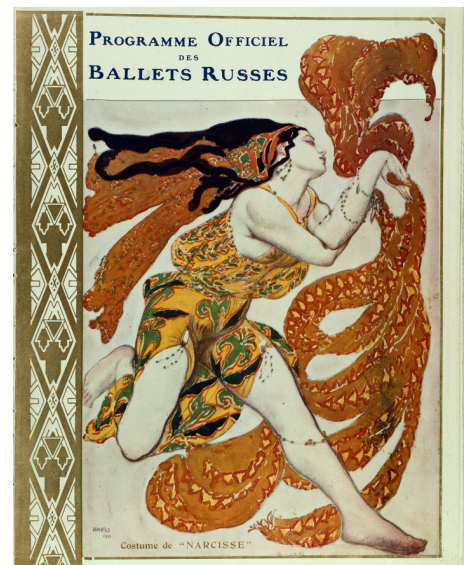


A fascinating new biography “*Diaghilev – A Life*” by the Dutch Russian art historian Sjeng Scheijen came out last year (published by Profile Books); and this autumn, with advice from Scheijen, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is mounting a major exhibition “*Serge Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes, 1909 -1929*” to celebrate the centenary of their first appearance in 1909. It runs from 25 September to 9 January 2011.

Scheijen’s book tells the fascinating story of how this charming – but often maddening - character rose from a minor though quite well-connected, provincial aristocratic family to his world-class cultural status. An early tour of Europe, with his cousin Dmitry (Dima) Filosofov, opened his eyes to European culture, and began that most fruitful of his achievements – the mutual cross-inspiration of Russian and western

European art and music that characterised the phenomenal success of the *Ballets Russes*.

Though quite accomplished as a musician and a keen Wagnerian, his ambitions as a composer were dashed when his work was dismissed by Rimsky-Korsakov. His first major artistic enterprise was the formation with his friend Alexandre Benois and other artists of the influential journal *Mir Istkusstva* – World of Art. He personally supervised its production, and with the extraordinary attention to detail which marked his whole career, insisted on the highest levels of quality in every aspect. It was provocative and became highly influential, and it was partly through *Mir Istkusstva* that he



attracted the attention of the wealthy Prince Sergey Volkonsky who found him the post of 'functionary for special assignments' for the Imperial Theatres.

He revitalised the Theatres' annual review in a lavish new format, astutely sending a personalised copy to the Tsar Nicholas II, and amongst other ambitious ideas in 1899 formed a plan to mount Delibes' great ballet *Sylvia*. But his autocratic manner proved too much for some more establishment figures, and he was ignominiously dismissed in 1901. Though deeply hurt, he was stoical, and devoted himself to an acclaimed monograph on the artist Levitsky. By 1902, his fortunes reversed again when – with the help of many friends - he got a titular post in the Tsar's personal chancery, and met the young composer Igor Stravinsky, whose partnership was to be a key factor in the artistic revolution that was the Ballets Russes.

In another turn of fate, when the journal *Mir Istkusstva* finally went under, he toured Russia to collect a total of 4,000 Russian portraits for an exhibition which he mounted in the Tauride Palace in St Petersburg - the largest ever such exhibition. Scheijen reports that it was in fact his greatest triumph in his homeland.

In his history of Russian culture, *Natasha's Dance*, Orlando Figes says that Diaghilev ascribed the Ballets Russes' intellectual roots to the Russian peasantry. In the 1870s many artists had sought to find the true soul of Russian art in the rural peasantry, by 'going to the people'. An artists' colony was established in Abramtsevo, and influenced many artists in Diaghilev's circle. It was that exotic Slavic primitive streak that Stravinsky and the artists and choreographers expressed in the Ballets Russes that gave them such phenomenal success in western Europe, and contributed to the extraordinary inter-cultural exchange between Russian and west European (mainly French) painters displayed in the 2008 Royal Academy Exhibition *From Russia*.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, ballet held a more important place in Russian society than it did in western Europe, and as Diaghilev found, was cheaper to produce than opera and, he claimed, a purer form of art. After the initial success of a major production of *Boris Godunov* in Paris, most of Diaghilev's productions thereafter were the famous ballets for which he is mainly and rightly remembered.

Increasingly living abroad, Diaghilev's extraordinary personal energy, attention to detail, and relentless cajoling and badgering of artists and financial backers brought together the creative talents of some of the greatest artists, dancers and composers of the time, including Nijinsky, Pavlova, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Cocteau and Stravinsky. Drawing on Russian folklore, he produced the great innovative ballets of the *Firebird* and *Petrushka*, and most dramatically the great *Rite of Spring* choreographed by Nijinskiy – which broke all the rules of classical ballet and at whose first performance riots broke out in the theatre. It is now better known as a concert piece, and is rarely performed as a ballet. Costumes and posters for these great works are on display in Diaghilev's house in Perm.

Scheijen's biography recounts vividly this switch-back ride of adrenaline-fired successes and turbulent setbacks across Europe and America that characterised the two decades of the Ballets Russes, driven by the charm and charisma of this extraordinary unlikely 'hero' of Perm, up to his poignant death in Venice – some say deliberately inspired by Thomas Mann's book of the same name. Despite being one of the most successful and innovative exponents of Russian culture in Europe, his death got only a solitary mention in his own country, the then Soviet Union, a brief obituary on page 15 of the *Red Panorama*, a journal of art and literature. Perhaps the new V&A Exhibition will revive an interest in this remarkable man.

*Geoffrey Findlay*

## Dates for your diary

### The Oxford Perm Association Summer Garden Party

This annual event will again be in Karen Hewitt's beautiful North Oxford garden, and all Association members, their family and friends are invited

**To**            **6 Rawlinson Road, Oxford**

**On**            **Thursday 22 July, 2010**

**From**        **6 p.m.**

**Refreshments:** Wine and soft drinks will be provided. Supper will be 'bring and share' and our events co-ordinator, Ann Davis, will as usual be glad to receive advance notice of people's contributions so that if necessary she can advise on the balance of main courses, sweet and savoury etc. Email: [annharvarddavis45@hotmail.com](mailto:annharvarddavis45@hotmail.com).

**Guests:** You are very welcome to bring guests, and to encourage anyone who would be interested in joining the Association, or in going to Perm, since it's an ideal opportunity to find out more.

**The Film:** The short film about Oxford and the Perm Association, made last summer by the Perm film director Varvara Kalpidi and her team, is now finished, and has been shown in Perm. We have copies, and it will be available at the party for anyone willing to tear themselves away from the garden for half an hour, or as a wet-weather option for all. It's viewpoint is interesting, and some of us were interviewed!

### *Forthcoming exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum about Sergei Diaghilev, who grew up in Perm and went on to found the Ballets Russes.*

Those of you who have been to Perm will remember the Opera House, one of the best in Russia, and perhaps have been there for opera or ballet productions. You may also have been to School 11, now called the Diaghilev School, which is based in the house where Sergei Diaghilev (1872 - 1929) grew up. After school in Perm, Diaghilev went to St Petersburg, and then to Paris where he became the impresario who brought Russian music, ballet and art to the whole of Europe. He never returned to Perm but his devotion to Russian art and artists was lifelong. He died in Venice.

The exhibition Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes, 1909 - 1929, runs from 25 September to 9 January, and it may be possible to go as a Perm Association group, which might reduce the cost and be fun for those of us travelling together.

If you're interested email me on [mari.prichard@hcarpenter.co.uk](mailto:mari.prichard@hcarpenter.co.uk), or write to me at 6 Farndon Road, Oxford OX2 6RS, and say what period in the autumn, what days of the week, and what leaving and departing times from Oxford you might manage, and whether you have a preference for train or bus. Then I'll get back to you when I've worked out if a group trip is feasible.

Mari Prichard, Chair, Oxford Perm Association

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**Oxford Youth Theatre** is due to visit Perm in July.

**Karavai** are planning a visit to Oxford in April next year. It's expected that they will give performances in a variety of settings, including the Oxford Folk Festival, from 8 to 17 April.

## Oxford Perm Association contact details

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## News of other links

### Bonn

Over the Late Spring Bank Holiday Weekend we were visited by the Bonner Stadtsoldaten Corps. In their fabulous blue and red 18<sup>th</sup> century "military" costumes they performed formation dances in Bonn Square. The corps is made up of men, women and children down to the age of six months!

### Leiden

Musicians from Leiden took part in the Oxford Folk Festival in April; and a group from Oxford visited Leiden in May.

From November 26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> a 50-piece marching youth band, the K & G band, will be performing round Oxford, the Castle and the Town Hall.

### Leon

The Oxford Leon Association and Trust is running a series of fund-raising events in support of projects in Leon: the annual Misa Campesina (folk mass) and a Latin American/Salsa evening raised over £400; and there will be a sponsored swim on 5 July.

### Grenoble

Over Easter East Oxford Community Choir gave three performances in Grenoble, together with their partner choir "Interlude", of Mendelssohn's great (and neglected) oratorio *St Paul*. Over 60 Grenoblois made a reciprocal visit to Oxford in May to give a reprise of the concerts in Oxford and in Dorchester Abbey.

## A Russian child's view of Oxford

Oxford, Oxford, Oxford  
Half an Ox and half a Ford  
Put together for you.

Oxford is an ancient place  
Filled with merry people  
Summertown is where you see summer,  
Summer all year through

Oxford, Oxford, Oxford  
Half an Ox and half a Ford  
put together for you

Oxford has its beauty,  
Beauty you can't always see  
But in the air of Port Meadow  
You can feel it and taste it all.

Oxford, Oxford, Oxford  
Half an Ox and half a Ford  
Put together for you

Oxford hides in alleyways,  
They run between the buildings  
Buildings made of Cotswold stone  
As if cut out of the sun.

Oxford, Oxford, Oxford  
Half an Ox and half a Ford  
Put together for you...

*Masha Hewitt*

## Cook's Tour

I was never going to get a lot of sleep on the night of the General Election, but a six a.m. start the following morning for a flight to Perm was probably the main reason why no other Oxford councillors were willing to come with me. This was a great shame as they missed out on a fantastic visit. The trip out to Perm was not uneventful and after a flight from Birmingham to Frankfurt I boarded the plane to Perm, or as it said on my ticket Nizhny Novgorod Perm. Now I'm not sure whether it was the lack of sleep, the extra bottle of beer the stewardess served me, or just my general lack of experience of international travel, but when the pilot announced that we were coming in to land at Nizhny Novgorod I assumed this was the name of the airport at Perm.

This was a mistake.

Sadly this was a mistake I only discovered at passport control after the plane had departed, where it was explained to me that Nizhny Novgorod was in fact a town eight hundred kilometres west of Perm, and that I had got off the plane one stop too early! With the help of a phone call to Tanya, who was supposed to be meeting me in Perm, Tanya arranged for me to be taken by taxi to the rail station and for the driver to help me buy me a ticket to Perm. At one twenty four in the morning I boarded my train and was shown to my couchette. I bedded down for the night and resigned myself to arriving a little late at Perm the following day, but at least having an amusing story and an unexpected mini adventure to talk about.

I awoke the following day and was much refreshed by the cup of hot black sweet tea provided by the carriage steward and settled in to the sixteen hour rail journey which was to be my penance for not staying on the plane. Never have I seen so many trees on a single rail journey.

I arrived at Perm railway station and went with Tanya to collect my bags

from the airport. Never let it be said that the Perm airport authorities are anything but assiduous when it comes availing themselves of the opportunity to make a simple two minute administrative process, a major bureaucratic exercise lasting two hours. An inventory and photographs of all my belongings, and several forms later, I was finally allowed to leave with my bag, (and without a fine!), for dinner.

The following day was Sunday and the Victory Day celebrations. These were particularly poignant as this would be the sixty fifth anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War, and it was likely to be the last Victory Day parade many veterans would be able to attend. The parade was very well attended and very much a celebration as well as a military parade. It was lovely to see young dancers and children invite some of the veterans up for a dance at one point, and I was glad to see the Welsh Guards in their bearskins marching in Red Square, in Moscow, on the live video link to the Perm parade. With the German Chancellor at the Moscow celebrations as well I was just left thinking, what a good idea and why hasn't it happened before?

Monday brought me the opportunity to visit the Kungur Ice Caves and an evening watching a contemporary dance performance at the unusually named "Theatre Theatre" formerly known as the "Perm Drama Theatre". On the Tuesday I had meetings with various Councillors and Council Officers. I was gratified to learn that some of the municipal challenges Perm faces are common to some of the ones we face in Oxford! In the afternoon I visited the Motovilikha Community Centre and was entertained by both Russian and Ukrainian folk singers and children who I feel sure would have scored highly on Simon Cowell's X-Factor show. I was very impressed by the range of activities which were taking place at the Community Centre and was told that the Community Centres in Perm came about



as a result of a previous visit by a Perm delegation to Oxford looking at our Community Centres.

On the Wednesday I visited School Number Fifty which specialises in the teaching of English. This was probably the highlight of my trip. After a tour of the school given by some of the pupils I was asked to take part in a lesson whereby students had an opportunity to ask me questions. I was extremely impressed by the quality and fluency of the children's English and the dedication of their teachers. When I left the Headteacher asked me if there was any possibility of setting up links with schools in Oxford. Clearly there are not likely to be many schools studying Russian language but the fluency of the children's English suggests that projects involving other subjects such as history, geography or science would certainly be possible. If anyone has any contacts with schools that might want to be involved please let me know.



Looking at the teaching resources the school had I'd also be interested in sending them some more interesting, relevant, and up to date literature, so if you know of anyone who is throwing out old comics or teen magazines please let me know as I'd be keen to send the School Number Fifty a bundle of them as a counter to some of the more conventional literature they are reading. Any donations can be left c/o the Town Hall for me.

On the Thursday I visited Perm State University and spoke to the Rector and some of the Political Science students about political issues both in Britain and Russia.

Afterwards I had a typically English afternoon tea in the company of members of the Oxford Perm Association.

Sadly my time in Perm was coming to an end but having stroked the nose of the bear on Lenin Street I'm sure I will be returning before too long.



*Cllr Colin Cook*