

The Myth of *Le Sacre du Printemps*:  
A Study of Three Choreographers

by

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## Introduction

### Inspiration

I was first drawn to *Le Sacre du printemps* during a search for a dance piece engaging myth on a different level than the fairytale renderings of ballet or the Greek psychoanalytical dramas of Martha Graham. I wanted a piece that spoke to people in some way and kept them returning to ponder it in their thought spaces long after the initial viewing. I wanted to find something that had a mythological function in people's minds, that was a story that was true in some deeper way than historical fact, but true in the sense that it picked up something honest from deep in the subconscious milieu of symbols and stories that make life meaningful.

I made a shaky assumption that an accurate measure of cultural and psychological importance for a dance piece was frequency of production. In the index of a history of modern dance I found twelve listings for *The Rite of Spring*<sup>1</sup>. This struck something in my memory.

I remembered my middle school ballet teacher who was prone to giving lectures on dance history during the bar exercises. She stopped class one day after seeing that none of us understood the weight and heaviness of a certain piece of choreography to tell us that ballet was not all lightness and beauty, sometimes it jerked and trembled and weighed down the dancer. "There was once a piece so heavy

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Anderson, *Art without Boundaries : The World of Modern Dance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997).

and ugly with music so primal and disjointed that it caused a riot to break out and the choreographer to go insane,” she recalled, passing around a book with a picture of a girl in a patterned smock with her body twisted and arms angular. “The dance was about a pagan tribe where a girl was destined to sacrifice herself to the god of spring. The original was a masterpiece, but it was lost after because it was too hated and traumatic to remember, but hundreds of other choreographers keep returning to the music to try and recover a piece that can stand up to the genius of the original.” She paused a moment to make sure the story hit home with each of us, or perhaps trying to recollect why she had told it in the first place and what it had to do with our current class. My young mind was a glutton for soapy dramas and had already slipped away in the story of a tortured genius haunted by arcane rhythms and a Fay Wray looking girl dancing before a Kong-like primitive god of spring. I remember storing this one away as a saucier moment in dance history, never expecting it to come back to me in the index of a library book.

My ballet teacher’s story had been a myth though, a myth more layered and significant than she probably knew. It is not just that the history of the piece has been mythologized; the work itself has gained its own momentum and become something with cultural resonance and impact. Through its evolution this piece has become about more than its movements or music, more than its dancers or audience, more than the ritual it captures or the story it tells. With this research I wanted to find a reason why the myth of *Le Sacre* was so powerful.

## Process

I began with a list of seven choreographers out of the hundreds available whose *Sacres* I wanted to explore: Vaslav Nijinsky's original (Paris, 1913), Lester Horton's American Indian influenced look at "universal concept of erotic 'primitivism' and ritual" (Los Angeles, 1937), Maurice Béjart's "enactment of a fertility ritual which celebrates the sexual union of a chosen woman with a chosen man...and reflects a universal concept of erotic 'primitivism'" (Brussels, 1959), Pina Bausch's reconfiguring of the original libretto as a comment "on the victimization of women in the social process" (Wuppertal, West Germany, 1975), Paul Taylor's multi-layered narrative "commenting on the viciously destructive impulse within modern society...three narrative layers: evocation of the 1913 *Sacre* choreography, a cartoon detective story (set c. 1930) about a kidnapped baby, the drama of a dance company's ritual of daily rehearsal," subtitled, "The Rehearsal" (Washington, D.C., 1980), Marie Chouinard's self-described analysis of the "very moment in which the first germ of life appears" presented as a series of solos (Ottawa, 1993), and finally, Heddy Maalem's recent consideration of "the notion of sacrifice and the cycle of night and day, as symbol of death and rebirth" performed by an international company of African dancers (Toboggan-Décines, Lyons, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

The initial common thread I found through these productions was each choreographer's use of their contemporary context to make a universal statement. All

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<sup>2</sup> All descriptions refer to the Roehampton University Stravinsky The Global Dancer Database (<http://roehampton.ac.uk/stravinsky/fulllistings.asp>), a comprehensive database of dance choreographed to Stravinsky's music complete with brief descriptions of the choreography.

of these dances made a critical statement about their society, and some attempted to suggest a solution either through a return to some hypothetical past or some unifying ritual. The first problem that I encountered was that though I saw a common ground between these pieces extending past the score, the choreographers themselves were motivated by so many different factors and had such varying goals, that it was nearly impossible to form a coherent argument for their coexistence based on these themes. To add to that problem, the amount of critical and scholarly information concerning Horton, Chouinard, and Maalem's pieces was limited and difficult to access, as were visual records of these pieces that I could access to analyze in depth. In addition, great deals of comparisons were made between versions around the seventy-fifth anniversary of the ballet in 1987 that did not factor Chouinard and Maalem's versions into their conclusions.

I resolved to narrow my study to the Nijinsky (with a great reliance and consideration of Millicent Hodson's 1987 reconstruction), Béjart, Bausch, and Taylor. These pieces have all been performed within the last year and are still garnering critical interest, which I believe speaks to their ongoing resonance. I began looking into each choreographer's history, philosophy of dance, and what they said about their versions of *Le Sacre*. I was surprised by the choreographic overlap in the creators' visions. I also watched and closely detailed the choreography of each piece in an effort to render each an observable ritual and be able to analyze them as such. This detailing of each piece was inspired in part by a question that had surfaced in my choreographic process about recording dance with words. To do this, I accessed the visual records held on video at the Lincoln Center Library in New York. These

recordings were imperfect renderings of the dances, since all of these pieces were meant to be seen in a live performance context. By watching recordings of the works I was not allowed the visceral impact of watching dancers perform live, nor was I able to choose my frame for viewing, but could see only from the angle the video recorded. The benefit was that I was able to see the dancers close up in a way that might not have been possible in a performance, and I was able to take time detailing and analyzing each section of the piece like I would not have been able to in a theater.

Correspondences like the hesitant interplay between genders in Nijinsky, Béjart, and Bausch and the depiction of intercourse itself in Béjart and Bausch caught my attention, as did coincidences like the use of a red slip in Bausch's *Sacre* as the marker of the chosen one, and the red cloth swaddling the baby who will be killed in the climax of Taylor's *Rehearsal*.<sup>3</sup>

There were congruencies in the choreographers' philosophies of dance as well, and it was where those overlapped with my initial interest – choreographers looking to a time before civilizations to make universal statements – that my interest was especially peaked. I tried to conjecture an explanation for the recurrence of this theme and found that Nijinsky, Béjart, and Bausch all spoke of restoring dance to a form that had been corrupted by centuries of codification and abstraction until it only expressed surface meaning. Their versions of *Le Sacre* were also placed either in a

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<sup>3</sup> Shelley C. Berg, *Le Sacre Du Printemps : Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham, Theater and Dramatic Studies No. 48* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988). p. 115. In Berg's description of Taylor's piece she states, "the bright scarlet of the blanket is one of the few patches of color in the white-grey-black spectrum of costumes and props. Its color is arresting and ominous. One can already smell the blood." This could easily apply to the red slip that lies on the ground through Bausch's piece, signifying the violence to come in a similar way.

mythological past or an unspecified present and were conceived of as rituals in and of themselves instead of depictions of a story. Paul Taylor's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rehearsal*), with its cinematic style and constructed narrative, did not fit in philosophically with the others. Taylor was too much an American post-Modernist with a satirical eye on his own society and a sense of cultural relativity that prevented him from making the sweeping universal statements of the others. His rituals were confined to the dance studio and his mythic past was too intertwined with America's past to abstract itself the way the others had. I chose to exclude Taylor from my analysis for this thesis on these grounds.

Vaslav Nijinsky, Maurice Béjart, and Pina Bausch's all concerned themselves with an idea of regression to a universal language of movement and the ritual of dance in their versions of *Le Sacre*. All three choreographers described some regressive desire; some wished to strip away layers of society and regress to a primitive ideal. This was the course on which I chose to focus my research and through which I hoped to attempt to understand how *Le Sacre du Printemps* came to be engaged with as a myth.

### **Intent**

I am basing my understanding of *Le Sacre* as a myth on comparative mythologist Wendy Doniger's concept of the macro-myth, which she defines as "a composite of the details of many varieties and insights...it suggests, though it cannot entirely encompass, the expression of all points of view in order to build up a multinational multi-myth, a collage in which a storyteller from any time and culture

could find many things that she had never yet dreamed of, but that might expand her own insight into the particular shared myth.”<sup>4</sup> Myths come from both traditional and modern sources. The modern formation of a myth occurs according to mythologist Joseph Campbell when, “the individual has had an experience of his own – of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration – which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realization has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of a living myth – for those, that is to say, who receive and respond to it of themselves, with recognition, un-coerced.”<sup>5</sup> Mythology works through ritual to contextualize events and make them repeatable through ritual. It is necessary that the passage of time is thus contextualized, or history loses meaning.<sup>6</sup> *Le Sacre* is a myth that is needed by today’s society to give it meaning, and the choreography of Nijinsky Béjart, and Bausch is the ritual form that recalls the myth of *Le Sacre*. To demonstrate this I will first cover the history of the creation of the ballet. Then, I will give the history of Vaslav Nijinsky, Maurice Béjart, and Pina Bausch, considering their biographies, artistic philosophies, and how they created their *Sacre*, pausing to consider the case of the construction of Nijinsky’s choreography by Millicent Hodson. I will then explain how each of their works can be viewed as a ritual enactment, and then describe each piece in detail as a ritual. I

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider : Politics & Theology in Myth, Lectures on the History of Religions New Ser., No. 16* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). p. 96

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*, 4 vols., vol. 4 (New York,: Viking Press, 1959). p. 4

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return : Cosmos and History*, 2nd pbk. ed., *Bollingen Series* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).p. ix and p.141-146

will then establish how *Le Sacre du Printemps* came to be called a myth. I will then examine a theory of primitivism and how *Le Sacre* functions as a myth. I will then recount my own choreographic explorations and how they tie into my research. I will conclude by considering once again the mythological impact of *Le Sacre* and its ongoing cultural relevance.

## Chapter 1: Histories and Biographies

### The Original

In the spring of 1910, Igor Stravinsky had just completed the music to *L'Oiseau de feu* for the Ballet Russe when a waking vision came upon him of an ancient sacrificial rite. “A solemn pagan rite: sage elders sitting in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring. Such was the theme of the *Sacre du Printemps*.”<sup>7</sup> He immediately contacted his friend Nicholas Roerich, a painter and archeologist specializing in ancient Russia, who had previously been commissioned by the Ballet Russe for the designs of “Polovtsian Dances.” Together they wrote the series of scenes that would make up the ballet’s libretto. When Stravinsky informed the director of the Ballet Russe, Serge Diaghilev, of their creation he was greatly impressed and commissioned them to set to work on realizing the work they called “The Great Sacrifice.” Stravinsky and the company were soon distracted by the creation of the ballet *Petroushka* and it was not until the following year that work began on the composition in earnest.

Diaghilev chose the young dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, fresh from the success of his first choreographic sensation *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, to choreograph the new work. In doing so, he effectively dismissed the resident choreographer of the Ballet Russe, Mikhail Fokine, a decision which initially sat well with Stravinsky who

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<sup>7</sup> Igor Stravinsky, *Stravinsky: An Autobiography* (New York,: Simon and Schuster, 1936). p. 31

considered Fokine ‘an exhausted artist’ incapable of creating the ‘new forms’<sup>8</sup>  
Stravinsky thought the ballet would require.

As soon as rehearsals began for the ballet in 1912, problems began to emerge in the difficulties of reconciling the choreography with the score. Nijinsky was determined to echo the rhythms of the music with the choreography, listening to the rehearsal pianist “play the section [of the score] in its entirety, then play each musical phrase separately, until he thoroughly comprehended and assimilated the rhythms.”<sup>9</sup> Stravinsky, however, insisted in later writings that he had great misgivings in Nijinsky’s choreographic ability, stating, “the poor boy knew nothing of music,” and that in explaining the score to Nijinsky, he had to teach him “the very rudiments of music...[which] he had the greatest difficulty in remembering.”<sup>10</sup> To help ease the discord between the composer and the choreographer, as well as sooth the growing alienation between Nijinsky and the rest of the company, Diaghilev brought in the dancer Marie Rambert of the Hellerau school in Dresden to teach the company and choreographer about the Eurhythmic system of interpreting music through movement. She worked closely with Nijinsky and helped him visualize the score. The ballet still required more than one hundred rehearsals to complete, with the dancers constantly complaining that the movement was too fast and too foreign to their bodies and the rhythms too complex to count. The time finally came for the premiere of the ballet at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées in May of 1913. After a peacefully received dress rehearsal, the ballet was ready for its premiere.

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<sup>8</sup> Berg p. 24

<sup>9</sup> Berg p. 26

<sup>10</sup> Stravinsky p. 40-41

The program read:

*Le Sacre du Printemps (Argument)*

*Premier Acte*

*L'Adoration de la Terre*

*Spring. The Earth is covered in flowers. The Earth is covered with grass.*

*A great joy reigns high on the Earth. The Men take up the dance and question the future according to their rites. The ancestor of all the Sages himself participates in the Glorification of Spring. He is led out to be united with the great and abundant earth. Everyone stamps the earth in ecstasy.*

*Deuxième Acte*

*Le Sacrifice*

*After nightfall: after midnight.*

*There are hallowed stones on the hills. The young dancers play mystical games and seek the Grand Way. The one who has been chosen to be offered up to God is glorified and acclaimed. The ancestors are called upon as venerated witnesses. And the wise ancestors of the men contemplate the sacrifice.*

*It is thus that one makes sacrifice to Yarilo, the magnificent, the flaming.*

Truman Bullard's three-volume work *The First Performance of Igor*

*Stravinsky's Sacre du Printemps* lists this program information and details the events

leading up to and critical response following the premiere of the work.<sup>11</sup> To

summarize the episode: Two minutes into the music the audience became restless.

By the time the curtain rose to reveal the vividly bright colors and patterns of

Roerich's backdrop and costumes, the noise of the audience nearly drowned out the

music. Half the crowd loudly hissed and booed, some even pulling out whistles,<sup>12</sup>

while some countered with cries of support and others called for quiet. Stravinsky

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<sup>11</sup> Truman Campbell Bullard, "The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky's Sacre Du Printemps" (University of Rochester, 1971). Vol. 1 p. 142

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Vol. I p. 146 referencing Misia Sert

left his seat in the auditorium and went to stand beside Nijinsky backstage where he yelled counts to the dancers who could not hear the music. The house lights were turned on during the break between the scenes and Diaghilev appeared on the stage urging the audience to let the work finish in peace, but shortly after the second act began, the noise in the house began to match it. The cacophony continued until the start of the “Dance Sacral” when Maria Piltz as the Chosen One began her dance of death, and the audience hushed. The curtain fell and the company assembled with the composer and choreographer for four curtain calls where they were exposed to wildly enthusiastic cheers and loudly condemning ridicule from the audience.

## **Vaslav Nijinsky**

### ***Biography***

Vaslav Nijinsky was born in Kiev to a pair of Polish folk dancing parents around 1889.<sup>13</sup> He was already performing small roles in opera houses and summer theaters with his parents by age eight, the same year that his father abandoned the family and his mother moved them to St. Petersburg. The following year he was enrolled in the Imperial Theatrical School and was soon recognized as an exceptional dancer and called a prodigy. He graduated in 1907 and was immediately accepted into the Imperial Ballet at a level beyond the usual entry position. The following year he was introduced to and began a relationship with the prominent art impresario

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<sup>13</sup> Biographical details, unless otherwise noted are sourced from Joan Acocella’s introduction to *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*. Waslav Nijinsky and Joan Ross Acocella, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, Unexpurgated ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

Serge Diaghilev. Diaghilev was part of a group of the artistic elite that aimed to bring Russian arts to the west. He had been organizing displays of Russian painting, sculpture, and music in Paris since 1906. In 1909, Diaghilev planned a Paris season to display Russian ballet with Nijinsky as a principle dancer. The twenty-year old dancer caused a sensation when he began performing in Paris. His dancing was so incredible and his celebrity became so wide spread that the Parisian audience began referring to him as “the god of the dance.” Diaghilev formed the Ballet Russe after the initial season and would produce annual seasons in Paris and London, gaining much esteem for Russian ballet as a recovered form of classical dance. The company flourished with Nijinsky starring in a multitude of roles created for him by the company’s principle choreographer Mikhail Fokine. The productions of the Ballet Russe “supplied an image of what Europeans felt they had lost: innocence, passion, folk roots, and un-self conscious responsiveness to spiritual mysteries.”<sup>14</sup> The hallmark of the Ballet Russe became its synthesis of music, dance, and scenery to create a complete piece presented in each ballet. The relationship between Diaghilev as head of the company and Fokine as choreographer began to deteriorate as Diaghilev pushed Nijinsky to begin choreographing his own ballets. The first of these was 1912’s *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*. The style was entirely new and difficult for the dancers to perform. The critics and audience also had a difficult time accepting it. The ballet had a strong sexual explicitness that shocked audiences. It also disregarded ballet vocabulary in favor of bodies and feet being held in a strict

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<sup>14</sup> Berg p. 14

profile position with angular, not rounded arms.<sup>15</sup> Though critics questioned the validity of this style in the context of ballet, the piece gained enough attention for Diaghilev to put further trust in Nijinsky's choreographic ability. Next, the dancer worked to develop his famous role as the title character in the Fokine ballet *Petrouchka* and his own choreographic project *Jeux*, a work set in contemporary times using a tennis match as a metaphor for the tangle of relationships. In 1912, Nijinsky was appointed as choreographer of the new Stravinsky composition, *Le Sacre du printemps*.

### *Le Sacre*

Nijinsky was seeking a new mode of expression with his choreography. In a letter to Stravinsky written during the rehearsal process for the ballet, he wrote, "Now I know what *Le Sacre du printemps* will be when everything is as we both want it: new, beautiful, and utterly different – but for the ordinary viewer a jolting and emotional experience."<sup>16</sup> Nijinsky was weary of the types of ballets he had been performing in where grace and beauty were equated as the highest ideal a dancer could attain to. He wanted to find beauty in a different source, in dance that had not been stripped of meaning by technique and ideals. "Nijinsky seems to be claiming that a fresh range of subjects should be opened up, or rather reopened, for the dance," Geoffrey Whitworth author of *The Art of Nijinsky* writes. He continues, "this implies,

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points : Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Robert Craft, "Nijinsky and Le Sacre," *New York Review of Books*, April 15, 1976, p. 39, quoting letter from Nijinsky to Stravinsky

not a destruction of what has been valued in the past and will go on being valuable, but a gradual evolution toward a new expressiveness and a new technique.”<sup>17</sup>

Nijinsky’s goal was to find beauty, true beauty through his dances. As Whitworth writes, “Prettiness is very well in its way, but life is greater, and truth greater still. And in this truth – this reality which is the gleam that forever eludes us – lies, as some believe, the hope of truest beauty...Nijinsky said, ‘Grace, Charm, Prettiness all surround the central point which is Beauty. It is for Beauty that I labor.’”<sup>18</sup>

Nijinsky had to strike out against the expectations set up for him by his dancing and make a bold statement of his intent with choreography and his philosophy of dance. He claimed in an interview following the London premiere of *Le Sacre*, “I am accused of ‘crimes against grace,’ among other things. It seems that because I have danced in ballets...which aim at grace pure and simple, I am to be tied down to ‘grace’ forever...[the words] ‘grace’ and ‘charm’ make me feel sea sick.” He continues, “I could compose graceful ballets of my own if I wanted to...[but] the fact is, I detest conventional ‘nightingale and rose’ poetry; my own inclinations are primitive. I eat my meat without *sauce Béarnaise*. There have been schools of painting and sculpture that went on getting *sauver* and *sauver* until there was no expression but only banality left; then there has always come a revolt. Perhaps something like this has happened in dancing.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Arundel Whitworth, *The Art of Nijinsky* (New York, New York: B. Blom, 1972). p. 99-100

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 100

<sup>19</sup> Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1975). p. 99-100 quoting Vaslav Nijinsky interview with the *Daily Mail*

Some critics responded favorably to Nijinsky's reinvention of dance and celebrated his philosophy. One wrote, "Decisive progress will be made only through the interpretation of harmonious and resolutely modern movement. Away with anecdotes, away with action encumbered by pantomime and more or less ingenious twists of the plot; let us exalt solely the plasticity of movement for its own sake; let us trace its rich and infinitely nuanced arabesque in space; let us notate its accents whether they be violent or graceful, and we shall have brought out all the nobility and purity of an art which shines forth amidst all the conviction of our theatrical aesthetics."<sup>20</sup> The critic Jacques Rivière wrote most eloquently of Nijinsky's iconoclastic approach, stating, "Everything that he breaks, everything that he strips away from the dance is done to achieve a full, material and even opaque imitation of the emotions...He works on [the dancers'] bodies with un pitying brutality as if they were things; he demands of them impossible movements and seemingly deformed poses. But this is done to tear from them all they can give in expression. And in the end they do speak. Out of all these bizarre and violated forms arises an indefinable clarity; they distinctly convey a thousand difficult and secret things which we have only to observe."<sup>21</sup>

*Le Sacre* was the last ballet Nijinsky choreographed for the Ballet Russe. There were rumors that his relationship with Diaghilev had deteriorated, and when he unexpectedly married the Hungarian socialite Romola de Pulszky while the company

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<sup>20</sup> Bullard, Vol. II p. 404-405 quoting S.M., "Nijinsky Choregraphe," *Comoedia*, VII/2053 (May 16, 1913)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 297 quoting Jacques Rivière, "Le Sacre du Printemps," *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, VII (November, 1913)

was on tour in South America in late 1913, Diaghilev officially dismissed him from the company. When the First World War broke out, he and his wife were suspected of being spies and were placed under house arrest in Hungary, during which time Nijinsky suffered a nervous breakdown. They were released with the help of Diaghilev, who needed Nijinsky to dance in the company's tour of the United States in 1916, but after his return to Europe his mental state continued to deteriorate and he was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1919. He spent most of his remaining years institutionalized until his death in 1950.

The story of Nijinsky's madness became conflated as part of the legend around *Le Sacre*. With the choreographer of the ballet effectively silenced by the ravings of his own mind, the belief in *Le Sacre* as a lost masterpiece grew.

### **Reconstruction**

Millicent Hodson undertook the project of investigating and recreating Nijinsky's work while she was a graduate student studying dance history at University of California, Berkeley in 1970. She was drawn to the inverted stance of Nijinsky's dancers in the few photographs surviving the 1913 production. She read these postures as Nijinsky's "denial of the authority invested in modern civilization...[and] suggested a different set of social and psychological priorities, a different notion of the power relationships between man and the universe."<sup>22</sup> For Hodson, a reconstruction became necessary because with the loss of Nijinsky's *Sacre*,

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<sup>22</sup> Millicent Hodson, *Nijinsky's Crime against Grace : Reconstruction Score of the Original Choreography for Le Sacre Du Printemps, Dance & Music Series* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1996). p. xix

“not only had a single masterpiece been allowed to disappear, but a style and method of choreography” has been lost as well. She worked closely with Kenneth Archer, a specialist on Roerich, on researching the original movement, costumes, scenery and interaction of the elements. In 1982 she began to stage the work on the Joffrey Ballet Company and was able to present a piece in 1987 that she could authoritatively claim was 85% Nijinsky’s choreography with her well informed guess work making up the rest.<sup>23</sup> It would have been impossible to have a perfect reconstruction of the original since Hodson was basing her investigation in the choreographer’s ideals and the recollection of dancers. Any choreographer knows that the work they envision is different from the work that actually gets performed, and the memories of witnesses had been influenced by cultural conceptions and criticisms of the ballet and by the other versions created since the original. Hodson’s reconstruction was inspired by the same need to return to origins on which Nijinsky, Béjart, and Bausch had acted. She too looked to the past for a lost style of dance that needed to be uncovered, and thereby reinforced *Le Sacre’s* mythology in her attempt to bring it back to history.

## **Béjart**

### ***Biography***

On January 1, 1927, Maurice Béjart was born in Marseilles, France. His primary parental influence came from his philosopher father, especially after the death of his mother when he was eight years old. Around age thirteen, his father

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<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Levy, "The Rite of Spring at Seventy Five," *Dance Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (1987). p. 52

enrolled him in ballet class because of his frail health. He soon began dancing with the Opera de Marseilles and by 1944 he left Marseilles to pursue dance in Paris. He danced and created his first choreographic work for the Theatre Cirque de Rouen, then went on to travel through Europe with the Compagnie de Ballet de Solange Schwartz. He traveled to London with a member of the Opera de Paris and remained there in order to study the more exacting British school of ballet. By 1953, he founded his own small company in Paris called Les Ballets Romantiques which later changed its name the next year to Les Ballets de l'Etoile. Most of the ballets Béjart created for his company were based on literary themes from classics such as Shakespeare to the music of Chopin, but he also began to experiment with setting dance to electronic music. He founded a new Paris based company called Ballet Theatre de Paris that “traveled throughout Western Europe for nine months to be able to perform in Paris for three.”<sup>24</sup> During one of these tours, he made the acquaintance of Maurice Huisman, the director of the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. Huisman asked Béjart to choreograph a large-scale work for a summer festival in 1959. It was Huisman’s aim to “present ballet as an art form capable of appealing to young people, as well as attracting an international audience.”<sup>25</sup> In order to realize this, Béjart added members from the Belgian troupe the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie and from the London based Western Dance Theater, to his own Ballets de l'Etoile to

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<sup>24</sup> Pamela Gay-White, *Béjart and Modernism: Case Studies in the Archetype of Dance*, 1st ed., *French Studies 14, Theater Studies 13 French Studies 14, Theater Studies 13* (New Orleans, LA: University Press of the South, 2004). p. 6

<sup>25</sup> Berg p. 93

create the company he would later term the Ballet du XXIeme Siecle. The piece BÉjart created for the occasion was his own *Le Sacre du printemps*.

### ***Artistic Philosophy***

To understand BÉjart's *Sacre*, it is necessary to view it in the context of the rest of his chorographic philosophy. In fact, he has said that his choreographic corpus should be viewed as a whole, claiming that he "does not regard his work as a series of unrelated ballets, of finished and separate entities representing discrete events; on the contrary, he sees each ballet as a fragment of a work in progress, as a stage in a journey toward an unknown destination."<sup>26</sup> *Le Sacre* came early in his journey, twenty years before that statement was made, when many of the ideas that would inform his later ballets were still being formed. It was his first work with the large group of dancers that would become his Ballet du XXIeme Siecle, consisting of thirty-six to forty-four dancers. This mass of dancers was part of his desire to choreograph a large group of people. He once stated, "Dancing is collective – by the group, for the group,"<sup>27</sup> and later reiterated his "emotional philosophy of dance as 'giving dance to everyone.'"<sup>28</sup> It is an experience the audience shares with the bodies on stage and it takes many bodies to communicate to a large audience. BÉjart was troubled that ballet only seemed to attract an elitist audience and was removed from

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<sup>26</sup> Colette Masson et al., *BÉjart by BÉjart* (New York: Congdon & Lattès : Distributed by St. Martin's Press, 1979). p. 7

<sup>27</sup> Sally R. Sommer, "Maurice BÉjart's Rite of Spring" (paper presented at the Rite of Spring at Seventy-Five, Lincoln Center Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, New York, November 6, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> Gay-White p. 7

popular art and culture, where it had lost its social impact. One of Béjart's dancers commented later in her life that, "with Maurice, dance has become popular art. He's taken dance away from the elite and given it to the man who watches television."<sup>29</sup>

How they were communicating had become an issue for Béjart as well.

Though he still used the vocabulary of ballet, he worked to source the movement from a deeper place within the unconscious. He spoke of the fusion of elements and techniques in his work by stating, "I believe that the future of art lies in what we call in French, *métissage*, which is a radical mixture. It has always been a great civilization when many different races meet and make an explosion and something happens...in my dances...there are classical elements, modern elements, folklore...I think the vitality of my ballet comes from that. You can like it or dislike it, but it is vital."<sup>30</sup> Béjart sourced his dance to a very human place, where Béjart's "images and movement forms make us uncomfortable because they destroy our preconceived knowledge of the formal codes of dance...while on one level there is destruction through choreography, on another there is a demand that we construct a different realm of knowledge."<sup>31</sup> His dancer Jorge Donn explained it this way, "With Béjart, dance had become much more than simply raising a leg to a certain height. It was something more and came from inside."<sup>32</sup>

This psychological focus on the unconscious as the guide to the creative process has its roots in the writings of psychologist Carl Jung. The choreographer

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 132, Diane Grey-Cullert interview with author

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 20, Maurice Béjart interview with author

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 21

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 142, Jorge Donn interview with author

finds expression for this psychological exploration of the self in his dance works. Pamela Gay-White describes this in her book *Béjart and Modernism*, stating, “In placing the self, subjectively, within the scenario, Béjart creates highly personal spectacles that abound with recurrent albeit intuitively legible archetypes. Originating within the realm of his subconscious, the destruction of the literary archetype, expressed as one reassembled as dance-spectacle, nevertheless remains enigmatic. Yet these recurrent archetypes reveal a seemingly continual force of energy and give his work vitality.”<sup>33</sup>

The recurring theme in his work based on his dreams is the male and female split and its effect on the individual. The male and female are “rather like the Yin and the Yang,” to him, “two complementary powers that are equal, yet different.”<sup>34</sup> This interplay is summed up nicely by Gay-White who writes, “Themes of love, war, aging, and learning have to do with losing the self. The hero, but one of Jung’s archetypal figures, stands as an example of comparison with the lone figure...not only must the hero be alone, but he must also submit to a feminine twin or double. The feminine archetype of modernity present in his ballets represents that of the sister soul in movement, evoking by necessity ‘the other’ or ‘opposite’ of the self, a feminine essence in constant transformation.”<sup>35</sup> While there are no characters in his *Sacre*, the masculine and feminine aspects apply to the whole group, giving the merging of the two a more universal meaning. *Le Sacre* is the macrocosm for gender union that is distilled into specific characters in his later work.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 145

<sup>34</sup> Berg p. 93, Maurice Béjart interview with author

<sup>35</sup> Gay-White p. 147

Béjart chose to communicate this inner world through the language of dance, which he termed “primitive, elementary, direct...it is intuitive in its discourse and not discursive or Cartesian in its language.”<sup>36</sup> Once dance is used as a tool to express the subconscious, it goes beyond a style and becomes a part of the project of art to be a voice in cultural change. He once said, “Dance is a visual art and therefore rapid and elliptic. For this very reason it seems destined to assume a more and more important place in the society of both today and tomorrow.”<sup>37</sup> In Béjart’s view, though dance comes from a primitive place, it is the language best able to deal with the present and future. The Marxist philosopher Roger Garaudy wrote that, “the prospective dance of Maurice Béjart, in a constant effort to participate in the invention of the future – not only of dance, but of man as well – does not deny the past; it enjoins to the contrary, creations.”<sup>38</sup> He was consciously working through dance on a social project with a view toward the future. Gay-White characterizes this project by writing, “In essence, he has named dance as the free-seeking aspect of culture, an art of idealization able to draw from coexistent aesthetic currents of the past while forging for the future a synthesis that can give to the century’s legacy of expressiveness its due.”<sup>39</sup>

The key to dance’s importance in society lies in the connection between the artist and the audience. By basing his work on “several systems of meaning encompassing literature, the psychological, and the somatic,”<sup>40</sup> he was able to connect with his audience on several levels. The audience was invited to delve through the

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<sup>36</sup> Sommer 1987, quoting Béjart

<sup>37</sup> Sommer 1987, quoting Béjart

<sup>38</sup> Gay-White p. 18 quoting Roger Garaudy *The Alternative Future*

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 7

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 7

layers of meaning, beginning with a familiar story, going deeper to the “intuitively legible archetypes,” and then deeper still to the connection with experience of the bodies on stage. Following the precedent set by the Symbolist movement in theater and poetry, he left final interpretation of a work up to the spectator.<sup>41</sup> “Béjart used ballet as a means to define the multiple forces existing in dance art to implicate that work as a major social force.”<sup>42</sup>

### *Le Sacre*

What, then was Béjart eliciting from his audience when he created his version of *Le Sacre du Printemps*? His philosophy of dance is well captured by a statement he made regarding his realization of *Le Sacre*. “The dance is a rite,” he proclaimed. “Every age must create its own rites and the young who gather by the thousands to howl and twist and rock their desire for a new rite are profoundly conscious of this need. The renovation of dance is not an aesthetic problem...it is a social question – a spiritual attitude. The notions of flesh and spirit have become hollow and futile in as much as the veritable object at stake in that indivisible unit which goes by the name of man.”<sup>43</sup> Dance is more than a performance; it is a ritual of renewal for Béjart and a vital part of the reinvention of culture.

Béjart began working on the dance by repeatedly listening to the music. He wrote that when choreographing to specific music he first listens. “I take a score and I look for motives. Then I dissect it and reduce it into schemes, like making a charcoal

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 55

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 55

<sup>43</sup> Sommer 1987

or graphic sketch for a particular design in a painting...I rest before taking up my work again. I believe it is necessary to understand once with one's spirit in an analytical fashion and, the second time, with the entire body. And so, if one doesn't finish each part of the work completely, one loses...either through having a work which is not fully constructed mathematically, or one which is not 'sensed' through being at one with the music."<sup>44</sup> For Béjart, the music is part of the larger artistic whole that he used to communicate with his audience. He felt he should fully understand what was being expressed before he added his layers of interpretation to it. He felt that he wanted to present the complex score more simply, to "just choreograph music and form and form and music."<sup>45</sup> Berg writes that, "Béjart decided to use simplicity as the key to his choreography. Rather than trying to interpret every note of the score, as Nijinsky intended... Béjart chose to 'orchestrate' his movement to highlight the broad rhythmic phrases of the music."<sup>46</sup>

Béjart reconceived the original scenario to make the ballet not about the sacrifice of a maiden, but about the union of male and female. He "chose to put more emphasis on 'Eros' – the power of life – than 'Thanatos,' the power of destruction and death,"<sup>47</sup> because he saw spring as the call for renewal through creation, rather than death. Given his preoccupation with the counter point between the masculine and the feminine, it is logical that the most powerful, creative statement could be made when these two are brought together on an overwhelmingly large scale. He

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<sup>44</sup> Gay-White p. 121, quoting Béjart

<sup>45</sup> Berg p. 94, quoting Béjart

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 94

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 93

said that he “planned the meeting of a man and woman...then the act of love as a ritual; something religious, even something very violent.”<sup>48</sup>

The dance is an enactment of a ritual, but not a historically grounded one like Nijinsky’s. Béjart did not locate the primitive in any historical society, but in a timeless place of origins before people had formed society. Sally Sommer in her lecture on Béjart calls this concept the Biological primitive – the primordial ooze and evolution of life. Plant, insect, bird, and primate images are used in his choreography.<sup>49</sup> Gay-White interprets the biological aspect of the ballet in the formal structures of the choreography, writing, “*Le Sacre* can be termed a ‘biological’ work in its use of formalistic elements, in that it ‘illustrates the converging of a circular form toward a specific center...In *Le Sacre du Printemps*, the biological mating of the chosen couple corresponds in form to the motif of a Phoenix that rises from the center of two converging circles, each symbolizing revolutionary cells of partisans bonding together...As the biological center or nucleus, the mated couple emerges from its mass at the end of the ballet, having become whole or complete through the representation of one singular, ideal movement form. The circular or biological model of danced movement can thus also be said to symbolize the merging of individuals into union.”<sup>50</sup> This description echoes the reaction Jacques Rivière wrote to Nijinsky’s choreography, proclaiming, “This is a biological ballet. It is not only the dance of the most primitive man; it is also the dance before man...nothing but the ‘panic and terror which accompanies the rising of the sap,’ nothing but the horrible

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 94, quoting Béjart

<sup>49</sup> Sommer 1987

<sup>50</sup> Gay-White p. 80-81

work of cells. It is spring seen from its interior, spring in its straining, its spasms, its dividing. One would think he is witnessing a drama beneath a microscope...the division of birth, scissions, and reunions of turbulent matter in its very substance...We witness...all the fortuitous vortices through which matter slowly lifts itself to life. Never was there a more beautiful illustration of the mechanistic theories.”<sup>51</sup>

Béjart wanted this primitive to speak universally to the masses and work as a ritual of renewal for modern culture.

## **Pina Bausch**

### ***Biography***

Pina Bausch was born in 1940 in Solingen, Germany. She began to study dance in 1955 at age fourteen at the Folkwang School in Essen, Germany. The Folkwang School had been built up by Kurt Jooss and offered diverse training in ballet, modern dance, improvisation, composition, Laban notation, music, anatomy, and dance history.<sup>52</sup> Five years later she received an award for special achievements in the school and a scholarship to study dance in America at the Juilliard School where she studied with José Limón, Anthony Tutor, Margaret Craske, and Louis Horst. By 1961 she was performing with the New American Ballet and the Paul Taylor Dance Company. She returned to Germany the following year and worked as a soloist in Kurt Jooss’s Folkwang Ballet, traveling nationally and internationally on

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<sup>51</sup> Bullard Vol. II p. 305

<sup>52</sup> Anderson p.129

the company's tours. Her first choreography emerged in the company and by 1969 she had choreographed for the opera *The Fairie Queen* (1969) and created *Fragments* (1968) and *In the Wind of Time* (1969), which began to introduce elements of theater into choreography and won her first place at the Choreographic Competition Cologne. She began to teach at the Folkwang School and to choreograph for the Wuppertal Theater by 1971. Two years later Bausch was assigned as director for the Wuppertal Theater. Her first season in Wuppertal included Christoph Willibald Gluck's operas *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1974) and *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1975). In December of 1975, Bausch's realization of *Le Sacre du Printemps* premiered.

### ***Artistic Philosophy***

*Le Sacre du printemps* was one of Bausch's early pieces and the last one to fall more on the side of choreography than Dance Theater, but much like Béjart, the seeds of her later work are apparent in this piece. It has been said that her "ongoing concerns gave her choreographic oeuvre the continuity of a serialized opus or work in progress."<sup>53</sup> We look then to Bausch's artistic philosophy to see what informed the construction of her *Sacre* and what she hoped to accomplish with her art.

Bausch's artistic philosophy is both a psychological and sociological project. It is based in a need to reinvent dance by "relieving it of its fairytale illusions and leading it toward reality."<sup>54</sup> This reinvented form of dance that began to emerge in

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<sup>53</sup> Reynolds and McCormick p. 639

<sup>54</sup> Norbert Servos, Gert Weigelt, and Hedwig Müller, *Pina Bausch-Wuppertal Dance Theater, or, the Art of Training a Goldfish : Excursions into Dance* (Köln: Ballett-Bücherei-Verlag, 1984). p. 19

Bausch's pieces was called *tanztheater*, translated "dance theater." The idea was that the body dealing "directly with physical energies"<sup>55</sup> motivated by the person's experiences presented a much more powerful and honest piece of art than one expressing movement with codified technique to prescribed stories. Norbert Servos, the author of a guide to Bausch's choreography and philosophy writes, "Dance Theater does not seduce us with illusions; it puts us in touch with reality. Its point of reference is a universal social structure of affects which, in each case, can be clearly localized historically."<sup>56</sup>

Bausch locates the reality with which the body speaks in an early phase in the development of humanity. Servos quotes the German philosopher Ernst Bloch's question, "How do we first hear ourselves? As an endless singing to ourselves and in dance...they possess, when one comes upon them, the charm of original beginning,"<sup>57</sup> to illustrate this point. Bausch sees that beginning as a model that she must work toward re-accessing because what has come to be called dance is a falsification of that origin. She began choreographing to try to rediscover what dance in fact was. "There was nothing new happening [in dance]," she claims, "and actually it was frustration which made me think of maybe trying to do something for myself. But it wasn't because I wanted to choreograph. The sole reason was because I wanted to *dance*."<sup>58</sup> She goes on to say, "There is a great danger in the way things are developing at the moment and have been developing in the past few years.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 19

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 21

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 19, quoting Ernst Bloch's *Zur Philosophie der Musik*

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 229, quoting interview with Bausch. My emphasis added.

Everything has become routine and no one knows any longer why they're using these movements. All that's left is just a strange vanity which is becoming more and more removed from actual people. And I believe that we ought to be getting closer to one another again."<sup>59</sup> Dance has become abstracted, but the reality behind it is still there and can still be recovered. "The case may well be that dance had to travel such a long road in order to find itself at last, to emancipate itself to its own modes and find its way back to its origins," Servos writes. This distance covered in the evolution of dance cannot be described in terms of dance history or the evolution of particular techniques. Dance is about the human body in its social context. Servos goes on to reference the sociologist Norbert Elais in writing, "Where the everyday behavior of the individual comes into view, the universal history of the body is met with the development of a certain physical control, and this is examined for actuality, at the point which marks the end of a phase of development."<sup>60</sup>

Her choreography is not solely a personal project, however, one of the main ideas in *tanztheater* is the connection between the performer and the audience. Servos summarized that in Bausch's pieces "the coherence only becomes apparent during the process of reception. In this sense, the pieces are not 'complete.' They are not self-sustaining works of art because, in order to develop completely, they require an *active* onlooker. The key lies with the audience, who are asked to question their...own everyday experiences. These should, and indeed must, be collated against the happenings on stage and related to them...[the sense connection] is dependent

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 227

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 25

upon the concrete (physical) expectations of the onlooker, which are disappointed, confirmed or confounded by the activities on the stage, and thus provide the opportunity to learn new lessons.”<sup>61</sup> Dance is meant to be seen by an audience and meant to affect them in order to reach its full potential. It may not be a stretch to say that the riot at the 1913 *Sacre* premiere would have pleased Bausch because the audience’s visceral reaction became part of the dance itself.

Bausch’s *Sacre*, like all of her later pieces, “force one to take a stand, one is either for them or against them...two basic reasons exist for [this] bewilderment...The first is her choice of subject: virtually all the choreographer’s pieces deal with those basic questions about human existence...They deal with fear, longing and loneliness, frustration and terror, man’s exploitation of man (and in particular, man’s exploitation of women in a world made to conform to the former’s ideas)...They are aware of the difficulties of human co-existence and seek ways to reduce the distance between two (or more) individuals...[The other reason] lies in the quality of mercilessness which everyone must feel in the way Bausch asks her existential, social, or aesthetic questions. The conflicts dealt with in the pieces are neither paraphrased or harmonized, but fully acted out.”<sup>62</sup> She reduces society down to its fears and anxieties and then focuses on those fears that come about through the uneven ground between man and woman. Those conflicts are then acted out, and an audience reaction is demanded. This intent is clearly exhibited in her *Sacre*, which

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 20

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 13

focuses on the notion of a female sacrifice as a symbol for the exploitation and dispensability of the female.

### *Le Sacre*

Bausch calls the plot of her *Sacre*, “the original libretto as if viewed from afar.”<sup>63</sup> The ballet is not located in ancient Russia, or even some primordial beginning like Béjart’s, but rather in an unspecified contemporary society, thereby not allowing the audience the distance it could gain from a fictitious physical location, but forcing them to question if this is their own society. The sacrifice of the chosen woman is the whole focus of the dance, not just the conclusion. Servos writes that this *Sacre* “is set in a contemporary society, although this is not more closely defined. The battle of the sexes does not develop from the ritual of earth worship. Sexual segregation is a reality that already exists, and is the point at which the action begins.”<sup>64</sup> Bausch did not engage with the score on a solely rhythmic level, she looked at its themes. “The starting point is the music. There are so many feelings in it; it changes constantly,”<sup>65</sup> Bausch is quoted saying during the restaging of her dance on the Paris Opera Ballet in 1997. The central feeling she turned her focus to was “the antagonism between the sexes and the resultant alienation of the individuals. The emphasis is on the role of the woman, who here is more clearly defined as the victim and object of this reality...Bausch makes the suffering of the female victim

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<sup>63</sup> Susan Manning, "German Rites Revisited: An Addendum to a History Of "Le Sacre Du Printemps" On the German Stage," *Dance Chronicle* 16, no. 1 (1993). p. 146

<sup>64</sup> Servos p. 30

<sup>65</sup> Alan Riding, "Using Muscles Classical Ballet Has No Need For " *The New York Times*, June 15, 1997.

almost animal-like, the sacrifice is executed with almost brutal matter-of-factness. The work develops as an existential metaphor for a reality which pitilessly claims its predominantly female victims.”<sup>66</sup> The biology in Bausch’s dance is not a metaphor displayed in nature and cells like Béjart’s or Nijinsky’s, it is the biologically rooted fact of gender behavior, meaning “there is no basis for moral judgment, much less opposition – only accommodation.”<sup>67</sup> It is not a sacrifice to bring Spring about, it is the ritual death of woman as Spring at the hands of an oppressive male society. The sacrifice is not for the community and it is not a self-sacrifice carried out with dignity.

The *tanztheater* aesthetic of presenting reality instead of acting emotion is evident in *Le Sacre*. Bausch covers the stage in an ankle-deep layer of dirt that the dancers negotiate their steps over throughout the dance. The layer of dirt is described by Servos as “not only a metaphor relative to the piece, but directly influences the dancers’ movements, lending them a tangible weight by physically recording the traces of the sacrificial ritual. The bodies rewrite the story of *Rite* in the earth.”<sup>68</sup> It is through the struggle to dance on this ground that the dancers’ physical exertion begins to show. They breathe audibly over the sound of the music and the sweat on their bodies causes the dirt to stick to them. The limits of performance stamina are pushed and there is a blurring of the “theatrical metaphor and masochistic reality.”<sup>69</sup> Learning *Le Sacre* required technically trained bodies to learn movement in a different way. Bausch makes the claim, “You cannot really teach steps. It is

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<sup>66</sup> Servos p. 31

<sup>67</sup> Jay L. Kaplan, "Pina Bausch: Dancing around the Issue," *Ballet Review* 15, no. 1 (1987). p. 77

<sup>68</sup> Servos p. 30

<sup>69</sup> Reynolds and McCormick, p. 639

completely different. It doesn't mean anything to teach steps. You have to reach in and change the entire body."<sup>70</sup> The Paris Opera Ballet dancer Geraldine Wiart who learned the role of the Chosen One agreed, saying, "We had to start from scratch...it was as if she had to remodel our bodies...it was the discovery of something entirely new."<sup>71</sup> That new way of movement was connected to a primordial feeling by another Paris Opera dancer. Pierre Darde says that learning this way of movement, "It's not something I can express in words, it is more the feeling of things that have passed through the body. But I have no doubt that this has been one of the most primordial experiences of my 17 years at the Paris Opera Ballet."<sup>72</sup>

Bausch's *Sacre* is not, like the others, a ritual of renewal – it is a statement of reality as she conceives it. "The attitude adopted in *Rite of Spring*, as in other Bausch works, is one of mere confirmation. The aim of this form of Dance Theater is not to question motivation or social context, but rather, by uncompromising exposure, to provoke emotional involvement, perhaps even opposition."<sup>73</sup> Bausch's call for the return to an alternate society is not stated explicitly in this work. Rather, her philosophy of choreography is based in the belief that dance contains at its root, the true expressive abilities of the human that artists must work toward recovering.

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<sup>70</sup> Riding "Using Muscles..."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Servos p. 31

## Chapter 2: Watching *Le Sacre*

### The Pieces as Rituals

Are these pieces myths being acted out or rituals being acted through? Are they showing the audience something or processing through something for our benefit?

Berg writes, “The very elements inherent in ritual dance – the sense of detachment, the repetition of movements, the pared-down gestures,”<sup>74</sup> were all present in Nijinsky’s piece. The first act of Nijinsky’s *Sacre* is like observing the events of a day, with each group of dancers distinguished as a group of characters acting out the festivities and ceremonies of the day. These festivities include scattered rituals like the divination of the Old Woman in the opening and the solemn “Kiss of the Earth” by the sage. The second act had the air of a total enactment of a ritual. The dancers are no longer playing characters, but instead are performing the duties of their role. The audience is denied full access to the ritual with more oblique movement and narrowed visual scope. Béjart’s is a very self-conscious ritual where there are people moving purposefully through specific stages, but the dancers are playing these people. They are not going through the movements for the sake of the ritual – they are acting parts in a dance. The limited emotional expression on the faces of dancers through most of the piece gives an air of detached enactors of a ritual, but there are moments like the tense split between the tribes in the male section, the anxious stare of the women as the men approach, and the fear and apprehension in the faces and

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<sup>74</sup> Berg p. 55

bodies of both the chosen man and woman, where the dancers are suddenly people in a situation instead of being removed one degree from the action. The whole dance has a sense of formality though, and all the dancers know their proper place and position for each movement. The dancers are the emotional embodiment of their movements and the sequence of their action is less important than the action itself in Bausch's piece. There is less formality in this piece and there is room for accidents and individual interpretations. The movement vocabulary is more pedestrian and less stylized and polished for presentation. Watching this piece is the most like watching something real in progress that could later be captured and codified, but is still in formation.

All three pieces carried a sense of ritual – a sense that they were being performed for reasons other than aesthetic appeal for the audience or practice for the dancers. To try to tease out what gave these pieces that sense, I examined each dance as if it were a ritual where every movement and every motivation was significant to the greater whole.

## **Ballet Russe<sup>75</sup>**

### **Act I**

#### ***Augers of Spring***

It is the day of the spring festival in prehistoric Russia. A group of three maidens wearing red patterned smocks with long black braids, a group of girls in

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<sup>75</sup> Millicent Hodson, "The Search for Nijinsky's Rite of Spring," (Thirteen/WNET and Danmarks Radio, 1987).

white and blue and a group of male youths in white crouch together in circles on the ground. An old woman stands hunched over carrying sticks of divination in her hands. Behind her is a fourth group of young men with animal fur capes and hats who begin to rhythmically bob together and stomping in their circle to warm the earth<sup>76</sup>. The old woman jumps to motion and serpentine her way around the crouching groups (she is responsible for magic and therefore cannot move in straight lines)<sup>77</sup> until she jumps next to the crouching group of male youths and they spring into their own jumping and circling dance. The youths and the other young men gather around the old woman as she separates her bundle of sticks and shows them how to cast divinations. They take sticks from her as she falls down and they begin to play their own games of divination. The men give her back the sticks and she describes one more circle with them before leaving the men to return to their original positions. A group of maidens in red enters and is soon met by the group of three maidens already present. They cause the group of girls in white still crouching to stand and soon all the groups are standing and stomping the earth and spinning within their own groups. The groups tighten together forming a mass and beat out rhythms and then spread back again.

### ***Ritual of Abduction***

There is a shift in the mood. The maidens run together while the youths look eagerly on and begin reaching out for them. The males chase the females in pursuit

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<sup>76</sup> Hodson *Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace*. p. 6

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 15 "In various traditions of ritual dance, figures responsible for magic rarely move in straight lines; instead they wind back and forth across the path to or from their destination, as though warding off dangers."

until they catch them and pair off with them for a brief dance before they run away again and the chase continues. All the females gather together while the young men surround them on one side and the youths on the other. They dart back and forth until two young men step forward and seize two maidens and violently throw them in the air while the other males cheer in encouragement and the females tremble. The maidens are set down and everyone abruptly splits and begins to walk away from each other as if something more important than the excitement and fear of the past few moments is about to begin.

### ***Spring Rounds***

Three tall women wearing mauve smocks and tall hats with bright blond braids that stand out against every other female's black hair enter and lead a few trios from the former groups in a solemn bowing section reminiscent of harvesting gestures in reverence to the earth. The groups re-gather and slowly work through circular patterns. This dance is part of a ritual and every movement carries significance<sup>78</sup>. Each group has its focus of intension on the earth and walks through its part with conviction. Everyone breaks out of the circles and they all rhythmically stamp their feet and slap their hands as an excited punctuation to their reverence for the earth.

### ***Ritual of the Rival Tribes***

The mood becomes festive once again. Young men run out and the youths spread along the back and begin to play fight with each other. The maidens and girls watch, excited and apprehensive. This is not a real fight; it is a game and a spectacle. The men and women circle each other and end up in couples once again, but this time

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p.70

the dance is not forced and it flows into a larger folk dance with two lines splitting and peeling off. The male and female groups tug at each other as part of the dance, but are only invested in the joy of the struggle, not its meaning or result. The groups spin off from each other and continue in their play fighting and merry making until the presence of the Sage is felt and everyone freezes and turns their attention to the procession.

### ***Procession of the Sage/ Adoration of the Earth***

The oldest and wisest sage comes out slowly in his long white robes and long white beard. He is stooped over, but his gaze is up at the sky and scanning over the bodies of the assembled group, never at the ground. He is flanked by a group of eight elders who bring him to the center of the group. The Sage looks up at the sun sending a wave of energy through the whole group and they begin to tremble, first in their heads and then moving through the rest of their bodies. It is like a circuit has been completed between the sun and the people, but there is no ground and everyone vibrates with electricity. To stabilize this connection the group moves into a large square marking the sacred area around the sage and four of his attendants. They help lower him gently to the ground where he prostrates and kisses the earth. Everyone looks up now and feels the full connection between sun and earth for a moment before they go into an ecstatic dance where they jump like excited atoms and stamp and fall to the earth only to spring back up and begin again. The sage stands in the middle of this still staring up at the sun.

### ***Dance of the Earth***

The maidens and girls come out of their excitement and begin running in a large circle around the group and a tight one around the sage with their arms outstretched gathering in the sun while the males run smaller circles within the two. The sage stands like an axis to all these orbits until everyone turns toward him and gathers tightly, reaching an arm in the air in a final impulse of energy and celebration.

The festival of the day has ended and the connection between the earth and the sun has been made, but something is still required if spring is truly to come.

## **Act II**

### ***Mystic Circle of the Maidens***

A ring of thirteen maidens gathers in the night. Their dance is like a game, but there is a seriousness group that speaks to the significance of their actions. The maidens scuttle around the perimeter of a double circle with their heads resting on their folded arms. They break away from the circle raise their arms in angular gestures to the sky before falling into a sophisticated square pattern along the ring. They split into an inner and outer circle and link arms, looking up for a moment. Something disturbs their focus and they look outward and then upward to the sky. The rings begin swinging in and out of each other at an increasing pace before the women cluster together again and return to their quick scuttling as one group.

They widen out once again and begin the game, which will determine who the Chosen One is to be among them. The circle moves slowly counter clockwise. They take two steps, then every other person steps out and weaves into the space before them giving the affect of a walking musical chairs. One girl stumbles and falls,

drawing the stare of the others, but she is forgiven and the game continues. The girl slips again and this time it is clear she has been marked.

### ***Glorification of the Chosen One***

She looks frantically about while the others push her to the center of the circle and begin to stomp around her and rhythmically clap their bodies. They are celebrating the sacrifice the Chosen One is going to make while also reveling in the fact that they have escaped her fate. The Chosen One stands petrified in the center with her eyes wide and shoulders slumped. The others jog and jump around her and throw their fists in the air. They leave her standing alone and group together as a pack leering at her from the side. They circle back around her, leaping and stomping before throwing themselves down on their stomachs at her feet. They rise and turn to the four cardinal directions, throwing themselves on the earth, readying it for the energy the Chosen One will soon be pouring forth.

### ***Evocation of the Ancestors***

The task of the maidens is now complete and they gather and kneel in front of the Chosen One to watch as the male elders of the tribe enter. The men cluster behind her and the spirits of the ancestors, wearing bearskins over their heads, begin to appear. The men slump toward the earth with every step and take sporadic glances and reaches toward the sky. The bear skinned ancestors gather behind the Chosen One as the elders form two small circles on either side and begin jogging around and pawing at the earth with their feet. Their dances become increasingly charged as all the males form a ring closing the Chosen One in. The other maidens stand and form a larger circle around that group and limp around it, alternately throwing their arms to

the sky and cradling their heads in their hands. The males begin to merge with this group while jumping and making laughing gestures<sup>79</sup>. The whole group is now orbiting the still frozen Chosen One, the men with pleasure in anticipation of the coming sacrifice, the maidens with distress over the loss of one of their number<sup>80</sup>. The maidens and elders wind off and exit, leaving only the bear-clad ancestors circling the Chosen One, preparing for her sacrifice.

### *Dance of the Chosen One*

The ancestors crouch as she jumps out of her petrified state and looks wildly around her. Her arm punches into the sky with her hand tight in a fist, “threatening the heavens.”<sup>81</sup> She holds her arms at stiff angles to her sides and jumps repeatedly into the air, sometimes swinging her right arm across her chest to protect her heart then opening it and gathering air into her chest. Her strain is visible and there is still fear in her eyes. She darts to the edges of the circle, but the ancestors’ presence there keeps her locked in. She returns to the center, quaking in terror as the other elders come back and begin to circle around her like a mechanical gear, never stopping its turning. She is still a human inside this system and trembles as she looks at the ritual surrounding her. She makes another attempt to flee, but it is too late and she kneels to the floor stretching one arm to the earth and one to the air. Like an awkward bird, she swings her arms, then crouches to beat her knees as the circle of men surrounding her increase their pace. She makes a last frantic turn around the ring closing in on her and the elders begin to wind out, but the bear-clad ancestors persist and her struggle

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid p. 161

<sup>80</sup> Ibid p. 63

<sup>81</sup> Ibid p. 166

dies down as she realizes there is no way to escape. The Chosen One must now accept her duty and carry for her part of the ritual. She begins her stiff jumps once again, reaching to the sky with her face, then opens her chest and arms fully to the sky, then folds in to the ground, beating the earth with her fist. The males return and crouch on the ground to watch her final dance. She continues her jumping and folding with more passion and drive and throws her arms through the air from one side of her to the other with ever decreasing precision. She spins with her arms waving on either side of her, losing her orientation until she comes to a sudden stop and begins to jump once again. Her exhaustion is showing and each jump becomes more labored than the last. She takes a final look at the elders kneeling around her, a plea in her eyes to make her suffering end, but her focus is called to the sky and she must jump once again and continue her frantic spins. Finally the life is drained from her and she falls to the earth as the ancestors close in. She takes one last breath and is lifted into the air as her body fails and her sacrifice is complete.

## **Le Ballet du XXIeme Siecle<sup>82</sup>**

### **Act I**

In a timeless, placeless space twenty-two men kneel bowing on the floor with their arms stretched out before them and their foreheads to the ground. They are alive, but not yet awake and they tremble with potential energy. One by one they peel away from the earth through their spines up and stretch their heads up to the light

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<sup>82</sup> Maurice Béjart, "Le Sacre Du Printemps," (Artium Summa, 1970).

above. When all the men have risen they take a collective breath and relax back into the ground. The first rousing is too gentle and they sink back into sleep.

Now one man springs to alertness on his hands and knees looking out. Half of the others sprinkled through the group spring up a second later. Their attention is called by something to their left and they turn to it with their bodies erect on their knees. Their arms are out in front of them with their wrists hanging limp. There is something reminiscent of an earnest animal with paws in their stance<sup>83</sup>, but they are too alert and ready with raw energy to carry that comparison any further. Their attention is brought forward and down once again and they poise themselves for what will happen next.

The men spring up in unison and begin to bounce on their hands and feet in a rhythmic pulse. They kneel and turn and spring up again to continue their bounce in a new direction. One pulse takes them up to their feet and they continue the rhythm with their hands out in front of them like tense paws once again. Half the group falls on to their backs and they angularly hold their legs in the air while the others push the earth away from themselves and then gather it in again in a series of bends and squats on their fronts. The group gathers themselves back together and springs to their feet once again to pulse in a forward ape-like position. They go through a sequence of kneeling, stretching, and crouching, sharply switching from one to the next en mass as if someone is calling out orders to them. They fall into a collective lunge and begin to pulse once again with the same throbbing energy.

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<sup>83</sup> Simmons 1987

Their attention is suddenly called upward and they stand straight up with their hands stretched above them and their faces to the light above for a moment before they hang their heads and cover their necks with their arms. An individual breaks away from the pack for the first time. His movements are chewy and elastic as he moves along the front row of the group and they back away from him until another steps out to join his elastic dance. The group sinks down on one knee with one arm making almost a wing and watches intensely while the two individual men jump and pull each other.

The two men break from each other and snap their arms to their bodies and begin to roll their heads and writhe uncomfortably in their bodies as if they are people who have just woken and are trying to remove sleep from their bodies. The rest of the group joins them and they are reincorporated into it. The men begin to squat and stretch in unison once again while they organize themselves into a pattern of three concentric circles. They arrive with their arms stretched up and their heads thrown back, then sit with their arms and legs both poised in an up held position in a moment that looks like they are open to absorbing the light above them. They stand and writhe with their heads before stretching away rhythmically once again. Their stretches grow until every limb is pulling away from the center and reaching out and up, then being contracted in once again. This develops into ecstatic jumping in random sequences until the concentric circle pattern is lost.

### ***The Rival Tribes***

Suddenly something stops the men's dance and they sharply turn forward. The group divides along the center with each half malevolently staring at the other,

none more so than the front men on each side. The groups separate and crowd together, leaving the two leaders to crouch, never breaking their stares. They face each other and press their heads together in a feat of strength before bouncing off each other and rousing the cheers of their respective groups. The men match each other move for move until the rest of their groups come forward and build into their bodies with their own, making a powerful structure on either side that is then transformed into a battering ram of sorts as the two groups meet and clash<sup>84</sup>. The men split apart once again leaving the leaders facing off on their own.

The two men fly at each other and deflect each other's bodies with their own until this proves fruitless and they switch to a more direct test of strength – the arm wrestle. Hands clasped together the leaders are joined on either side by the members of their tribes and each side pours their strength into their leaders until they all fall and a wave of men behind them jumps over their bodies. Everyone breaks into the unorganized chaos of a fight while the leaders continue to square off until they agree to use their position to test other members of both groups. One by one, men jump over the line created by the joining of the leaders hands. The men that clear it are free to move back into the crowd, but one man makes a mistake and falls,<sup>85</sup> drawing the attention of the whole group.

### ***Naming of the Chosen Man***

He slowly gathers himself up from the floor and stands absorbing the gravity of his new role with his right hand covering his right eye. Meanwhile, the division

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<sup>84</sup> Simmons 1987

<sup>85</sup> Simmons 1987. "It is not clear if he stumbles and falls or is caught on the arms of the leaders, but he is now marked and separated from the group"

between the tribes is forgotten behind him and everyone clusters together to witness his next move. He has been marked now as the chosen male, the He to represent all the other men.

He goes through a pulsating, contracting, and stretching dance that continually grounds itself in a bird-like squat with his arms curved to either side. During this the other men split into a V on either side of him, copying his gestures minimally while their eyes remain fixed on him. He tries to appeal to some other that may be watching at the opening of the V, but the only response is for the other men to turn away and blind themselves from what may happen. He has no choice but to continue.

The other men begin to circle around and line up, averting their focus except for sudden glares. He explodes out in front of them in a series of jumps and stretches and falls while the group collectively bows toward him and away from him, responding to the fervor of his movements with the measured calculation of their own. They break into a cluster behind him, and he falls from the strain he is putting forth. Three of them come forward to abuse him further by kicking him and rolling him while he is down. The two leaders return to grab the Chosen Man by his hair and pull him up. They are trying to test his character and impress upon him the gravity of the task he will later have to perform. Senseless cruelty is not the aim of this endeavor; it only appears pitiless because he is so resistant to his role and struggles against it. The rest of the men gather to show their strength and precision apart from him, rhythmically punching and reaching and then building upon each other into tall statues. The leaders continue pulling at him, trying to rouse him out of resistance. He reluctantly takes charge and seems ready to stand for the group.

They move collectively again as a pack from one side to the other, and then begin to scoot themselves forward with their hands while sitting on their knees. They stretch out their hands, reaching for something to one side of the group and then the other until the tension is too great and they dissipate again into small clusters falling and stretching out or up. The chosen man finally understands the weight of what he must do for the rest of the pack and he gathers them back together and leads them in several jumps and spins until he falls once again.

This fall grabs the attention of something outside their group and a light brightens in one corner, drawing all eyes to it. The men cluster together, backing away from the light and leaving him to slide himself on the ground below them. Two men step out and dance pointedly towards the light, turning to beckon the other men when they are almost there. The men follow in a cluster, shielding their eyes or averting their glances, but they are too frightened and back away before they reach the source. The men are called once again and this time they respond with fervor and press forward. The men bounce toward the light, leaving the chosen one to struggle toward it through his exhaustion behind them.

## **Act II**

### ***Circle of the Maidens***

Twenty-one women lay on their backs with their bodies open in a ring around one standing woman. She has already been chosen and stands with erect anticipation and building resolve with her left hand covering her left eye. The women on the floor around her begin to arch their backs up subtly and sensuously at first, and then build

to strong pelvic thrusts. Their arms slowly grow out and spread until the group looks like a flock of birds anchored by the woman standing in the center. They reach up widely with their legs open and their heads thrown back, staring above them. They draw back in and sit then roll to their feet and stand, looking somewhere between coy girls or coquettish women.

### ***Glorification of the Chosen Woman***

The group takes notice of the woman in the center for the first time and takes a collective step back, widening the empty circle around her. She lowers her arm from her face and seems to come into the moment, knowing that her time is near. She acknowledges half of the group and they gently bend to respond, then she turns to the other half and rolls her head in an almost preening gesture and they preen back in response and kneel to her. She shuffles to the first group and they kneel again until she bends down as well.

They stand and scatter to make a straight line on either side of her and she pushes out in either direction with her arms. The lines rise and fall as she gestures over them. She is not just directing their movement – she is conducting the energy of the group from a source greater than herself. The women kneel and roll sequentially through their spines and begin to circle the chosen one among them again. They sweep around her in two interlocking circles while, two at a time, the other women step out and brush her up-stretched arms. The main group makes a V with her at the tip while four other women sit in front with their legs, arms, and heads reaching up to the sky. The tensile tableau is held for a moment until something to their right grabs all the women's attention.

They turn to it in various positions of alertness ready to respond. The threat withdraws and they gather back into themselves. They know that they must complete their ritual because their time alone is quickly ending and their movements takes on an urgency. The chosen one and the cluster of four women on the ground stand and move forward while the main group retreats and huddles close and turns to watch them. The quintet stretches through sensuous gestures while the larger group echoes them.

The groups break apart and begin to mull around until the chosen one, flanked by the other four women stand pulsing up and down on their feet. The rest of the group forms an arching line behind them and move their arms to drowsily cradle their head in their hands. They lift their arms up to the air above them and peel off from the line, reforming it again behind the chosen one. The long line of women follow through the gestures of the chosen one, bending their bodies and stretching their arms into the air in front. The four other women of the chosen one's group sit spreading their arms and legs wide and stretching like birds. They peel to the side of the long line and repeat the stretching and opening of their bodies that they did earlier under her direction.

The disturbance on their right happens again and all the women turn to it, ready once more, but it retreats. The precision of their movement is gone and the women scatter and mull in a disorganized chaos once again, some lying on the floor together and some clustered and standing. There is excitement, anticipation, and fear in all of them, especially the chosen one. It approaches once again, but this time it is not concentrated in one area, there is a change in the quality of the air. The women

look in all directions awaiting the entrance. They scan and search and cluster closer together until they form a two-tiered huddle with the chosen one at the center, protecting her from what might arrive.

### ***Entrance of the Men***

The men swoop in from behind the cluster of women. They are like hungry vultures with their wings out stretched, bobbing closer in toward their carrion. They form a circle around them, pulsing and pounding, kicking and stretching, attempting to approach, but ultimately they keep a distance. The men group into huddle with their arms, circling closer and closer into the frozen women. They test their approach, jumping in a few at a time and cautiously hopping back until they all sneak forward in a quiet walk until they are almost touching the women.

The chosen woman explodes upward in the center of the cluster around her, throwing the men back in surprise. The men retreat as the women around her throw their arms up and then swoop back in as the women contract together in an energetic ripple. The women fall onto each other forming a protective cluster around the feet of the chosen woman standing with her right eye covered by her right hand and her left arm stretched out and away from her. The men form a ring around them facing out with arms stretched up to the air. She sharply pulls in and huddles causing the group of women to spring up around her, guarding her still. The men group together flexing for an attack while the women cautiously back away. The men lunge forward, but the women have already retreated and pushed the chosen one forward.

She begins a standing pulse on her feet bringing her arms down to her sides, and then spreading into an outstretched wingspan, continuing to pulse. She gathers

herself in with small pelvic thrusts, then spreads once again, then contracts again, surveying the two groups of anxious watchers around her, then widens once more, but slowly deflates this time. She squats with her legs pressed tightly together and bounces over to the group of men, pacifying them. Then she moves over to the women, assuring them. She weaves these groups together with the constant pulsation like the movement of a sewing machine needle<sup>86</sup>. Her bounce turns into a walk and she advances lifting her arms to the air, then bringing her energy back to the trip from the male group to the female.

The groups begin to respond to her sudden bursts of kicking and stretching by pounding the earth and reaching up for the sky. Now she languidly dances between them and they slowly settle back to watch her with ready anticipation. As she approaches the males they pounce to their feet and rhythmically respond with writhing bodies, letting their hands explore the surfaces of their skin. The women on the other side jump up and echo their movements. The chosen one circles around herself, then widens back into her wingspan and pulses calling their attention.

The groups begin to crawl toward her from either side on their hands and knees. They are drawn in as she slowly rolls her head and slumps over herself for a moment. Is she too exhausted to continue? No – she springs back to her feet and covers her left eye for a moment before going into an elated series of jumps and steps, kicks and turns. The crowd reaches their arms up in excitement and draws back from her once again. She is caught in her ecstatic dance until the men push out from among them their chosen male.

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<sup>86</sup> Simmons 1987

He slumps and shuffles toward her while she nervously cycles through smaller and tighter versions of her previous movements. He stalks behind her and approaches her, but both avoid each other's gaze. The groups of men and women slowly begin to close in from either side, sensing the couple's hesitance and wanting to make sure neither flees. Finally the chosen man and woman turn to stare at each other, then soften their gazes.

The man circles the woman, nervously inspecting her. She begins to pulse and retreat toward her group as he angles toward his group, but then they turn and cautiously bounce together. They touch their fronts together without looking at each other and break away a moment later and fall back to their groups like opposite magnets repelling each other. Their groups gather them into their folds then push them out to the front again and circle and shove them into contact once more.

### *Sacred Dance*

This time they cling to each other, knowing that they cannot hold back from each other and must carry forth their duties. He lifts and thrusts through her and she folds herself around him in a frenzied push and reach of limbs. The women rush in and circle them in an inner ring and the men surround the group in an outer ring while the woman reaches up with her arms and face while held tight in the embrace of the man. She sinks down into his arms and they rhythmically thrust their pelvises forward to each other and push back with their arms. She collapses further and he folds her under him and pushes himself above.

The groups of men and women finally merge and each pairs with one of the opposite sex. Perhaps they did not know how to approach each other until they had

seen the chosen ones<sup>87</sup> or perhaps the initial act had to be carried out by the chosen ones before the floodgates were open to their mass rite. Whatever the cause, the energy first contained in the chosen couple is now spread to the group. They thrust toward each other in the same motions and lift and push and jump all in pairs and all together. They stand back to back and the women roll their pelvises against the men, then are lifted and lowered to the ground on the men's backs. The couples reach up to the air then around each other then through each other into the air once again with all their limbs. They lie for a moment in an echo of the men's very first position in a circle with the chosen couple still poised together in the center.

The center couple gathers each other up for a moment then stand with their arms and heads stretched high while the mass surrounds them. They are thrust into the air and fall into their backs as the group raises their arms in praise and the rite is complete.

## **Tanztheater Wuppertal<sup>88</sup>**

### **Part I**

#### ***The Maidens***

A woman in a white slip lies alone on the earth. She gently caresses a piece of red fabric along her face. A second woman runs in and stops to slowly gather her own white slip up her body with her hands. A third woman comes in and quietly crouches, running her hand along her cheek and looking down lovingly at the earth.

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<sup>87</sup> Simmons 1987

<sup>88</sup> Pina Bausch, "Le Sacre Du Printemps (Das Frühlingsopfer)," (Westdeutsche Rundfunk, 1980).

A fourth and fifth woman run in and then pause, regarding each other. Two more women enter hand in hand, crossing through the standing women. One continues to run and lift her arms while all the others fall to the ground and begin to ungrate against the earth. The runner stops and violently throws her hands and thrashes her body, then collects herself back together and backs slowly away from the site of her episode.

The other women begin to stand as they are joined by another woman making smooth gestures with her arms that contrast with the harshness of the last dance. The women all begin to pace worriedly while stroking their white slips and patting their bodies down. Occasionally one pauses to gather her slip up over her bodies or to run her hands over her hair or to crouch to the earth. Through all this motion, the first woman remains on the ground with the red material in her hands.

The other women's pace becomes more frantic as more and more women filter in and join them. They do not notice as the first woman rises from the ground with the red cloth bundled in her hands. She stands and holds it away from her, suddenly catching the notice of the flurry around her. They all stare as she spills it from her hands on to the earth. The women all cluster together and begin to withdraw from the red patch, never taking their gazes off it. Abruptly the women all begin to move in unison, lifting their hands, then beating their arms and thighs and squatting toward the ground. A few break away from the cluster and kick and stretch, then their eyes catch the red pool and they quickly rejoin the group. The mass distances themselves further and further from the red with side steps while their arms scoop through the air and come down slapping their bodies.

All of a sudden a group of men run in, causing the women to disperse. They pause and begin to weave through the space the women are scattered, then rejoin into a cluster and echo the women's scooping and crouching and slapping movements, but with more confidence and power. Each woman turns away from the group of men as it passes her. One man stands apart from the others and begins to stare down on of the women. He draws her in with his gaze, and then closes the space between them, forcing her to scuttle back from him. She cannot escape any further and he presses to her until their bodies almost touch. Another woman grasps the red cloth once again and huddles on the earth with it in her arms.

The scattered women group together once again and begin to respond to the men's dance with their own hitting and bowing dance that pushes its way through the cluster of men. The groups merge and rhythmically repeat a sequence of arching and lifting their arms then folding their bodies and drawing their arms back in all in unison. The crowd moves together except for the woman still clutching the red bundle and one other woman violently thrashing and pulling her self down. The woman holding the cloth is suddenly anxious to relinquish it and runs to the edge of the crowd looking for a recipient.

### ***The Abduction***

The crowd quickly stops their dance at this site and the genders pull apart from each other once again. Desperately the woman runs from the male group to the female, trying to pass the red bundle. It is left in the hands of another woman who apprehensively grasps it while her body pulls away, then drops it for the next woman who alternately cradles and pulls away from it, then tosses it into the hands of the

next women, then the next, then the next. Anticipation mounts in the jumps of the scattered women and excitement in the clustered men. The men sharply turn their focus to the woman left holding the red in her hands and they charge toward her. She drops it before a man reaches her and fiercely pulls her back. She escapes and frantically jumps and hits her chest and clutches her stomach in violent outbreak. The other women stand staring at her while the men begin group around her, slowly drawing closer to her frantic dance. Two men grab her and throw her on top of a third man who disturbingly clutches her body and lowers her stiffly around him. The other men triumphantly jump and dance together, while the other women scatter further with fitful snatches of movement. The frenzy finally breaks and the tormented woman runs away into the dissipating crowd. Everyone pauses and then begins to back away from themselves, feeling the impact of the scene they have just witnesses. A woman slowly and sorrowfully crouches to the ground.

### *Spring Rounds*

The group's retreat forms them into a large circle and the red cloth stains the ground like an off center focus. The group takes a step counter-clockwise around the circumference, then bows and stands and sways from foot to foot, then repeats the process. There is a somber, measured sense to the movements. The circle alternates men and women and the two genders are not at odds with each other for the first time since the men entered. The men stop and bow and the women carefully approach behind them and embrace them. The couples stand in these unexpectedly tender couples and sway together for a brief moment before spacing back into their circle. They fold to the earth, squatting and undulating their spines as they ripple toward it.

Then they abruptly turn and begin to run around the circle, stopping to catch their breath, then running faster around. They stop as suddenly as they began and turn toward the center, spreading their arms and legs wide. Then they fall to the earth and lie balled in a fetal position before rising for a moment again. They fall to the earth again, harder this time, and then thrust their pelvises up to the air. They stand and look up and reach their arms to the air above them, then double over in a forceful reaction.

The circle begins to turn again in a frantic run as couple moves out of the ring. The woman tries to distance herself from the man and she dodges away as he clutches after her and finally grabs her. Meanwhile, the group's running has flung them out of their circle and they stand in a chaotic clump watching the captured woman. The men advance toward her and crowd around her while her captor kneels in front of her. He strokes her thighs and chest as she stares fixedly forward, past the crowd of hungry onlookers.

The men burst away and begin to powerfully kick and jump. The group of women is a shadowy cluster behind them that the newly released woman stumbles toward through the crowd of victorious men. The women begin to dart through the men a few at a time toward the red material lying on the earth. The men are drawing closer together, fervently bending and clapping against themselves. A woman reaches the red and kneels on the ground stroking it while the other women reach and stretch their arms, gathering together to contrast the male's hard movements. The woman with the cloth spreads it in a rectangle between the groups of man and women. While the men continue, the women pull back sharply, drawing their hands

to their stomachs in a punctuated rhythm. The male group huddles together in their knees and one man stands to approach the pulsing women. The other men rise and begin a rhythm of their own that reaches to the sky and beats on the legs.

### ***The Kiss of the Sage***

The single man moves toward the red rectangle and regards it. Suddenly the male and female groups stop and look over at each other as if they are seeing the mirror of their emotions in the other group. The man in front of the rectangle kneels to it and lies upon it face down with his arms stretched across it.

The groups explode into each other in a frenzy of jumping and kicking and falling toward the ground. The women catch themselves and begin to tremble while the men turn their ecstatic dance into a frantic run from one stationary woman to the next. They shake and grab the women, but they are paralyzed in place and give no response. The women begin to move toward each other and cling together. They reach and grasp the other women and huddle together away from the men. One man lies on the red patch, still unmoved.

## **Part II**

### ***The Circle of Maidens***

The women begin to drift apart from each other and stand on their own. One bunches up her skirt, another few reach their arms up, and others kneel on the earth. A few dart through the others in little bursts while others timidly walk through them. The men stand apart with their backs turned, uninterested for the moment in the women. The disparate movements of the women form them into a cluster and they

huddle together again. One at a time they take a hesitant step away from the group, but reach back to the group and quickly retreat back into it. One steps out and runs her hands over her slip before snapping back to the group. The woman begin to move farther from the group with each venture and to approach the man lying on the red fabric and look over his still body. The cluster loosens as the women cling to each other less and a few even dare to dart around or spin. They rhythmically join together, reaching their arms and folding them into their centers, growing more confident. Then the men begin to take notice of them once again.

The women's movements fade back into tentative shadows as they back away from the man on the red. He finally stands and looks out across the group. The women return to their reaching and folding, but are now more restrained and aware that they are being watched. Their attention is caught and they spring together and turn. The men watch earnestly, clearly wanting something from the women. The group of women hesitantly draws toward the red stain. One woman finally picks it up and presents it to the huddled group of women and passes it to another woman. She takes it uncertainly and approaches the man who had lain on it, but draws back fearfully before reaching him. Another woman is handed the bundle and approaches, but then skittishly retreats. A third, fourth, and fifth woman attempt the approach with the red bundle, but withdraw before they reach the man. A woman reaches him and he grasps her arms before she can retreat. The group of men begins to jump and thrash behind him and the women respond with their own frantic dance. Each man grabs a woman and thrusts himself onto her, gathering her unwilling body up and pushing her down, violating her.

### *Honoring of the Chosen One*

The couple with the red cloth between them stands together, and then the man slowly undresses her and pulls the red over her. The cloth turns out to be a sheer red slip and she is now distinguished from the rest of the women by her bright garment. The other men release their women and the whole group thrashes and claps against themselves. The woman in red and her conqueror face each other as this flurry weaves through them. The woman makes an attempt to flee, but is drawn back by the stare of the man. He draws her into his arms and touches her back, leading her forward. The crowd stops and stares at the woman being pushed before them and back away from her.

The woman stands slowly rolling her head with the man staring at her back. The cluster of others watches with a pulsating movement that builds into a larger thrashing. They throw their heads up to the sky then flip them down over and over, moving closer to the standing couple. The man takes the marked woman shoulders and the crowd spreads farther apart as their movements grow larger and wilder. He walks her in front of them and displays her before them, catching their attention and causing them to quickly back away. He pushes her closer toward them and they face her as a mass and begin to pulse and stop in front of her. The man turns her away and releases her to stumble forward, clutching her slip. The scene is still for a moment, then the group slowly begins to drift away from each other, their gaze still locked on the woman standing frozen. The man lowers himself to the earth and lies down on his back and slowly lifts his arms until the chosen woman falls to the ground.

### *Sacrificial Dance*

She stands and frantically waves her arms and folds her body. She arches her back and scoops her hands and scuttles backward. Her limbs are tossed and then caught as she loses control of herself. She freezes with her arms bent and becomes aware of the others watching her. She looks for an escape from their gaze, but cannot find one and her dance becomes wilder. Her slip falls off one shoulder, exposing her breast and her hair is becoming more untamed. She is drawn back into her frantic dance and struggles to pull herself back. The moments of consciousness become briefer and briefer and her dance is now flailing and beaten. She gathers herself one last time and runs across the faces of the watchers, looking for some mercy or reaction, but they just stare. She runs past the man, still lying on the earth with his arms raised to the air. Her exhaustion shows in her next burst of dancing and her body carries her through it against her will. She falls to the earth then drags herself up, stumbling through her motions, then falls once again and barely recovers with short bursts of movement, folding and jumping toward the earth. She covers her face with her hands and sways for a moment before stumbling back for a last kick and grab and bend. She is finally defeated and collapses one last time onto the earth. The crowd stands away from her body, impassively watching.

## Chapter 3: *Le Sacre* as a Myth

### Toward a concept

The connection between *Le Sacre du Printemps* and mythology is made frequently enough that it warrants investigation into the nature of the piece and how it can legitimately be studied. We often think of myths as familiar stories imbedded in our culture that are retold from generation to generation, and while there certainly are intriguing stories surrounding the process of the ballet's creation and the riotous premiere, those only partially explain the mythological aspect of *Le Sacre*. They do not provide, however, a satisfactory explanation for its persistent recurrence. It is more than its music, more than its libretto, more than the original revolutionary choreography's loss and revival, more than the story of its premiere, and more than the individual voice of each re-creator who takes on the challenge of choreographing his or her own *Sacre*. When *Le Sacre* is considered as myth, all of these factors come into play and it takes on a life force of its own. *Le Sacre* as a myth is also elevated from the specifics of dance history and made a part of the larger cultural significance of art and its place in contemporary society. The year 1987 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the creation of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. That was also the year that three occurrences commemorating this anniversary called attention to *Le Sacre's* status as a living myth in a scholarly sense.

The first event of that year was the Joffery Ballet's performance of Nijinsky's lost choreography reconstructed by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer presented in September. A nearly decade-long study of the original production was undertaken

by the collaborators in an effort to de-mythologize Nijinsky's choreography and get to the historical seed of its significance. "My hypothesis," Hodson writes, "was that the ballet might prove as interesting in its own right as the often told tale of its opening...A reconstructed *Sacre* would not diminish the attraction of future choreographers to the score. On the contrary, it might give them...a more concrete sense of *history*."<sup>89</sup> In her investigation, Hodson discovered Nijinsky's choreographic inspiration provided by Roerich's information on Slavic art<sup>90</sup> and the ritual forms that are still reoccurring in modern dance today.<sup>91</sup> She dismisses future production as baggage, elaborating the myth of the original and "making ever more remote the reality of Nijinsky's dance,"<sup>92</sup> because she is thinking of mythology as corrupted history instead of a working part of art's dialogue with culture. By attempting to strip away the layers of myth surrounding *Le Sacre*, Hodson called attention to those layers of meaning.

The investigation of *Le Sacre* as whole informed by its beginnings but kept valuable by its evolution was taken up by the second occurrence: the "Rite of Spring at Seventy-Five" conference. Coordinated by Joan Acocella and Lynn Garafola and directed by Jonnie Greene on behalf of the Dance Critic's Association and the New York Public Library, the conference was presented at the Lincoln Center Library

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<sup>89</sup> Hodson *Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace* p. xxi. My emphasis added.

<sup>90</sup> Hodson "Nijinsky's Choreographic Method: Visual Sources from Roerich for 'Le Sacre du printemps'" *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 18, No 2 (Winter, 1986-1987) p. 7-15

<sup>91</sup> Hodson "Ritual Design in the New Dance: Nijinsky's Choreographic Method" *Dance Research: The Journal for the Society of Dance Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring, 1986) p. 63-77

<sup>92</sup> Hodson *Nijinsky's Crime Against Grace* p. viii

November 5-7. As Suzanne Levy reports in the *Dance Research Journal's* review of the event, "The first day's session featured a lecture on *Sacre's* score by Robert Craft, the second focused on the Nijinsky version, and the third on *Sacre's* subsequent history."<sup>93</sup> The second day had a heavy focus on Hodson and Archer's reconstruction process and the historical authenticity of their creation. Details of their research were reported, like Archer's conviction that Roerich's designs and ideas had direct impact on Nijinsky's choreography. Roerich, Archer insisted, based much of the ballet's libretto on archeological studies, but said that, "he was also interested in folklore of a pan-global outlook with archetypal suggestions," and that he "came to associate the ballet with notions of human family and the future of nations."<sup>94</sup> Archer's observations about Roerich's universal primitivism were part of the process of reconstructing the ballet and part of the ballet as a myth. A further exploration into the link between the modernist ballet and the universalistic notion of primitivism was made in Robert Rosenblum's lecture "Primitivism in Modern Painting Before *The Rite of Spring*." He traces themes in the modernist art of Matisse and Picasso that advocated for a "'regression' to nature," relocating human beings to the world of their origins."<sup>95</sup> Roerich, then, was one of many artists looking to the past to make a statement about the present and propose a direction for the future, which is a function of the living myth of *Le Sacre*. The most telling statement to come out of the second day of the conference was Joan Acocella's assertion during the panel titled "History and the Dance Critic," that dance does not have a complete history, because a dance

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<sup>93</sup> Levy p. 52

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 53

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 53

only fully exists in the moment it is performed. “Our history is less like the other’s history [referring to art and music], than it is a religion...[dance history] is a set of beliefs welded together by powerful emotion.”<sup>96</sup> Acocella’s statement makes all of dance history into a kind of mythology, though *Sacre* still stands as the prototypical example because of its lost origins and the strong emotional attachment it affects in people. A panel discussion at the close of the conference titled “The Big Questions” brought together choreographer Yvonne Rainer, anthropologist John Szwed, and philosopher Francis Sparshott with dance historian Sally Banes moderating. Banes opened the discussion with the series of questions: “Why does the Rite of Spring keep coming up? Is it a last grasp of primitivism? Fueling of early modernist sensibility that is no longer relevant? Does it have a universal regressive humanist message? Is it getting back to some kind of generic or universal origin or mythology? Is this a modernist story constructed about the primitive that we can no longer believe in a post-modern era? Is there an aspect that can elicit different responses in different time periods?”<sup>97</sup> The discussion did not answer all of these questions because each of them is true in some sense for some choreographer’s version of *Le Sacre*. The point of interest that did get addressed was that there is a larger cultural tendency that artists have picked up on to look for answers to unanswerable problems in a lost origin. *Le Sacre*, Szwed points out is “a mythic ritual, one that never existed, so that it does not truly matter [how accurate a reconstruction is because] everything is a

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p. 53

<sup>97</sup> Sally Banes, "The Big Questions" (paper presented at the Rite of Spring at Seventy-Five, Lincoln Center Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, November 7, 1987).

version of another version of an original.”<sup>98</sup> The panelists discuss how it has become a monument in dance history that we can refer back to and that keeps getting retold. In this way, every new version of the dance is a reenactment of a ritual that was created to resonate with our current need for historicism and speaks for our time. Szwed closed the discussion by stating as Levy writes it, “*Sacre* was not a real myth at all but a leap of the imagination.”<sup>99</sup> It is true that *Le Sacre* as the story contained in the ballet is not a traditional myth, but through the process of its history, it has indeed come to function as a myth.

The last event to take place in conjunction with *Le Sacre*'s anniversary was the publication of Shelly C. Berg's *Le Sacre du Printemps: Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham*. The book was a thorough exploration of the history and impact of the *Sacres* created by Vaslav Nijinsky (1913), Leonide Massine (1920, 1930), Maurice Béjart (1959), Paul Taylor (1980), Richard Alston (1981), and Martha Graham (1983). With this book, Berg advanced her own hypothesis as to why *Le Sacre* continues to reappear. Her conclusion was that *Le Sacre* functions as a living myth according to Joseph Campbell's definition of the creative mythology.<sup>100</sup> Berg locates Stravinsky's dream as the initial experience and the score as the point of transformation to a sign, which was then communicated through Nijinsky's ballet into

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<sup>98</sup> Levy p. 53

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p. 53

<sup>100</sup> Campbell p. 4 “In what I am calling ‘creative’ mythology...the individual has had an experience of his own – of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration – which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realization has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of a living myth – for those, that is to say, who receive and respond to it of themselves, with recognition, un-coerced.”

a living myth. The signs that were used to communicate the impulse were the themes of “the cycle of life, death and rebirth,” that were “not only universal, [but] multifaceted and remarkably adaptable.” Its reinterpretations are the responses of those who can receive it with recognition and add their own voices to its evolution. Berg continues, “*Le Sacre* reopened the doors of perception to a realm of powers made palpable through the language of myth and the symbolic forms of ritual.”<sup>101</sup> Though it was itself based on a fictive ritual, it came to operate as a myth that calls attention to the need expressed in modernist art to return to mythic archetypes and rituals.

Berg’s conception of *Le Sacre* as a macro-myth can be used to look at the particular ideas Nijinsky, Béjart, and Bausch were responding to. The myth they all pick up on is a search for truth in the primitive mind. That truth, for them, could be recovered through the ritual of dance.

### **The Primitive**

The theme these choreographers share is what Joan Acocella, Lynn Garafola, and Jonnie Greene consider the most important idea in *Le Sacre*: primitivism. They define primitivism as the belief that society does not elevate or improve the human soul but, on the contrary, corrupts it and that it is those things that are least socialized, least civilized – children, peasants, ‘savages,’ raw emotion, plain speech – that are

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<sup>101</sup> Berg p. 150

closest to the truth.”<sup>102</sup> The authors go on to say that by the late nineteenth century, “primitivism achieved a new and less sentimental status, of which the 1913 *Rite of Spring* is one of history’s foremost examples. With *Rite of Spring*, the [creators of the ballet] gave its audience a different sort of barbarity...true violence, true, quaking fear, a human society truly antecedent to what we recognize as civilization,”<sup>103</sup> I think the opposite goal was actually intended, at least by Roerich and Nijinsky. Roerich wrote his letter to Diaghilev detailing the events of the ballet that culminated in a sacrifice, “I have been studying Russian (and Slavic) antiquity for twenty years now, and I find beautiful traits in it, wonderful scenes which the public must be reminded of. In the whirlwind of contemporary life the public often forgets about the distant life when people knew how to rejoice, when they understood the beautiful cosmogony of Earth and Sky...I love antiquity, lofty in its joys and deep in its intentions.”<sup>104</sup> Roerich, as shaper of the libretto, did not intend to display primitives as barbarous in the ballet, it was the act of human sacrifice that inspired Stravinsky which troubled viewers so deeply. He “idealized age-old civilizations, which served as models for this beautiful, simple, highly spiritualized life.”<sup>105</sup>

There is no evidence that the early Slavic civilization that the ballet claims to depict actually practiced any type of human sacrifice. The ritual conceived is much closer to a festival described by the collector and interpreter of myth James Frazer’s

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<sup>102</sup> Lynn Garafola Joan Acocella, Jonnie Green, "The Rite of Spring Considered as a Nineteenth Century Ballet," *Ballet Review* 20, no. 2 (1992). p. 68

<sup>103</sup> Ibid p. 68

<sup>104</sup> Marilyn Meyer Hoogen, "The Rite of Spring as Ecstatic Ritual of Renewal for the Twentieth Century" (University of Washington, 1997). p. 109-110

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 63

recounting a Sacaean festival where, “a man who personated a god or hero...enjoyed the favors of a woman...and after he had thus done his part toward securing, by means of sympathetic magic, the revival of the plant life in spring, he was put to death...Such rites appear to have been common all over Western Asia...the custom was a religious or rather magical ceremony intended to ensure the revival and reproduction of life in spring.”<sup>106</sup> As Millicent Hodson was immersed in the writings of Roerich during her reconstruction of Nijinsky’s *Sacre*, she became curious as to why Roerich would rewrite “mythology for the climax of *Sacre* [to include foreign sacrifice]...given Roerich’s commitment to archeological authenticity and the encouragement he gave both to Stravinsky and Nijinsky to use their Slavic heritage.” She hypothesized that “the decision enabled him to resolve the desire to use an archaic subject with what he considered an appropriate way to end a ballet. Death of a young woman, or apotheosis of her spirit, is after all the crux of Romantic ballet.”<sup>107</sup> This explanation of Roerich’s decision is dismissive and does not account for his philosophy of primitivism, which was where his concept of the ballet was sourced from. The loss of a primitive way of thinking is what he thought was responsible for “man’s loss of wholeness and the absence of spirituality and beauty in all aspects of his life.”<sup>108</sup> He believed that “contemporary man could create a new reality if he returned to the life steeped in beauty and the spirituality it represented.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough; a Study in Magic and Religion*, 3d ed. ([New York,: The Macmillan Company, 1935). *Vol. 6: The Scapegoat* p. 400-401

<sup>107</sup> Hodson “Visual Sources from Roerich...” p. 11

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11

<sup>109</sup> Hoogen p. 63

## **Primitive thinking**

A different conception of primitive man and his use for sacrifice is presented in Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.<sup>110</sup> Eliade wrote that archaic or primitive man differed from modern civilized man by "the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insists that he is connected only with History. Of course, for the man of the archaic societies, the Cosmos too has a 'history'...[but this is] a 'sacred history,' preserved and transmitted through myths. More than that, it is a 'history' that can be repeated indefinitely, in the sense that the myths serve as models for ceremonies that periodically re-actualize the tremendous events that occurred at the beginning of time."<sup>111</sup> Archaic man viewed history in terms of repeatable models and archetypes. "An object or an act becomes real insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is meaningless."<sup>112</sup> Only connection to a repeatable ritual gives an event meaning and its meaning comes solely from its connection to an original, past event. What are these ritual actions? Eliade writes, "Every responsible action in pursuit of a definite end is, for the archaic world, a ritual. But since the majority of these activities have undergone a long process of desacralization and have, in modern societies, become profane, we have thought it proper to group them separately."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Eliade p. 21

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. p. xiii-xiv

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p. 34

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p. 28

This responsible action includes dance as a ritual. “All dances were originally sacred,” Eliade says, “in other words, they had an extra-human model...Choreographic rhythms have their model outside of the profane life of man...a dance always imitates an archetypal gesture or commemorates a mythical moment.”<sup>114</sup> Sacrifice plays into the primitive system of archetypes by allowing for death as a regenerative force of life. “The death of the individual and the *periodic* death of humanity are necessary...the death of the individual and the death of humanity are alike necessary for their regeneration. Any form whatever, by mere fact that it exists as such and endures, necessarily loses vigor and becomes worn; to recover vigor, it must be reabsorbed into the formless if only for an instant; it must be restored to the primordial unity from which it issued,”<sup>115</sup> Eliade says. In modern culture we have lost the order that myths provide for our history and we have lost the rituals that perpetuate it. We have become “concerned with the problem of history as history, of the ‘evil’ that is bound up not with man’s condition but with his behavior toward others...And in our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history...if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p. 28

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p. 88

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 151

## Utilizing the primitive

The notion of the primitive mind as a more honest and necessary ideal that modern society should return to is what Nijinsky, Béjart, and Bausch were responding to. They picked up on the idea that can escape the historical pressure pushing on our culture through periodically reminding ourselves of the primitive with the rituals they create in dance. An artist can sense what is being forgotten, place it on stage, form it into a myths, and use that mythic archetype to interpret our present and give the specifics of history trans-historical, cross-cultural meaning. *Le Sacre* allows the artist to become the vatic, “the seer whose vision is emblematic of man’s struggle.”<sup>117</sup> Art allows us to abstract ourselves enough so that we can give meaning to seemingly arbitrary history. By making violence into art in Nijinsky and brutality into art in Bausch, we are able to enact a ritual of renewal in our present culture. When Berg praises *Le Sacre* for reopening perception to the language of myth, she is noting the ability of myth to renew our culture this way.

Roerich and Eliade structured the ‘primitive’ this way and Nijinsky, Béjart, and Bausch worked it into their choreography, but the question of universal applicability still remains. Eliade’s work is significant because he attempted to synthesize the motivations for mythology in humanity by taking a broad cross-cultural survey. His universalism is what has lead to the rejection of his theories in the culturally relative, post-Modern academy of today. This does not mean his theories do not hold any ground; it is just that they are a synthesis of so many ideas

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p. 150

that it becomes impossible to apply their model to any one culture and find it accurate.

Nijinsky, Béjart, and Bausch were trying to recover dance in a universal primitive, in “the primal art form, the one that does not lie,”<sup>118</sup> but the one whose history is impossible to trace. Each of the choreographers established a new form of movement, though they each based their philosophies on an original archetype for dance. The primitive is not a return to something lost, but a way of developing the loss of an unrecoverable past into the impulse to create something new.

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<sup>118</sup> Acocella et al p. 71

## Chapter 4: My Choreographic Explorations

### Fall

My first semester choreographic work centered on the idea of myth as a written versus interpreted form. I had just read about the recovery process Millicent Hodson had undertaken to reconstruct Nijinsky's ballet and wondered how all the verbal accounts of the first production could be translated to movement. That germ of an idea grew into the idea to approach my choreography through several writing exercises that the dancers then turned into movement phrases. I wanted to focus on what perspectives the three dancers would bring to the same theme and what that would mean for them in a verbal form and then a movement form. I wanted then to put those written and danced forms into conversation with each other.<sup>119</sup> Most of the vocabulary for the final dance came out of this initial exercise in the first few rehearsals.

For the first writing practice, I wrote a list of themes I felt were treated in some choreographers' interpretations of *Le Sacre* or connected to the idea of spring then chose three of them to focus on. I gave the dancers the first theme (circle) and asked them to write three sentences about it, then fold the paper so that only their last sentence was showing and pass it to their right. I then gave them the next theme (green) and told them to repeat the process, but have the visible sentence influence

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<sup>119</sup> Later in my research I discovered that Pina Bausch uses a similar method of asking her dancers questions and having them translate their answers into gestures.

what they wrote in some way, then repeated the whole process a third time with the third theme (body).

I then asked each dancer to create a phrase based on the paper with their original lines on it.<sup>120</sup> These phrases took on the names of their creators (i.e. the Allison phrase). The dancers then created a phrase from each of the other papers, giving them three unique phrases based in this exercise. These were named after the original writer and new interpreter (i.e. Greta's Audrey phrase).

The next step I saw in my process was to give these movements to characters and to see what would happen when the characters interacted. I gave the dancers situations or moods, not specific characterizations because I wanted them to have a good deal of themselves in what they were doing. To create the situations I went back to the two different free writing exercises we had done in the previous rehearsals. I compiled random lines from these two works into three different situations or moods and gave one to each dancer.<sup>121</sup> I asked the dancers to feel out who these sketches were and how they would move. Part of this was to try to get them to break familiar movement patterns that they had set up in the composition of the last phrases.

When the dancers explored the movements that came along with the phrases, the characters they created seemed in conflict with each other. There was an element of struggle as they interacted and they were engaged in a push and pull of energy. The characters that developed all felt decidedly feminine, but came across as women

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<sup>120</sup> The dancer's writings in Appendix 1

<sup>121</sup> Appendix 1b

in different states of life. Greta's demeanor was childlike and her movements were unmeasured and curious. Audrey had been struggling with a knee injury, which made her movements hesitant, and her trepidation combined with her situation to read like an old woman. Allison's state was harder to define because it did not take her far from her current state – her movements were powerful and graceful, like a woman in the prime of her life. I felt like I was catching these women mid-sentence, as if they had been having a conversation for a long time and I was glimpsing a segment of it from outside.

As I watched the dancers interact and began to read their characters I was reminded of the three Fates of Greek mythology. The Fates were three sister goddesses who determined the course of every mortal's life by weaving the thread of life, measuring its length, and cutting it at the point of death. I found that the idea of a predetermined fate came up in both the original *Le Sacre* libretto and Pina Bausch's version, as the woman to be sacrificed is chosen out of the rest of the group for unclear reasons that could either be interpreted as fate or chance. I was intrigued by the idea that a life and death that carries so much meaning in these pieces could be reduced to a string being measured and cut by otherwise indifferent deciders. The idea for a string somehow influencing or determining the dancers' journey through the piece stuck in my mind, but I was not sure how to incorporate it.

Around this time I happened to be observing an *Introduction to Dance* class where one of the exercises included partners pulling each other with an imaginary string. All the decisions were left up to the moving partner and the person being moved had to react passively. When I introduced this exercise in my rehearsal where

I had already been working with the theme of fate, I found that the question of agency arose. Which of the characters in the dance had the agency to move themselves and which ones were passively reacting to the path set out before them? As the dancers worked with this idea, I also decided to expand the space and force with which the dancers could pull each other so that they could yank each other almost violently through space.

I still felt that something tangible was missing so I decided to add actual strings for the dancers to pull each other with. The dancers and I experimented with tying the strings on different parts of our bodies and attaching them to different anchors that would provide resistance to movements. We then went back to the phrases generated earlier and added sections where the dancers brought their focus to the strings and let them direct their movements. As I watched this new evolution, the characters that we had developed did not read as strongly as before. The dance came to be more about the notion of an individual moving herself or being moved and less about the identities of those three individuals. The question of agency was very present, however, and I felt that the journey each dancer took during the dance was from passively being moved to being able to move herself. I also asked my dancers to question how much they resisted or questioned the motions they were being moved through – if they just accepted the pull of the string or if they felt resistant to it and reluctant to move.

As the date of the concert approached and I began to visualize how the piece would look onstage, I got the idea to have strings stretching across the stage space itself. At various points in the piece I imagined the dancers unspooling threads into

the space. Now, in addition to the strings they had connected to themselves that could pull them one way or another, they were also spinning their own threads. If the string attached to someone's wrist was the means for others to pull her, the string she pulled across the stage symbolized the dancer seeking to take command of her own fate. I envisioned that after they pulled their strings across they would return to the space and get caught in the web that had been created by the intersecting strings. This was meant to be a statement that even if they felt in charge of their own line, they were just as trapped by it. Still, I felt that could not be the end of the piece, because the theme I was most interested in was that of the individual resisting the pull of fate. I returned to the idea of the Fates and their role in cutting the strings of those individuals whose lives were over. The idea to cut through the web of strings the dancers had created struck me. What more powerful way to make a statement about resisting fate than to cut the string they themselves wove? Cutting the string is ending a life, but at the same time it is freeing it from the binding of fate.

The title for the piece came from the Walt Whitman poem "A Noiseless Patient Spider." I came across this poem in my research mid way through my choreographic process, and realized that many of its elements spoke to the piece I was creating. I read the poem in Wendy Doniger's *The Implied Spider*,<sup>122</sup> a book about myth and retellings of myth. In the center chapter of her work she brings together poetic, mythological, philosophic, and linguistic analogies that make reference to the meaning of a spider spinning.

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<sup>122</sup> Doniger p. 63. Poem reproduced in Appendix 1c

The final dance was broken into three sections I thought of as a prologue, struggle, and epilogue. The prologue began with the Greta unraveling a spool of string, Allison and Audrey measuring it out and then the dancers cutting it into three sections, which they wrapped around their wrists. This was a direct reference to the Fates and also a moment where each of the dancers were shown binding themselves into and accepting the struggle they were about to engage in. The struggle consisted of reworked versions of their character phrases, where each dancer worked with moving themselves and being pulled by others. As the piece went on they each found a moment where they were released from the pull of others and then moved on to pulling their own string across the stage. Instead of coming back into the web and becoming stuck as originally planned, the dancers left the strings alone on stage to vibrate with their own power for a moment showing the paths the dancers had chosen to take for themselves. The epilogue of the piece showed the dancers reentering no longer attached to the strings and independently cutting away at them and dismissing the power they used to have over them.

### **Spring**

I began my second piece of choreography with the intention of focusing on how the repetition of gestures creates a ritual, and furthermore the repetition of performances begins to build a myth. Using similar methods as I had in the fall, I asked the five dancers to react first physically, then in writing to certain words that I felt were connected to the themes in *Le Sacre*. The written pieces were then given to another dancer to translate back into a movement phrase that could be repeated on a

loop. We played with these exercises for a few rehearsals and I began to tease out phrases or movements that connected to wider ritual themes. One was Sara Beth's sitting and lifting of her hands to the air, then slowly turning herself around and lowering them until she collapsed into the floor. This recalled a connection between the sky and the earth that the *Kiss of the Sage* represented in the original *Sacre*. There was also a gesture developed representing a vine growing up, out of the navel that reminded me of Mircea Eliade's observation that the earth's navel is the point at which creation began.<sup>123</sup> Gathering and herding movements of the group also began to emerge in the warm up of each rehearsal and I felt like the group of five individuals was coming to form a kind of pack or tribe with a collective identity as well. This group feeling was disturbed when I asked two of the dancers to work on a duet with an intimate physical feel. The other three dancers watched as they worked on this duet and I began to suggest the emotions they could be watching with. We played with the idea that envy of the couple's contact caused strain in the rest of the group and pulled them apart. The idea of watching began to develop as well. Were the dancers watching each other out of curiosity, emotion, or to make sure the ritual of the dance was carried out properly? I was reminded of a reference from an essay by Jonathan Z. Smith about ritual in which a priestess is concerned that a profane action may become part of a sacred ritual if she does not guard against it.<sup>124</sup> The

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<sup>123</sup> Eliade p. 16

<sup>124</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith "The Bare Facts of Ritual" quoting Plutarch "The priestess of Athene Polais, when asked by the mule drivers who had transported the sacred vessels, replied, 'No, for I fear if will get into the ritual.'"

dancers became their own guards against any improper action becoming part of their ritual.

I wanted to re-ground the motivation for the dancers movements in their writing, so I once again compiled lines from the dancer's written exercises to make profiles for the dancers.<sup>125</sup> We played with these character conceptions and tried to establish what they meant for the dancers' relationships and interactions, but the only dancer whose movement did not look forced when she was given her character was Audrey. She developed one of her original phrases further to include this new text and added more of her own words to it. I asked her to recite what had become her poem while she moved through her phrase attached to it.<sup>126</sup> There was a delightful moment of coincidence when she said the phrase, "Repeating are the stories," which I felt captured so well what I was researching in the ongoing productions of *Le Sacre*. I was inspired to return to thoughts of repetition and how it would frame the piece as a whole.

I envisioned the final piece taking place "after nightfall; after midnight,"<sup>127</sup> when the dancers have been called out of their beds from a restless night to enact a ritual together. It begins with Kim, Cara, and Emily dancers repeating a series of movements and saying snatches of Audrey's texts in a corner while the piano version of the Prelude to *Le Sacre du printemps* played quietly behind them. This was the ritual already in action. Kim stops as she senses a disturbance and watches as Sara Beth enters and sits to mark the connection between the sky and the earth. Audrey

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<sup>125</sup> Appendix 1d

<sup>126</sup> Appendix 1e

<sup>127</sup> Bullard Vol. 1, p. 143, quoting the 1913 program notes

enters and is caught in a different cycle of repetition that is broken by the stare of one of the others. The ritual develops as the dancers spread apart and begin to trace the connection from their navels to the sky and back to the earth and then get caught in their own repeating gestures until they stop to watch Kim's movements that threaten to work their way in. Audrey stops this process by recalling the words spoken at the beginning and referencing the fertile outburst of energy their ritual recalls with her movement. The dancers flock together, but then separate once more because of the distraction Cara and Emily's individual attraction brings to the group's action as a whole. Audrey and Sara Beth lure Cara away while Kim interrupts Emily's connection, and the dancers are all drawn back into the initial ritual while the music of *Le Sacre* begins to play once again. Sara Beth walks through the group observing their actions and then stops to once again connect the sky and earth, and the piece is complete.

## Conclusion

There was no precedent set for the explosion *Le Sacre du Printemps* caused when it premiered in 1913. The piece had more of an impact on the future of dance, theater, art, music, history, mythology, and psychology than almost any other work of art in the twentieth century. Through the months I have spent researching *Le Sacre*, I have come to realize that there is no one satisfactory explanation to what gives this piece in all its incarnations such enormous power. This thesis is my own attempt to examine a piece of this power and offer my own explanation. Nicholas Roerich and Vaslav Nijinsky planted the seeds of their own primitivism in the original version of the ballet – a primitivism that used the past in order to break from the present. Since the initial production Maurice Béjart and Pina Bausch have formed their own notions of the primitive and used *Le Sacre* to present those notions to the world, thereby making their own break with how dance was perceived in their respective presents. Creating a *Sacre* has become a way for choreographers to make their own statement in dance through the precedent set by the myth *Le Sacre* represents. *Le Sacre* will continue to attract choreographers, dancers, musicians, artist, and commentators and all of their voices will add more layers of complexity and meaning to the work.

## Appendix 1

### a.

Word Prompts

#### **Greta**

*Pancakes are shaped like circles*

*I made pancakes for breakfast today.*

*Breakfast was at 3pm in the afternoon.*

*We made sure not to use paper plates*

*Paper plates do not make the environment very happy.*

*Each body is a universe within itself.*

*Bodies moving together are powerful forces*

*The body responds to the environment we allow it to live in.*

#### **Audrey**

*I drew a circle.*

*Then I added two hands.*

*It ticked like a clock.*

*Lily pads are green.*

*Green is like nature.*

*Green is the color of greed.*

*When I think of a body I first think of the human body*

*But body means other things too*

*Like a body of water or someone's body of work.*

#### **Allison**

*Circles remind me of merry-go-rounds.*

*Circles are the shapes of friendship.*

*Circles are perfect and difficult to draw*

*Green is one of my favorite colors.*

*For my birthday all of the cups etc were green*

*It reminds me of freshly cut grass*

*I love the feel of it*

*I miss lying in the grass on a summer night*

*It's quite a shame the seasons have to change; or*

*More simply, that the Earth has to move.*

### b. Character Profiles Fall

*Greta: Just woke up from a dream of space. Hungry – wandering halls of old house looking for food – young girl still learning your words. Want to ask for help, but can't – searching for that small object. Lingered fear from sleep. Afraid they are trying to steal your teeth because you are left unprotected.*

*Allison: Taking a moment to collect my thoughts. I had been up all night – walking home finally. I feel colder when it's dark – dropped it – it just jumped out like that. It was part of me – safe or so I thought – now I was left unprotected.*

Audrey: *Messy haired – just woke up – don't know where you are – wrongness of a broken routine. Every lost person's nightmare – Devastated and infuriated – know this is happening because you lost something that once protected you.*

**c. A Noiseless Patient Spider**

**Walt Whitman (1900)**

A noiseless, patient spider,  
I mark'd, where, on a little promontory, it stood, isolated;  
Mark'd how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;  
Ever unreeling them--ever tirelessly speeding them.  
And you, O my Soul, where you stand,  
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,--seeking the spheres, to connect them;  
Till the bridge you will need, be form'd--till the ductile anchor hold;  
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul

**d. Character Profiles Spring**

**Emily**

They were as innocent as the young who gather by the thousands to howl and twist  
and rock their desire, playing games on the plains  
His gaze paralyzed her soul like a fast acting poison as their differences caused her  
blood to boil to flow  
This roundabout, this boil, this rising before the fall  
She cracked a round steel pipe  
Her anger boiled up inside of her

**Kim**

Renew is birth  
She tried to hold it in  
This crack happens first in my leg, then in the liquids of my belly  
Like a child I want to take a bath in the sink  
There's boiling water and vinegar to scare away flies or kill the ones who get too  
close  
Renounce this sauce

**Cara**

We can renew our ladies by breathing life into them  
These ladies have been grabbing breath from each other  
Sinking slowly slowly into nowhere, but do not be scared  
The broken hearted girl took a look at herself  
With lightness in her voice she called the act of reflection the state of things

Her will cracked beneath the weight of fallen leaves

**Sara Beth**

If looks could kill and trees could sing  
The crack widens slowly – I can't see the change  
Can you breathe without grabbing it?  
But she could not, so she let it boil over in curls and fists of hair

**Audrey**

The mirror doesn't reflect  
Ancient words made marks on the earth  
My claws are ancient, like eggs atop pitchforks  
I eat my meat without sauce  
Look into the mirror and reflect on your gender

**e. Audrey's Spoken section**

The mirror doesn't reflect  
Like eggs atop pitchforks  
Universes, my head is new and bald  
Stories, repeating are the stories  
To crags not yet surfaced  
To under arms under me

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