

Millicent Hodson, Kenneth Archer

Seven Days from Several Months at the Mariinsky

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Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer

Ballets Old & New, London

<http://www.hodsonarcher.com>

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Saturday, 15 February—Chosen Ones

So this is it, the great Mariinsky Theatre, where Nijinsky began his meteoric career as a dancer, and where Diaghilev poached him for the Ballets Russes. By the age of 23 Nijinsky had become the most celebrated dancer in the world, caused a riot in Paris with his choreography for *The Rite of Spring*, eloped with a Hungarian socialite on tour in South America and then been banished from the Ballets Russes by the jealous and lovelorn Diaghilev.

Because of Nijinsky and his *Rite* we are standing in Teatralnaya Square looking up at the Mariinsky. It is 20° below zero. Our job is to stage the 1913 version of the *Rite* with its multitude of handpainted costumes by Roerich. Nijinsky was the first of some one hundred choreographers to tackle Stravinsky's tumultuous score. We spent almost a decade reconstructing this first version and another decade setting it on companies in Europe and the Americas. Yet bringing it to Russia, to St Petersburg, to this theatre, is a dream come true. In the months to come we may call it a nightmare. Colleagues have catalogued the problems of working here. "Nonetheless, you will love the Russians," a friend at the Royal Ballet reassured us. "It will be difficult, but it will be all right on the night," said Balanchine contacts, recalling their heroic struggle to stage the triple bill of *Jewels*.

A 19th century architectural wonder, the Mariinsky is now wrapped in plastic and ice-clad scaffolding. The city is racing to finish its many renovations before the 300th anniversary celebrations in June. High on the front of the theatre a vast poster depicts the Mariinsky's legendary director Valery Gergiev, mastermind of the festival, which will feature the *Rite*, and beside the maestro in silhouette is the Bronze Horseman, symbol of the city and its founder Peter

¹ The first version of this diary was published in online magazine *ballet.co.uk*

the Great. Freezing winds buffet the poster so that it buckles and shrieks like the sail of a ship in a storm. We shiver in deep snow, hoping this operatic welcome by the elements is not an ill omen.

Inside the theatre we are greeted warmly—once we get past the bureaucratic barrier of doormen who shoulder their duties with Cold War severity. We watch the Kirov in class, welcomed as *gosti* from abroad, and luxuriate in the forest of classically curved limbs and perfectly turned out feet. The original *Rite of Spring* requires the dancers to invert their technique, with toes turned in and elbows glued to the ribs. Stravinsky called Nijinsky's Maidens "knock-kneed Lolitas." In 1913 the Mariinsky dancers mutinied during the *Rite* rehearsals. Ninety years on, we wonder how they will cope.



Millicent Hodson in rehearsal for *Rite of Spring* with dancers from The Kirov Ballet
Photograph © Valentin Baranovsky

The ballet director, Makhar Vasiev, ushers us into his office. A former principal dancer of the Kirov and a princely man by nature, he is an amiable host with English so good he can entertain us with his wit. But he is pressed and so are we. There is a lot to do. "You haven't even started your ballet with us and I am already booking it on tour. Today, I agreed London, Covent Garden. It's crazy, but nice, don't you think?" We talk about casting, especially for the Chosen One who dances the violent five-minute solo at the end of the *Rite*. One ballerina who interests us is guesting with a New York company but may return. Another has an injury. We mention yet another, listing her special quali-

ties for the role, which Vasiev confirms, but informs us she is pregnant. Nijinsky had the same problem with his sister, Bronislava, but worse. He had created the solo on her, sculpting each movement. Then she became pregnant in the run-up to the premiere, and he had to start all over again on Maria Piltz. In the end with Vasiev we name three Chosen Ones: the renowned ballerina Iulia Makhalina, the new star Daria Pavlenko and the rising young soloist Alexandra Iosifidi. Already we speculate about how they will individually approach the role.

But now we must embark on a journey to the upper realms of the theatre, where we meet with technical staff about costumes and decors. We take them through the two acts of the ballet, group by group, scene by scene. Act I takes place in the daytime. Archaic Slavic tribes anticipate the spring with games and ceremonies. We explain that Nijinsky treats this primitive scenario as a modern canvas, deploying blocks of colour and bolts of energy. But all the while he builds the ritual, using motifs on the Roerich costumes as ground patterns for the dancers. The staff become intrigued and pour over our dossiers. Act II, at night, begins with Maidens in a moonlit labyrinth. One is chosen by fate to dance herself to death to ensure the return of spring. Ancestors in bearskins lift her as an offering to the sun god Yarilo. At *Sleeping Beauty*, one of many ballets we will enjoy, we see Pierre Lacotte, here to reconstruct *Ondine*. He saw us do the *Rite* at the Paris Opera and urges us to teach the Kirov in the same way. Soon, during Petersburg's dark wintry days, we will start the sunlit scenes of Act I. How could we know now our premiere will be postponed and that we will set the nocturnal dances of Act II in the season of the midnight sun.

II. Thursday, 6 March—Divinations

We are back from London to start rehearsals. Snow swirls around us. English wool is no match for this kind of cold. We buy serious hats at Gostiny Dvor, a sort of imperial Selfridges on Nevsky Prospect. The hats are bordered with fur, like the ones Roerich designed for *The Rite of Spring*. It makes us wonder how long the freeze lasts. We hurry back to the theatre to rehearse the men in the first scene of Act I, with its shifting rhythms and insistent jumps. In the ritual they pound the earth with their feet, warming it, making it ready for the rays of the sun. The scene is called *Augurs of Spring* and the men divine the future by leaping over twigs. We ask them, "Who is the best jumper?" A chorus replies, "Grisha." The young Popov, fresh from the Vaganova School, looks like an elongated Baryshnikov. His partners raise the twig mischievously high, but he clears it with the ease of a mountain goat. This form of fortune telling the men learn from a character dancer, who scurries among them, hunched double. She is listed in the ballet as the Old Woman of 300 Years. The men joke that she is the same age as St Petersburg.



Two of Seven Maidens & Elder, Act 1/7 - Circling the Sage. Sketch by Millicent Hodson ©. Source 'Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace', by Millicent Hodson, Pendragon Press 1996. An exhibition of Millicent Hodson drawings of 'Rite of Spring' is being held at Gallery K, London, from the 27 July - 20 August 2003.

At the door of the studio faces appear, looking in on the commotion. The men take to this ballet immediately, punching the air with pent up power. They must dance one rhythm with their arms and another with their feet. Expletives of frustration. Millicent shouts the counts. Slava, the ballet master, joins in, helping fix her Russian. Kenneth shows Lyudmila and Alexei, the pianist and stage manager, our documents for the next scene. Our translator Kristina

gets all of us out of linguistic snares. At first some women seem bewildered in the rehearsals, but a few, like Ti Yon Riu, push to the extremes the *Rite* requires. Gradually, others follow suit, and before long the studio is filled with Maidens who look beautiful gripping the ground with flat feet and clapping with spatula hands. "There is a grace here," said Jacques Riviere, defending Nijinsky's ballet in 1913, "one more profound than in *Spectre de la Rose*."

We need to establish a long-term rehearsal schedule. So we speak with Tatiana, one of Vasiev's assistant directors, showing her the timetable agreed in our contracts. We are guaranteed thirty days with a minimum of three hours per day for the full cast plus extra time for small groups and soloists. "*Nevozmozhna!*" (Impossible), she responds. "The company performs different ballets every night and must rehearse them. And we must prepare the tours." Thus we encounter for the first time what we call the "Kirov enigma." We discover it has daunted an honour roll of guest choreographers and répétiteurs. Some, it is said, are driven to rage, others to tears. Some pack their bags and leave. The enigma is—how to stage a work new to the company when all the time is booked for its normal routine. No time for novelties.

We take our scheduling problem to Vasiev, who convenes his three assistant directors: Sonya (she speaks English) is administrator and trouble-shooter; Pavel (he speaks French) focuses on repertoire and stagecraft; and Tatiana, who supervises schedules and casting. With his team Vasiev reviews the Kirov's forthcoming commitments and calculates days when the women are more in demand for ballets like *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*. He arranges for the men to have extra *Rite* rehearsals in that period. And he reminds his assistant directors of the special stylistic demands of Nijinsky's ballet.

After the meeting we return to our lodgings at the Lokosphinx, an impressive colonnaded building on Griboedova Canal opposite the famous Lion Bridge - familiar from Dostoevsky. Petersburg is like Venice with ice. Yet our rooms are too hot. No way to turn down the heat—a vestige of Soviet ways, we are told, when everyone got the same, want it or not. So windows are flung open to subzero gales. No wonder we are all fighting the flu. But what matters is that we feel at home here.

The Lokosphinx is more a residence than a hotel. No sign on the door reveals its identity as a haven for hard working Mariinsky guests. We meet the French architect Xavier Fabre and his team who are planning massive renovation of the theatre. The opera director Julia Pevzner arrives from Tel Aviv to do *Rheingold* and *Valkyrie*. Before long we are joined by our American colleague Howard Sayette, who is staging *Les Noces*, on the same programme as the *Rite*. Giovanna Avanzi, a costumier from Italy, has brought her husband and baby while she works on Puccini's *Il trittico*. We pass each other in the Mariinsky corridors, but breakfast is the only time our schedules mesh. We share news of the war in Iraq, complain about the weather and de-stress in

four languages about our projects. Whatever the state of current affairs, the daily temperature or our various productions, the breakfast club at the Lokosphinx is a happy occasion. The lady chefs invent for us an "*omlet vesni*" (spring omelette), with lots of parsley and dill, to fortify our work on Nijinsky's ballet.

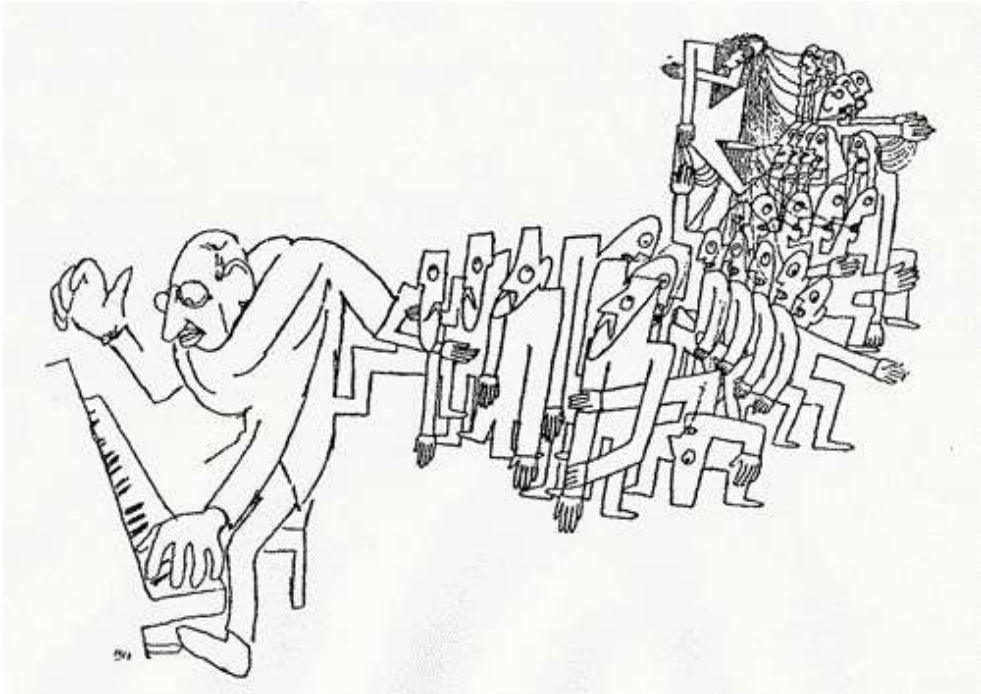
III. Wednesday 19 March—Meltdown

Slush on the pavements, as Pavel walks us to the decor workshop, inspires hope that winter will come to an end eventually. We had proposed going with the painters to see Roerich works at the State Russian Museum, where as graduate students we did research two decades ago. But at the meeting we found Roerich monographs and catalogues piled on the workshop table. The painters knew and valued Roerich's art. Now we are back to see progress on the backdrops. The workshop is vast, old-fashioned and congenial. Russian pop music, complete with static, plays in the background. Canvases for the *Rite* are spread on the floor, surrounded by buckets of paint, brushes and broomsticks with sponges. We scale the steps of the long catwalk to study the huge canvases from above. The painters engage us in debate on various points, translated by Vasiev's aide Ugana. We arrange to have the backdrops hung in the theatre soon to check sightlines and wing positions—that is to be our first step on the hallowed stage of the Mariinsky.

The dancers have survived the second scene, *Ritual of Abduction*, with its primitive version of a silent movie chase and brute duets where the men bounce the women with abstract emotion. We move into scene 3, *Spring Rounds*, and the five-part counterpoint. The men, who have had more time than the women, have advanced further, but they struggle with the syncopations and fragmented structure. We make a big chart on the back of an old Kirov poster as a cue sheet for the five groups.

Musicologists know that Stravinsky mined collections of Russian folk music for motifs. But these are scholarly matters. We do not expect them to surface during the pressures of rehearsal in St Petersburg. The women are scheduled from 8.50 to 10.00 pm. Some are still jetlagged from a recent tour. All are wide-eyed with fatigue. They throw their arms and stamp their feet in a section Nijinsky called "*oy dee la do*," according to notes on the piano score, made by his assistant Marie Rambert. She added his stage direction, "as though they were singing an old folk song." The women lock wrists with each other in *kumlenie* (ritual pacts). Lyudmila at the piano starts to chant over the Stravinsky score: "*gori gori*," exclaiming, "They are calling in the spring, evoking it by magic." She recognizes the composer's source, remembering it from her youth. The women come alive, astonished but delighted. Like the crowd in *Petrushka* entranced by the Magician's flute, we cluster around the piano. Lyudmila chants again. The dancers mark the movement. Nijinsky's next in-

struction is "*maslo*" (butter). They must melt, like butter or ice, from the *staccato* wrist locks into the *tranquillo* coda. The women dance this section with particular zeal. They understand that their energy, like the sun, will bring the spring, and its *Rite*, into being.



Jean Cocteau's 1913 cartoon of Stravinsky playing *The Rite* with Nijinsky's dancers multiplying movement in geometrical progression.

Since *Sleeping Beauty* in February we have seen *Chopiniana*, *Carmen*, *Le Jeune Homme et La Mort*, *Swan Lake* and two versions of *Nutcracker*, some but not all of what the dancers have performed. The standard is predictably high; comparable to the many Kirov performances we have seen on tours in Europe and the Americas. Now, as we watch them at home, somewhat familiar with the life behind Golovine's gorgeous front curtain, we are confronted with the cost of our pleasure. It is no secret that Kirov dancers feel overworked and underpaid. That fact ceases to be a statistic when you face them in the studio at all hours of the day and night. During rehearsal we tell the Chosen Ones their dance is Nijinsky's biography of a soloist—how it feels to be the one in the centre—the effort, responsibility, isolation and glory. But he made his *Rite* an ordeal for each member of the large corps, all of whom have solo parts. The Chosen One dances herself to death, but they all exhaust themselves. So perhaps Nijinsky was telling it like it always was at the Mariinsky.

Walking back to the Lokosphinx, we watch Army conscripts in greatcoats and fur-flapped caps breaking the ice with bludgeons and pouring hot water on the snow. We talk about the "Kirov enigma" and how to crack it. The Mariinsky dancers are arguably the best in the world, but the system causes meltdown on many levels. The Kirov Ballet is doing the work of an imperial-cum-state theatre at home and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes abroad. Can they maintain their traditional repertoire, at the standard they have set, and introduce a whole new world of choreography?

IV Sunday 23 March—Name Day

Rumour has it that the costume and decor workshops just got a *diktat*: "Be ready by 1 April for stage rehearsal." Because of the Kirov's double (sometimes triple) casting, more than a hundred handpainted costumes and nearly a thousand accessories are to be finished. We regularly visit the costume shops and know that much remains to be done. How could they do it in a week? More importantly, why? We have struggled for time to finish the first act choreography, let alone start the second. We go to Vasiev and show him our record of rehearsal time requested and granted. The difference is tallied in red ink. "We are artists not accountants but you need to see the figures." Before looking at our tally he says, "Probably we are in debt, but," he pauses, "the Maestro wants the *Rite*, *Noces* and *Oedipus Rex* for the Stravinsky gala on 10 April." President Putin is bringing Schroeder and Chirac with the president of Siemens, who is the sponsor.

"That would be possible," we parry, "either the gala on the 10th or the premiere, as planned, on the 13th, if we can rehearse the *Rite* all day, every day, until then." Vasiev stops and thinks, knowing only too well that life at the Kirov does not work that way "The *Rite* is important and must be done properly," he affirms. "And there is also *Noces*," we add. "And *Etudes* to finish," he sighs—"we have to postpone the Stravinsky ballets." Pavel is summoned. "The second Stravinsky is set for 9 June, he reports, "it will be hard to get technical time at that point in the festival. Vasiev interrupts "But the Maestro just might agree." Gergiev is conducting at the Met in New York. Vasiev, after a full day at the Mariinsky, spends half the night trying to reach him on the phone. In the end the Maestro decides to postpone. For the April gala he puts *Petrushka* and *Firebird* with *Oedipus Rex*. Our premiere is now 9 June.



Ancestor in bearskin, Act II/4 - Pawing the ground. Sketch by Millicent Hodson ©. Source 'Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace', by Millicent Hodson, Pendragon Press 1996. An exhibition of Millicent Hodson drawings of 'Rite of Spring' is being held at Gallery K, London, from the 27 July - 20 August 2003.

We have to stay longer. The postponement plays Russian roulette with our schedule. How can we finish the *Rite* in St Petersburg and keep commitments in Rome, Helsinki, London, and Moscow. Phone calls and faxes to explore our options. Then we discover the company is to leave on tour for Cagliari in Sardinia. Vasiev invites us to his office and tells us, smiling, he is having "crazy ideas." We are instantly curious. "Why don't you come on tour and rehearse the dancers in Italy? You could have more time there." For a few moments we imagine the Mediterranean heat. An ingenious solution if enough of our cast are on the tour. "Is there a list for Cagliari?" we ask. Vasiev calls his assistant

directors Sonya and Tatiana who show us the roster of visas. Half our cast is to go, half is to stay in St Petersburg, but more men than women will remain. We are about to start Act I, scene 4, *Games of the Rival Tribes*, with its fighting duets for the men, which require individual teaching. We tell Vasiev that we had better “stay and fight.” Despite our disappointment, we are cheered by his “crazy ideas,” which somehow break the spell of winter, like the crashing of Kostchei’s egg in *Firebird*. The sun is shining somewhere. We will see it some-time.

We try to keep track of the ever-changing population in our rehearsals, the cast, the covers, and what Slava calls the “undercovers.” The company’s collective body memory is both a great and a terrible thing. We are determined to know our dancers by name. In Russian tradition, name days—feasts of major saints—are more important than birthdays. The Kirov’s 260 some dancers seem to share a total of ten names. So the dancers propose that we add the first initial of their surnames. There is almost a whole alphabet of Alexanders and Alexeis—Alex M, Alex N, etc. The same is true of Marias and Natalias, who become Masha K, Natasha S. Patronymics in postmodern Petersburg seem to be out of fashion. But nicknames are a source of never-ending invention. Our Chosen Ones become Iulitsa, Dasha and Sashlinka.

We need to relax. Howard has returned from the US and we spend several evenings with him. One night Slava walked us along Griboedova to his apartment for supper. On the way he pointed out the original dormitory for imperial ballet students, where Pushkin stood at the entrance passing love letters to the girls. At the corner of *Sredaya Podyacheskaya Ulitza* (Middle Bureaucrat Street), he showed us the building where Fokine created *The Dying Swan* on Pavlova. During supper Slava’s wife Irina—both are former Kirov dancers—invited us to watch her class at the Vaganova School. During our visit Irina introduced us to Mariinsky star Altynai Asylmuratova, who now directs the school, and Slava showed us drawings by Nijinsky in the archive.

Other evenings Howard joined us for performances. *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* was a first for us, as was Lavrovsky’s version of *Romeo and Juliet*, which we saw with Julie Kent from American Ballet Theatre. Tonight she is guesting in *Giselle*. In the interval we meet with Vasiev in his box by the stage. He talks about the budget for London this summer and says he can only take dancers for the *Rite* if they are in other ballets on the tour. We agree to draw our second act dancers from the London group. That means three quarters of our present cast cannot dance Act II, and more than 30 new dancers will have to be trained for Act I in London. Our workload grows by orders of magnitude. Long into the night we revise cast lists in Cyrillic.

We make time to visit the State Russian Museum to see if things have changed since *perestroika*. Many works by Roerich and his contemporaries, which had been secreted in curatorial offices, are now displayed. *Kapuchinni* have be-

come popular, and we stop at a cafe before heading home. The rivers and canals are still frozen but Petersburg drips with melting snow. We turn along Bolshaya Morskaya, parallel with the Moika, and notice a handsome building. On the facade is a gilt title in Russian art nouveau letters, which we translate as "Imperial Society for Encouragement of the Arts." Then we notice a plaque with the name Roerich, which tells us that he and his family lived there when he was director of its school in the last days of the Romanovs.

V. Sunday, 13 April—Battle Plan

When the tour group came back, we had a few days with the first cast, trying to catch them up with the covers. Josette Amiel, whom we know from the Paris Opera, is also back to complete *Etudes* against the clock. With a 17 April premiere that cannot be postponed, she has to have total priority. Many of our dancers are in *Etudes* and, just as difficult, our pianist and stage manager must be in those rehearsals instead of ours. Vasiev has given us the option to leave earlier and return sooner than planned for our final period of work. As director he is besieged by the conflicting demands of his tours, his home repertoire and his guests. Once again we asked to see him.

"So that's the battle plan," Sonya said, peering at our large chart with coloured arrows. In fact, the chart shows the tribal square and lines of movement for the 44 simultaneous solos toward the end of Act I. "It's not Borodino," Kenneth quipped. "But it could prevent battles over rehearsal time," Millicent added. We show Vasiev how we can teach the solos in shifts to any dancers not needed for *Etudes*. Experience at the Mariinsky has taught us to hoard time like gold. Though visions of London in the spring tempted us to pack and go, we decided to stay put and teach the solos. Most companies learn them in groups over a day or two. At the Mariinsky groups were not available. So it was one-on-one for more than a week as we slowly worked our way through several casts. To do the solos we had to skip forward to Act I, scene 7, *Dance of the Earth*, after the Sage has kissed the ground, releasing the forces of spring which hurl the dancers into the air and throw them down. This chaos is organized in canons of classical movement gone berserk—*entr'chats*, *tours en l'air* and *grands jetés*—with torso spasms and sickled feet. Rambert wrote that Nijinsky interrupted these bursts of individuality with braces of rhythmic unison. "Accents with frenzy," she called them, when the dancers beat on the ground, their chests or their heads, then fling themselves toward the Sage, focusing their volatile energy toward him as their centre.

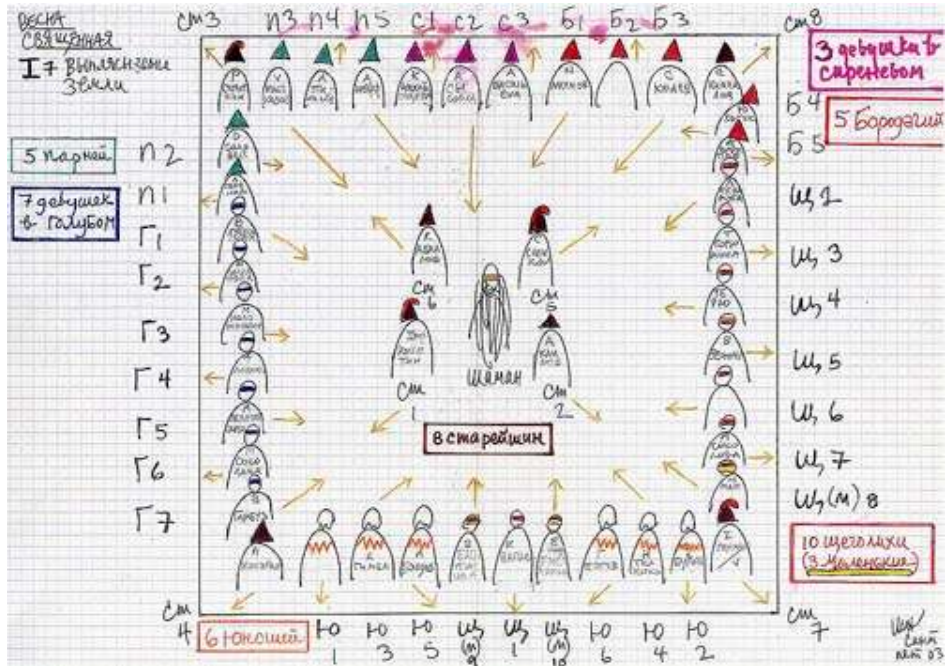


Chart by Millicent Hodson showing the tribal square and starting places for the 44 simultaneous solos in Act 1, scene 7, Dance of the Earth

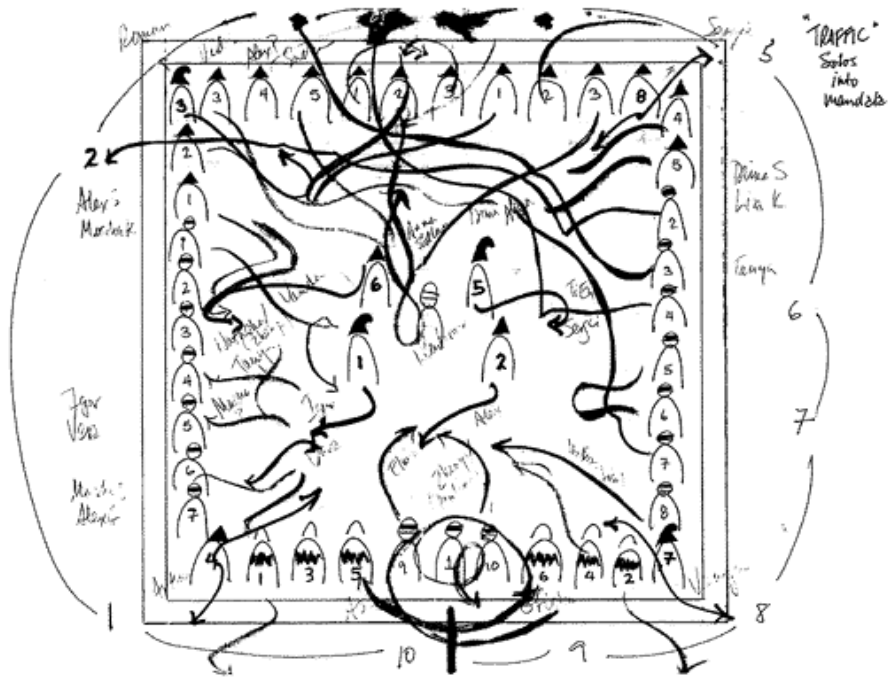


Chart by Millicent Hodson showing the lines of movement for the 44 simultaneous solos in Act 1, scene 7, Dance of the Earth

Natasha, Lyudmila's reserve, plays the same 24 measures more than a hundred times. Soon her fingers are wrapped in tape—"arpeggio stress syndrome," we jest. Perhaps it was this section Cocteau caricatured when he showed Nijinsky's dancers multiplying themselves in geometrical progression. Dancers from *Etudes* leave but hurry back. We notice the margins of the studio get more crowded by the day. The dancers stretch out and watch each other learn or leaf through Millicent's notebooks. Some are not accustomed to being personally choreographed. Others, more experienced, marvel at the quantity of material amassed in 44 solos. Somehow we have crossed a threshold. Before, the dancers worked hard. That is their job. Now they are working together. Ironically, the singularity of the solos has made them into an ensemble. Slava records every move with his fountain pen and meticulously collects copies of Millicent's teaching notes. The Kirov is making the *Rite* its own.

The costumier Tanya took us again to check the costume painting. In adjoining rooms artisans were busy applying colours, some with stencils, some free-hand. A variety of smocks with vivid Roerich borders were hung from overhead racks. After shoes, hats and headbands, we checked the tights. The Russians do not buy them for their dancers. Every pair is made to measure on two ancient knitting machines. A ledger contains details for thousands of Kirov legs, past and present. For several decades the same women have run these machines. Above them a portrait of Lenin still presides. Since Howard could not get a full cast for his rehearsals of *Noces*, he decided to leave early and finish in the weeks prior to the premiere. Just before he flies to California, we see together a triple bill of *Apollo*, *Prodigal Son* and *Le Jeune Homme et La Mort*. We also watch performances with Josette, meeting after her marathon days on *Etudes*. In this period we see *La Sylphide*, *Don Quixote*, the operas *Ruslan and Lyudmila* and *Prince Igor*, plus the Siemen's gala.

The days fly by. We wake up early on Sunday morning amazed that this is the last working day of our second visit. Kenneth is determined to take his Roerich walk, so often contemplated but always cancelled in the interests of the *Rite*. He strides out towards Vasilievsky Island, past St Isaacs and across the Neva, to the embankment where Roerich grew up. There is a plaque on the house where the artist was born. Further along the river is the Academy of Art and university he attended. En route Kenneth meets Andrei, once a dancer and now a teacher at the Mariinsky, who is walking his dog in the park. His daughter Vera is in our first cast. Many dancers live on this island and often rush from performances to reach its bridges before they are raised for the nightly passage of the ships. Millicent never gets to Nijinsky's house.



"Dance of the Earth" from the Kirov's *Rite of Spring*. Photograph © Valentin Baranovsky

Today the conductor Mikhail Agrest watches rehearsal, following the score as we integrate scenes 5 and 6 of Act I—*The Procession of the Sage*, with the Elders' dance of the four directions, and *The Adoration of the Earth*, when the Sage kisses the ground. These scenes lead directly into the ecstatic release of the solos, which seem to liberate the dancers from fatigue, physical and spiritual. The mandala and spiral formations after the solos are a headache to perfect, but everyone persists, looking forward to the final stamping sequence, when they close in around the Sage and end the act. They just miss the count with its tricky syncopation, but that strengthens their resolve to do it right that night when Vasiev comes to see their last run through of Act I. We fret over imperfections but the Kirov director turns to us and smiles. Sensing the anguish of incompleteness we feel, he starts slowly—"You know, I think really it's not bad at all." We relax slightly. "In fact, it's already quite good," he carries on. We would contradict him, but he takes us each by an arm and says, "I know these dancers, and I can see they want to do it." Slava thanks the cast and reminds them that we leave for London tomorrow. They give us a good send off, some punching the air and others clapping with spatula hands in true Nijinsky style.

VI. Friday, 23 May—Labyrinths

Petersburg is green and leafy. We are back on Griboedova but not at the Lokosphinx. Its prices have increased two-and-a-half times for the city's anniversary celebrations—too much for the Mariinsky to pay. Members of the breakfast club are relocated to separate apartments in the vicinity. Ours overlooks *Nikolsky Sabor* (St Nicholas Cathedral) with its golden domes and Orthodox crosses like the ones so many dancers wear. Christianity has returned full force. "This return to religion is an urban thing, for the intellectuals," we are told by a young waitress, who has a doctorate in Soviet history. We had noticed that many people observed Lent. At the Lokosphinx, as elsewhere, no one served *blinis* from - the end of *Maslyenitza* (Butter Week, like Mardi Gras or Pancake Day) until Easter.

We are back at the theatre but now in the big downstairs studio. Kenneth simulates the Act II chalk circles with tape on the floor. In scene 1, *Mystic Circles of the Maidens*, thirteen women tread in a tight ring at the centre. The setting is a stone labyrinth in ancient Rus. "Like Stonehenge," Slava says. Act II challenges the women, as Act I did the men, and we keep reminding them that Nijinsky made this ballet on Mariinsky dancers. "Turn your technique inside out—reverse your alignment," Millicent coaches, "dance from a lower centre of gravity and deeper point of concentration." When they sweep one foot in a *rond de jambe*, it has to be done with the entire sole and not the tip of the toe. And they must land from *jeté* turned-in—everything they learned not to do at school. These contortions amuse them when they try to coordinate their feet with Nijinsky's innovative *port-de-bras* — a primitive crossing of the chest and ritualistic reach to the stars. As they thus walk the labyrinth, according to Roerich's scenario, the Maidens seek to learn their future. Fate chooses one as the sacrifice. The deadline of the premiere makes us work mercilessly fast. They learn thirteen hours of material in less than two. Vasiev comes into the rehearsal and watches the women spar with each other in scene 2, *Glorification of the Chosen One*, when they honour and frighten the victim, preparing her for the ordeal. "Both the music and the movement are difficult," remarks Vasiev, as his dancers become "*Amazonki*," to use Stravinsky's term.

The men are pacing the *ostinato*, which they perform around the Chosen One in scene 5, *The Sacrificial Dance*. It is both a brain and body teaser with its irregular rhythms: 1-2, 1, 1-2-3, 1, 1, 1-2, 1-2-3, and so forth, as they step, close, dip and bow. They do it as a daily drill, reading from charts at the outset until they memorize this sequence, which musicians can only follow from a score. Gergiev hovers at the door as our Ancestors struggle to master the circular procession, learning it in half the standard time. "Aren't they meant to do it together?" he queries. Meanwhile, we start scene 4, *Ritual Action of the Ancestors*, in which they isolate the Chosen One through laughter, a strange but timeless practice, laughing at her with their hands but dragging their feet in a

pagan prayer for her protection. The six tallest men, as we know from Rambert's notes, must be the Ancestors in Bearskins. Pressed together, they lumber toward the Chosen One as a primordial mass of black fur. The dirge thunders from the piano, and Lyudmila calls out to us all, "*The Mass of the Dead—do you hear Stravinsky's quote?*". The men nod, striving to stay in step.



The Chosen One - Shaking with fear and embracing her fate. Sketch by Millicent Hodson ©.
Source 'Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace', by Millicent Hodson, Pendragon Press 1996
An exhibition of Millicent Hodson drawings of 'Rite of Spring'
is being held at Gallery K, London, from the 27 July - 20 August 2003.

The week that follows is engulfed by anniversary events, climaxing in the Mariinsky gala attended by President Putin and 45 heads of state, Tony Blair among them. BBC vans surround the theatre. Outside the scaffolding is off, but security inside is ironclad. Getting past the stage door is like going through a labyrinth. During the gala period, we lose two days of rehearsal, not good for pre-premiere nerves. We repair to the Cafe Idiot and catch up our diary, sinking into worn leather chairs and taking inspiration from defunct Cyrillic typewriters, part of the eccentric decor. The Idiot (homage to Dostoevsky's hero)—a cafe bar on the Moika—is a magnet for expatriates and literary tourists. The BBC turn up in force: 40 of them are at the Lokosphinx, including Ross MacGibbon, whom we know from a Balanchine project. On Russia we see their broadcast of the gala, which includes our *Shaman*(Sage) Vladimir Ponomarev as Peter the Great. No sooner are we back in rehearsal than the studio is evacuated. America's first lady Mrs Bush is arriving at the Mariinsky shop to buy souvenirs. The dancers rush to stop police from towing away their cars.

Bundled in jumpers to prevent bruises, the second act women do the falls in scene 3, *Evocation of the Ancestors*. Five times they fall, flat on their faces. It takes courage. The men, in awe, applaud them. What they are doing, Rambert wrote, is "designating the spot" for the sacrifice, "not consecrating or cursing but making it, in a way, magic." They impress us with their *esprit de corps*, falling in unison (almost) around the Chosen One. By the time of this achievement—four days before the premiere—we are suddenly told that one of them cannot dance because her debut in *Le Corsaire* is the day after the *Rite*. Return in extremis of the "Kirov enigma"—how can the system keep such a secret? A *Corsaire* premiere is no last minute affair. The Act II Maidens are totally destabilized. We resist despair. The countdown has begun.

VII. Monday, 9 June—High Noon

Yet we awaken on the morning of the premiere with a sense of euphoria. The onion domes of St Nicholas Cathedral gleam in the sunlight. We speak with Slava on the phone and he is cheerful, too. Last night at the final studio rehearsal the dancers were relaxed and confident. We set the bows, calling each one by name to take their place in the full cast formation. It felt like a graduation ceremony, and in a sense it was. They knew we were pleased with their work and that we trusted them to do their best. We all applauded each other.

Today will not be easy. For us it is very rare to have the general rehearsal—the dancers in costume and make up with orchestra—on the afternoon of the premiere. It is even more rare to begin the lighting at this eleventh hour. But we have done everything we can to be ready. Costumes and accessories are still being finished. We have yet to see the bearskins, which Act II men must try with the movement. All the same we are pleased with what we have seen.

For several days we have had to report difficulties to our valued costumier via her mobile. It surprises us that she has not been about. Later she tells us she had to be in Siberia finishing another production.

The stage call for lighting the *Rite* and *Noces* is 10 o'clock. "Our technicians are not ready—why not go and have a coffee," advises Sergei Lukin, the lighting director. Together with Howard we leave the dark theatre and go out into the sun to a café nearby. With so much left undone, it seems unnatural to feel this relaxed. It is noon before we can start drafting cues for Act I in order to see lights on the decor and dancers during the general. At 12.30 the singers come for *Noces*. We have to abandon the lighting. We take care of costume details while *Noces* is on stage. After it has had two run-throughs, we meet Slava in the wings, ready to call our dancers. The look on his face forecasts bad news: "They are going to do a third run of *Noces*." We look at him in disbelief. "But that means we can't start the *Rite* until 4.30 at best and *Oedipus* sets up at 6.00. When will we finish our lights?" He sighs philosophically: "*Obuichna*" (It's normal). "Not for us," we protest to him and Pavel, who raises his hands in existential despair. Clouds begin to gather outside the theatre.

Our spirits lift a little when we see Maestro Gergiev mount the rostrum for the *Rite*. Since February everyone has confided that he will not have time to conduct the general rehearsal. Lyudmila, a longtime friend of his, has offered to convey our urgent needs. He is noted for his brisk pace. We request a slower tempo for the breakneck partnering of the *Abduction* in Act I. He agrees to try and the general begins. The dancers hold their own. Sergei runs the rough cues and commands his crew by intercom, improvising on the lights we have discussed. But for Act II he has to experiment—one eye on our notes. Halfway through this act lights start flashing on and off. The Maestro calls in amazement over his shoulder, "Is this the lighting?" Suddenly the stage is plunged into darkness. The Chosen One is spinning wildly. Millicent jumps up, calling out, "It's too dangerous!" Like Maria Piltz during the 1913 riot, lulia keeps her head in the crisis. She is still on the music when light returns.

It is 5.45 pm. The *Oedipus* stage manager paces anxiously by the footlights. We persevere desperately with Sergei and his crew, who communicate from catwalks over the stage. At 6.00 the situation explodes: angry shouting, feedback from microphones, scores slamming shut. Our time is up, and the *Rite*, after months of careful work, is not ready for its premiere. We go into shock. So high at noon: so low at six o'clock.

Back at the apartment we change for the evening. For the first time in fifteen years of opening nights together, we do not speak a word to each other. As we walk back to the theatre it begins to rain. Blossoms are blown from the trees, and we remember the ominous wind on our first day at the Mariinsky. Backstage after *Oedipus*, we cannot distinguish the applause from the rain beating on the ground outside. We watch *Noces* with Howard in the Tsar's box and are

relieved for him that it goes so well. When the *Rite* is called, we check everything onstage and try to convey our support to the dancers. But both of us feel empty and numb.



The Kirov's *Rite of Spring*. Photograph © Shira Klasmer / from the Authors' archive

Miracles can and do happen, especially at the Mariinsky. The dancers, despite their exhaustion, surge through the music, pulling themselves into perfect lines and circles throughout the kaleidoscope of Act I. The 44 simultaneous solos are a wonder to behold. During the Entr'acte the women manage the fast change-the Maestro helps by easing the tempo. Act II, which the dancers had to learn so quickly is delivered by collective will. The *Amazonki* jump and fall in precise unison. The *Ancestors* master the procession. Iulia carries the company and audience with her until the last breath of her ordeal. Nijinsky's *Rite* reveals the architecture of human passion - elemental forces, sexual drives, tribal tensions, religious ecstasy. The Kirov tapped those powers in themselves and the public. Twenty minutes applause. They deserve it. Afterwards, jubilant, the dancers embrace us. We treasure our bond with them.

Vasiev comes onstage to thank the dancers for their hard work on the Stravinsky programme. He announces a four-day holiday, plus a bonus, which caps their joy with relief and renewed energy. Then he invites us, with Howard and Pavel to supper at the nearby Backstage Restaurant, where he entertains us all with Kirov anecdotes making us forget the traumas of the day. The conversation turns to his dreams for the future, and we understand how keenly he feels his responsibility to lead the Kirov Ballet into Russia's dynamic new era.

At 3 30 in the morning he walks us home. It is still light. Pointing across the Krukov Canal Vasiev indicates the site of the new theatre. As we stroll past the Mariinsky he explains the renovations that the French are planning: "It will cost millions and all this touring will help pay for it. In a hundred years the two theatres will still be here for St Petersburg." He says good night to Howard and to us in traditional Russian style, three kisses each and a bear hug for the *Rite*. Then he turns and walks back along Griboedova, a tall solitary figure, facing yet another enigmatic day at the Kirov.