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The Politics of Dancing *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo*

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“It was Mallarmé who said that a ballerina is not a woman dancing, because she isn't a woman and she doesn't dance,” Arlene Croce wrote in a 1974 dance review for *The New Yorker*. She was praising the debut of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, who were performing the most pink-and-white of classical ballets—*Swan Lake*, *The Dying Swan*, *Don Quixote*—in drag. Mallarmé meant that the ballerina acted as a poetic cipher in motion; Croce meant that the Ballets Trockadero were men, and dancing exquisitely.

Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo (nicknamed “The Trocks”) have been performing “serious” ballets *en travesti* since 1974, when they were founded as an offshoot of Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company.¹ The company’s impeccable camp pedigree can thus be traced, through avant-garde gay superstar Charles Ludlam, to the explosion of post-Stonewall activism in the arts and the popularity of camp performance in 1970’s New York. On the other hand, Les Ballets Trockadero can also claim a pure-blooded heritage of vodka and red roses: they are the spiritual inheritors of the great diva tradition of Russian ballerinas. They dance on pointe, they elbow each other out of the spotlight, and they have names like “Ida Nevasayneva” and “Mikhail Mypansarov.”

Currently acclaimed worldwide, the Trocks are on tour forty weeks a year. (They spend every summer in Japan, where they have a cult following; this alone could probably qualify as a litmus test for camp.) Balletomanes and schoolchildren are equally enamored of the company’s stagy, absurd, but technically brilliant dancing. In fact, last time they performed in New York, *Time Out New York* listed them as “pick of the week,” in three categories simultaneously: best dance performance, best gay & lesbian event, and best children’s activity (Chung). What does all this popularity mean, politically? Is it necessary to concede that the Trocks are merely another lovably harmless manifestation of drag, just as well assimilated as Mrs. Doubtfire and Dame Edna, or can we trace from their double heritage—edgy 1970’s gay performance tactics, and those monumentally

iconic Russian prima ballerinas—an underlying political strategy of activism and cultural relevance?

In fact, I would argue, political motivation is embedded in each of these traditions, in a number of different ways. The strategies of resistance employed by the Ballets Trockadero draw on each of these inherited histories in order to mount a camp performance that confronts the tenets of gender identity, of classical ballet, of issues of race and class in the performing arts, of enforced theatrical illusion—and even of drag itself. I will outline them here before exploring each one in depth:

- I. Like their role models, the ballerinas of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, the Trockadero dancers use ballet to glamorize their identities by associating with a nostalgic history of Russian ballet. Both are utilizing the fantasy of a foreign identity that can be “put on” like a costume, disguising the social provenance of the dancer. Through double and triple layers of accreted on- and off-stage identities, the Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo uphold the Ballets Russes’ tradition of continuous self-performance.
- II. The Ballets Russes toured tirelessly, and in bringing ballet across America for the first time, inadvertently worked at the frontier of awareness of their art form. At the end of their careers, when the company was outmoded and barely a gilt shadow of itself, the Ballets Russes began to accrue camp value.² The Trocks re-enact the “first encounter with ballet” experience—touring in Turkey for the first time last summer, for example, their first performance in a Muslim country—and also channel the spirit of nostalgic ossification.
- III. Continuing the legacy of gay activism, and specifically of drag resistance during Stonewall, the Trocks are gradually legitimizing male pointe dancing, and thus transforming training for male dancers generally. They are, thereby, confronting the stigma of the “unnatural” gay body by refusing to accept the “natural” limits ascribed to the male body.
- IV. There is a correlation between being visibly “out” in drag, and being “out” as gay men—both are still risky performances of public identity, in many of the cities where the Trocks do shows. Although ballet history is rarely written as

an overtly gay history, it is worth noting that the original Ballets Russes company was founded in 1909 by Serge Diaghilev when he fell in love with the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (Turnbaugh). Its offshoot, the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, was formed by another of Diaghilev's ex-lovers, the gay choreographer Leonide Massine. When the Trocks tour as a campy, explicitly gay-identified company, then, they are both paying tribute to the extravagant self-invented Russian ballerinas and bringing out the shadow history of the Ballets Russes as a company that was created, supported, and managed by gay men.

- V. Inheriting tactics from their artistic model Charles Ludlam, whose hallmark was the low-cut dress he wore while playing Camille so well that the audience "forgot he was a man," the Trocks don't shave their chests. The Trockadero ballerinas do wear wigs, tutus, false eyelashes, flower garlands, and toe-shoes with pink satin ribbons, but they make it a point to play on audience discomfort by showing their distinctly masculine chests. Susan Sontag, in her 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" explains, "the traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness—irony, satire—seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled. Camp introduces a new standard: artifice as an ideal, theatricality" (62). The melodramatic tenderness with which the Ballets Trockadero approach their repertoire is neither "straight" satire, nor is it purely ironic. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, these roles can *only* be overplayed—Ludlam's post-Garbo depiction of Camille, and the Trockadero's campy Romantic versions of Giselle and Odette, are doomed to the same tragically feminine self-sacrifice—and so the illusion itself is now deliberately disrupted by markers of its own artifice.
- VI. In an ironic twist on artistic purity and conservation, the Trocks are actually a force for the preservation of ballet history, mounting historic ballets that are no longer in any other company's repertoire.
- VII. Judith Butler's concept of all gender as performance, and of drag as a valorizing manifestation of non-normative sexual and gender identities that

would otherwise be marginalized or made invisible, is compounded by issues of race as performance, especially in the strict conventions of Western Classical ballet. Robert Carter, *prima ballerina assoluta* of the Ballets Trockadero, maps several intersections of these tensions, and demonstrates his strategies of subversion and resolution.

To begin with the Trocks' direct ancestry, the enlightened irony of those faux-Russian names is partly indebted to the fact that many of the original "foreign" ballerinas in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had to be glamorized out of their working-class, less-than-exotic identities. (Ninette de Valois was an Irish girl named Edris Stannus, while Lillian Alicia Marks of Finsbury Park, north London, daughter of a mining engineer, became Alicia Markova. Vera Zorina, who became Balanchine's wife in 1928, was born Eva Brigitta Hartwig.) Becoming a prima ballerina with the Ballets Russes was an escape from family and oppressive social conditions at the turn of the century in Britain and Ireland, as well as from poverty and obscurity. In Mallarmé's terms, the stigma of being "a woman dancing" in the early 1900s could be sublimated into the identity of being a ballerina.

When Diaghilev died in 1929, the company split in two and weakened through competition; finally, in 1936, the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo was formed by Sergei Denham, as a touring company with many of the same dancers, based in Monte Carlo. The company's resuscitation kept the old Ballets Russes ballerinas from being forced back into the poverty and obscurity they had been trying to escape when they had first joined Diaghilev's fledgling company: the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo allowed them to sustain their roles as "Russian ballerinas." In other words, it enabled these female dancers to act out an identity which was realized and ratified through performance—and from 1938 to 1962, when the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo were effectively trapped in America due to WWII and permanently strained finances, the company visited 100 towns a season, crisscrossing the country by train. They effectively introduced ballet to the US, and every ballet company in America—straight or not—owes its existence to this history. Although it might seem, to a prima ballerina in the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, that dancing in a small theatre in Vinita, Oklahoma was far distant from the glory she

deserved, she could still rest in the assurance that she was indisputably a Prima Ballerina, because she was onstage in tutu and toe-shoes, with her Russian name printed in the program.

In rehearsals, Alicia Markova was known to mark the steps onstage dressed in a mink coat and heels. Here it becomes clear that she came to inhabit the role of the Russian ballerina full-time, so that both her offstage attire and onstage costume matched her assumed name; when she danced, it was an affirmation of internal consistency. “In imitating gender,” Judith Butler writes, “drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (175).³ If we look at the Ballets Trockadero through the theoretical lens of Butler’s concept of drag as performance, we can also see the historical depth provided by these public narratives of women who deliberately and conspicuously acted out the identity of the ballerina, to the point of exaggeration and even self-parody. The high stakes of this performance in terms of class and social status are already established by the dancers of the Ballets Russes; the Ballets Trockadero then add the complex negotiations of sexual orientation and gender identity. As if these many layers of staged identity were not sufficiently difficult to navigate, the ethnic composition of the Ballets Trockadero also raises the issue of race as performance in America.⁴

Every time Robert Carter, the Trockadero’s *Prima Ballerina Assoluta*, puts on his makeup to become Olga Supphozova, he says, “I begin to enter a different world. I develop a different mindset. I see Olga as being fastidiously delicate and pretty. I am a forceful dancer, but I love working on being pretty. I enjoy putting on my makeup, and it starts to change my energy, it prepares me to become Olga onstage” (quoted in Jhung). Bobby Carter is an African-American gay man, from Charleston, South Carolina, who started dancing when he was eight years old, wearing cast-off pointe shoes from older girls and practicing in an empty studio. The Trocks came to Charleston when Bobby was ten; he joined the Company in 1995, and learned the most difficult lead roles soon after. He says that he loves to dance Odile in *Swan Lake* (with the virtuosic thirty-two *fouettés* made famous by Pierina Legnani in 1895, now a test for great ballerinas), the *Grand Pas Classique* (with a set of *fondú développés* that travels across stage into a *pirouette*, a feat that few ballerinas can pull off), and *Paquita*. In fact, Bobby Carter cites his fondest memory of a performance as the time when Maya Plisetskaya, the Bolshoi’s famous

Prima Ballerina Assoluta, watched him dance *Paquita*: “Maya was in the wings, cheering me on as I did the *fouettés*,” he remembers. “She said she loved our *Paquita*, and that we were better than the usual female cast” (quoted in Jhung).

This type of comment—“better than the usual female cast” of ballerinas—is somewhat of a typical response to the Trocks. The fact that Maya Plisetskaya, one of the most renowned ballerinas of the twentieth century, compliments Bobby Carter on his *Paquita*, illustrates how the Trocks’ version of parody maintains its balance between irony, reverence, and pure camp. To return to Mallarmé, the Trocks *are* in a sense the perfect vehicles for ballet. Their bodies are terrifically well-trained, and they have written two complete sets of socio-kinetic codes into their muscles (“forceful” and “fastidiously delicate”). By performing ballet on the bodies of denaturalized ballerinas—and here I mean that you can see Bobby Carter’s chest hair while you are holding your breath watching him spin through that demanding string of *fouettés* in *Paquita*—the Trocks are supercharging the form itself. At the same time, they are refusing to let audiences forget that this spectacle called classical ballet is arbitrary, inbred, dusty and overblown, full of demented ballerinas and delusions of grandeur. It is at this intersection that the Trocks produce camp performance, and it is worth noting that they produce it on their own bodies, with sweat and makeup and bruised toes.

There are several levels of humor occurring simultaneously during a Ballets Trockadero performance. The most universal of these is slapstick physical comedy: the over-enthusiastic *pirouette* that topples the entire line of dancers like dominoes; the old, knock-kneed ballerina who bows so deeply she can’t get up again. Then there are the jokes about theatricality and performance generally: someone exits, and there’s a big crash in the wings, or the girls in the *corps du ballet* show up onstage still wearing their glasses. Next, there’s the level of jokes about the ballet itself, as a form: for example, in the *pas de deux* *The Flames of Paris*, the ballerina whips off a neat series of *fouetté* turns, but her partner is overwhelmed by his own rapid circle of uncontrollable *châinés*, and ends by propelling himself haplessly into the wings. That’s a ballet joke generally, about the ballerina’s tight control over form, in contrast with the male dancer’s flashy but ungovernable muscular power. There are also specific ballet jokes, like the fact that in many productions of *Swan Lake*, there is a swan prop that inevitably looks like a

cardboard cut-out from high-school drama class. In the Trocks' version of *Swan Lake*, the swan prop is, in fact, a cardboard cut-out, pulled jerkily across the stage on a little black string.

And beyond the jokes about specific ballets, there is a constant, weird, fascinating interplay between all the levels of characters being performed simultaneously by each dancer onstage, which Deborah Jowitt terms "layered transformations." A male dancer named Paul Ghislin, for example, has been a company member since 1995. Onstage, therefore, he's often dressed as a woman (or, Mallarmé would correct me here: not as a woman, as a ballerina).⁵ Paul's stage name is Ida Nevasayneva, so he is also impersonating a Russian diva ballerina. Tonight, let's say, Ida is dancing a piece called *The Dying Swan*; so now he is a man dancing a woman dancing a faux-Russian ballerina dancing like a very sick bird. On top of all that, *The Dying Swan* was choreographed for the famous Anna Pavlova, and was her lifelong signature role. (When Anna Pavlova was on her deathbed, she asked for her *Dying Swan* costume.) Now Paul is dancing a female faux-Russian ballerina pretending to be a sick bird who is also performing the pathos and melodrama of Anna Pavlova's attachment to her role: this is, indeed, a very complex and deeply layered formula for camp.

When the Ballets Trockadero were first performing in a rickety loft on West 14th St, hosted by a gay issues group, no serious male dancer could risk ruining his career by joining a drag ballet company full-time. In addition, boys in ballet schools were never trained on pointe, so the early members of the Trocks were forced to sneak into girls' pointe classes and then practice in secret. A case in point is Tory Dobrin, now the Artistic Director of the company, who wore black socks over his toe-shoes to try to disguise the fact that he was the only male dancer in a pointe class (Jhung). This experience formed a kind of corollary to being gay (which most of the dancers in the Trocks were, and still are); a typical male dancer would have a "straight" day job partnering and lifting female ballerinas in one of the big New York ballet companies, and then come downtown late at night to dance, anonymously, as a Trockadero ballerina. The global presence and popularity of the Ballets Trockadero, some thirty years later, has effectively transformed this state of secrecy and shame. Male dancers can now be "out" professionally as well as sexually: boys can choose to train on pointe, which means that

younger, more fully prepared dancers can join the company, which in turn reinforces the legitimacy of drag ballet.

Each dancer in the Trocks is given two stage *personae*, one male and one female, so that in a sense even the *male* roles are being danced “in drag.” (But, of course, no one joins this company to be a boy!” says Bobby Carter [quoted in Jhung]). Margeaux Mundeyn, unlike her impeccable role model Margot Fonteyn, chews gum onstage and whispers to the other girls in the corps du ballet—but Jacques D’Ambrosia’s bio relates how he “was dismissed from the Paris Opera Ballet in 1991, when he blackmailed the horn section of the orchestra and forced them to play *Papa Don’t Preach* in the third act of *Romeo and Juliet*, while he vogued *en pointe*” (Dobrin). Even in this brief example, it is quite clear how the Trocks are interpreting the performance of masculinity onstage. The male roles are generally either played as suspiciously effeminate (another reference to the history of gay men in dance) or as big dumb jocks (the counterpoint to melodramatic, hysterical ballerinas).

In her seminal definition on drag, Esther Newton states, “at its most complex, it is a double inversion that says, ‘appearance is an illusion’” (19). However, the Trocks’ version of drag is a decisively interrupted illusion, punctured by details of physicality (the hairy chests, no falsies, visible under the satin corsets and strapless gowns) and by the anti-hetero-normative exaggeration of effeminate traits in male character roles (in many of the Trockadero pieces, the ballerina lifts her partner, whereas the prince struggles to heave his princess upwards). In this way the Trockadero ballet is an incomplete act of gender-switched performance, one that belies the neatness of Newton’s “double inversion” in favor of a confrontational fluidity between categories.

In addition, the Trocks’ list of memorable performances includes numerous AIDS benefits, reflecting a profound political commitment to one of the formative issues for the gay community. In 1982, for example, there were 14 company dancers in the Ballets Trockadero; 10 of those dancers would die from AIDS-related causes in the next few years (Charles Ludlam died of AIDS in 1989). The company’s policy on performing for AIDS benefits is that whenever and wherever they are asked to participate, they do.

In addition to AIDS fundraising, opening up the options for young male dancers, and touring widely and publicly as a primarily gay company, the Ballets Trockadero also

performs historic, authentic ballets that would otherwise be lost. For example, they are the only company in the world to have in their repertoire the underwater *divertissement* from Alexander Gorsky's ballet *The Humpbacked Horse*. The Trocks' version is certainly campy—there is a bubble machine, and costumes include fake shell bikini tops—but it also demonstrates how singularly sincere the company is about preserving the tenuous history of ballet. The mix of absurdity and authenticity is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that it was Elena Kunikova, who trained at the Kirov Ballet, who set Gorsky's piece on the Trocks.

“We're not a drag show, honey,” Bobby Carter said in an interview last year (quoted in Jhung). This sentiment encapsulates the paradox of the Ballets Trockadero: on the one hand, Carter was hailed last year by *The New Yorker* as having “greater mastery of the female technique than most females” (Acocella). On the other hand, all these White Swans and Giselles and Sylphs and Fairy Princesses are being danced by men in size 12 toe-shoes, with the tendency to developée until they give someone a black eye. The sheer multiplicity of levels of camp, the obsessive invocations of ballet history, the insistent performative and political activism, the goofy violence of slapstick physical comedy: all of these are performed simultaneously onstage, with that elevated, perfect technique that causes nearly every critic to claim that the Ballets Trockadero are out-performing both genders. It is hard to imagine that Charles Ludlam can comfortably co-exist in the same body with the grandiose ballerinas of the Ballets Russes, but the two have a common tone of camp melodrama, as well as a kind of tremulous, ecstatic faith in the act of performance; something that the Ballets Trockadero succeed in summoning. “Camp is a *tender* feeling,” as Susan Sontag wrote (65). Perhaps it is not so surprising that the Trocks can be tender—irreverently tender—towards performers whose onstage lives were like dreams they had of themselves, in which they confronted the difficult worlds of the past and the present by fabulously exceeding them, in low-cut gowns and mink stoles and stage makeup. This act is a political triumph of the created self, the performed identity, over the realities of poverty, prejudice, social constraints, and the many indignities of life outside the theatre.

In the Ballets Trockadero, a ballerina is not a woman dancing; a ballerina is an act of revolution in a pink tutu.

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¹ In 1972, the East Village experimental La MaMa Theater hosted the performances of the Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet, an earlier incarnation. See Coleman, “Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo.”

² Susan Sontag emphasizes the temporal dimension of camp, explaining that “so many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*,” not out of “a love of the old as such. It’s simply that the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment—or arouses a necessary sympathy” (60). In the case of the Ballets Russes, foreignness compounds the impulse of detachment, and exile reinforces a sense of sympathy. Sontag attributes the camp effect in part to the process of distancing over time, which moves an object (or a character) towards the fantastic. When she subsequently shifts the discussion from temporality to unity of character, she brings up “the aging Martha Graham” (61), who exemplifies the state of being fanatically and absolutely herself, in every movement. Martha Graham’s monumental unity of character, magnified by age, makes a useful analogy for the ballerinas of the late-period Ballets Russes.

³ For Butler, drag is an “act” in both senses of the term: it is a decisive, physical manifestation of intention (to “do drag” is to represent one’s identity as a visible declaration of gender imitation), and also a theatrical performance. If drag is a performable act of gender that can effectively transform the definition of an individual’s public gender identity, it implies that gender itself consists of nothing more than a set of acts that can be selected and performed at will. Drag emphasizes the process through which all legible gender identities are built over time, through actions of imitation and repetition.

⁴ Bodies can be thought of as having overall visible identities, composed as a set of visual clues to defining affinities: gender, sexual orientation, class, colour/ race, disability, etc. Audiences tend to read these mixed signs of identity simultaneously, and to combine them into strings of identifiers (often unconsciously), so that marks of difference are aggregated to form a perceived total identity. Skin colour, like the biological gender of the body, can be acted upon in a number of different ways to produce a public identity such as “Asian” or “feminine.”

⁵ Or, as Susan Sontag says, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (56). In the case of the Ballets Trockadero, the ballerinas they satirize are already “ballerinas,” to some extent—i.e. the classic prima ballerinas are already performers of themselves—so it could be said that the Trockadero dancers play their stage roles inside double quotation marks.