

Comedy Ballet as Social Commentary: *Till Eulenspiegel* (1916)

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***Abstract:** In 1916, during the American tours of the Ballets Russes company, Vaslav Nijinsky created a choreography to Richard Strauss's tone poem Till Eulenspiegels lustische Streiche, nach alter Schelmenweise, in Rondo Form (1894-1895). Only performed during the tour, the work was long deemed a failure or an indication of the choreographer's approaching insanity. Tracing the reviews and other contemporary materials, this article asks what can be known of a past performance and rehearsal practice - and what our interpretations of the past reveal of present-day concerns and assumptions about dance as an art form.*

Introduction

This article discusses *Till Eulenspiegel*, a "ballet comi-dramatic"¹ to the music of Richard Strauss, and the fourth and last choreography Vaslav Nijinsky made for Sergei Diaghilev's company the Ballets Russes. The work was only performed in North America between October 1916 and February 1917, and as such, it raises questions about what is remembered of past dance and why. Discussing what contemporary source materials reveal of the production, I argue against persistent myths about the choreography from the claim that the work failed to impress the public or was incomplete at the time of the premiere to the more recent claims regarding the possibility of reconstructing it from the existing archival sources.

In 1916, the United States was still officially neutral in the conflict that was bringing an end to several European empires and showing the devastating effects of new technologies of war.² The First World War was also the principal reason why the controversial choreographer of the Ballets Russes 1912-1913 seasons, Vaslav Nijinsky, would create a comic work that his contemporaries believed signified a

¹ From the programme notes in NYPLDC Ballets Russes (Diaghilev), Programs.

² The United States had greatly benefited from the war in Europe and was clearly on the side of the Allies, despite its official neutrality and isolationist tendencies. May 1959, esp. 361-382.

change in his choreographic and aesthetic thinking.³ After outlining the circumstances in which *Till* was created, I examine the work's narrative and staging, its appraisal of comedy and the underlying political message that contemporary critics found particularly appealing. Hence, I have paid particular attention to the background of the critics who made these statements. Works of art are multivalent, and critical reception can at best only indicate a work's significance in (contemporary) discourse on art, just as authorial intention is merely one of many possible interpretations of a work's significance. Discussing a work that was originally written out of the canon as indicative of the choreographic author's madness and later reinstated through hagiography inevitably leads to questions about canonisation and significance given to past performances.

Mounting the Work

After what could be called a disastrous first tour in the spring of 1916, the management of the Metropolitan Opera, headed by the Chairman Otto Kahn, had decided to hire the Ballets Russes from Diaghilev.⁴ After the last performance on 29.4.1916, Diaghilev took the company to Spain and when the Ballets Russes returned in September for their second North American tour, it lacked several prominent dancers, including Diaghilev's new lover Léonide Massine, as well as the régisseur, Sergei Grigoriev and his wife Lubov Tchernicheva. Nijinsky may have insisted Grigoriev not be hired purely out of spite: his own 1913 dismissal had come

³ H[enry].T[aylor].P[arker]. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916. Also Merle Armitage 1949, 29 says *Till* was "prophetic of an interesting new direction" - Armitage worked for the Metropolitan Musical Bureau as a publicist for the Ballets Russes tours, but his reminiscences are obviously influenced by Nijinsky's later illness. On Parker, see note 33 below.

⁴ The first Ballets Russes tour was filled with numerous problems from hostile reviews to prolonged intermissions caused by incompatible sets. See Järvinen 2010. *Indianapolis News* reported 19.5.1916 that the Diaghilev company had created a 210,000\$ deficit and that the organization "will disband" although Kahn personally guaranteed 300,000\$ for the second North American season. On Kahn, a Jew of German origin, see Kobler 1988, esp. 51-52; Matz 1984; Dizikes 1993, 426-429. On anti-Semitism amongst American upper classes, see also Gilfoyle 2002, 285.

from the régisseur's pen.⁵ However, in Grigoriev's absence, the day-to-day affairs of the dancers were divided between three 'ballet husbands': Nikolai Kremnev (married to Sokolova), Randolph Barrocchi (newly wed to Lopokova) and Stanislaw Drobecki (married to Fanny Pflanz). Kremnev lacked authority with his fellow artists, whereas Barrocchi and Drobecki did not get along with them at all. Disputes soon arose over casting and rivalling factions emerged in the rosters.⁶ It did not help that everyone was pressed for time: the company arrived only three weeks before the scheduled opening of the season.

In his contract, Nijinsky had agreed to direct a second tour of North America from the beginning of October 1916 until the end of February 1917; to rehearse the company, including several new dancers, in the existing repertory; and to choreograph two new works for the season in New York: *Mephisto Valse* to the music of Franz Liszt (a Hungarian), and *Till Eulenspiegel* (henceforth *Till*) to the music of Richard Strauss (a German). The choice of music recalls Nijinsky's recent internment in Austria-Hungary,⁷ but he had been planning a work to Liszt's *Rhapsodies* already in 1914,⁸ and he had met Strauss in 1912 when Diaghilev commissioned a new ballet from the composer, *La Légende de Joseph* (*Josephslegende*, henceforth *Joseph*) - a work to the

⁵ Buckle 1998, 398-399, 440-441. Unlike Bourman 1938, esp. 287-289 presents, he and his wife remained in Europe.

⁶ Even Sokolova 1960, 86-87 admits Kremnev was tactless, prone to outbursts and had no authority over the dancers; similarly, Nemchinova 1975. Bernays 1965, 125 says the tour was "marked by factional warfare between Nijinsky and Diaghileff's administrators", but 123 he also accuses the dancers (esp. Spessivtseva) of being uncooperative. Also Garafola 1988/1989, 132; Acocella 1987, 51.

⁷ When the War broke out, Nijinsky was visiting his wife's family in Budapest and was treated as an enemy alien. Thanks to the connections of his new in-laws, he could avoid internment camp, but together with his questionable military status (Nijinsky had left Russia in 1911 to avoid serving in the Russian military), this caused numerous difficulties for the Metropolitan management, who had believed Diaghilev had the dancer under contract. Nijinsky adamantly refused to leave his wife and child as hostages for his good behaviour, prolonging the negotiations for his release, which meant he only caught up with the company during their second season in New York in April. Then the dancer refused to perform, citing a law-suit concerning unpaid salaries that he had won in London against Diaghilev as well as aesthetic concerns about the company. See Järvinen 2010, esp. 87-89, 101n36.

⁸ *The Times* 25.2.1914.

libretto of Hugo von Hofmannsthal.⁹ *Joseph* became one of the causes in Nijinsky's break-up with Diaghilev: in July 1913, the impresario, desperate to appease his financiers, agreed to give *Joseph* to Mikhail Fokine, Nijinsky's predecessor as the company choreographer.¹⁰ Strauss was adamantly against this decision, even threatening to walk away from the production when Diaghilev dismissed Nijinsky altogether and gave the leading role to his new lover, Léonide Massine (Leonid Miasin).¹¹

This unrealised collaboration explains why Strauss apparently welcomed Nijinsky's plans to choreograph his tone-poem, to the extent that American papers reported the composer had offered to make changes to his music if necessary.¹² Nijinsky may also have met Strauss in February 1916 when, during the negotiations for his release from internment, the dancer stayed in Vienna and rehearsed in the Theater an der Wien.¹³ The composer's permission and reported approval of the choreographer's plans was significant to the reception of *Till* because American music critics, like their European

⁹ See Kessler to Hofmannsthal 19.7. and 8.8.1912 in Kessler & Hofmannsthal 1968, 353-354. In Stravinsky 1984, 47, the translation of Nijinsky's letter to Stravinsky 1.12.1913 mentions that during the trip to South America he was working not on *Joseph* but on *Till Eulenspiegel*; cf. Nijinsky to Stravinsky 26.11./9.12.1913 (the same text) in Stravinsky 1997, ii:181 where the Strauss ballet is taken to mean *Joseph*.

¹⁰ Nijinsky's work on *Joseph* was announced in *Revue Française de Musique* June-July 1913; and in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 21.7./3.8.1913. Reporting Nijinsky's fight with Diaghilev, *Peterburgskaya gazeta* 3./16.9.1913 immediately speculated on what would happen to *Joseph*. Nijinska 1992, 473-474 on Diaghilev giving the work to Fokine. Nijinsky had been involved since the work was commissioned: see preceding fn; NYPLDC Astruc Papers.

¹¹ Kessler reported to Hofmannsthal 10.10.1913 that Nijinsky was no longer to work for Diaghilev and 16.10.1913 suggested Nijinsky could instead work with Reinhardt to produce *Joseph*; but wrote again 2.12.1913 and 7.12.1913 that Strauss wanted Nijinsky, period. As late as 15.3.1914 and 11.4.1914 Kessler claimed Strauss still wanted Nijinsky to dance *Joseph*. Kessler & Hofmannsthal 1968, 366-369, 371-372, 377-379; Hofmannsthal wrote to Strauss 30.9.1913 and again 25.10.1913 that he approved of Fokine as the choreographer. Hofmannsthal & Strauss 1954, 209-210. Strauss's dissatisfaction with Fokine's and Massine's contributions is even admitted by Grigoriev 1953, 196-197; also Massine 1968, 46-47, 52-61, esp. 59: "During the final week of rehearsals Strauss, Diaghilev, von Hofmannsthal and Kessler were still arguing over the ballet."

¹² *The New York Times* 27.8.1916.

¹³ Nijinsky 1980, 245; following her, Buckle 1998, 424; Buckle 1993, 298.

colleagues, had severely criticised danced representations of symphonic music, including previous works by the Ballets Russes.¹⁴ However, as the drama critic Hiram Kelly Moderwell noted in his review, Strauss's music was not strictly symphonic, "Isadora [Duncan] may be playing a foolish part when she 'realizes' the Seventh Symphony in the dance, but this music of Strauss's demands its miming."¹⁵ In fact, Strauss, as the somewhat acrimonious critic of *The New York Journal* noted, "has the Lisztian inability to do any more than attempt to tell a story. That, indeed, is the chief musical defect of his quality. If Bernard Shaw were a novelist, Richard Strauss would be the Bernard Shaw of music."¹⁶ Hence, Strauss's music was fit accompaniment for ballet because dancing, like Shaw's comedies, did not aspire to the lofty ideals expected of symphonic music.

However, in the Ballets Russes, the quality of the music had been a major draw for audiences and during the first American tour many critics had expressed discontent about what they heard.¹⁷ The Metropolitan brought in Pierre Monteux, the French conductor of Diaghilev's pre-War seasons. Monteux had been given leave from the trenches to conduct during the second American engagement of the Ballets Russes, but in late September, he suddenly announced *Till* was 'enemy music' and that although he agreed to conduct music by dead Germans, he adamantly refused to take the podium for Strauss, who was still alive and very much a German patriot. This, of course, made for free publicity for the Ballet,¹⁸ even if it raises a point about how cultural products acquired added nationalist significance during wartime. The Broadway composer Anselm Goetzl, who had conducted during the first tour, took

¹⁴ For example, Krehbiel in *New York Tribune* 16.4.1916; more in Järvinen 2014, 32, 77-79, 254-255n31-36.

¹⁵ *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916. Moderwell, the author of *The Theatre of To-Day* (Moderwell 1914) was an early proponent of modernist theatre, Wagner, and ragtime music, see May 1959, 337-338.

¹⁶ *The New York Journal* 24.10.1916.

¹⁷ See e.g. *The Christian Science Monitor* 18.1.1916 quoted below; *New York Tribune* 16.4.1916.

¹⁸ *The New York Times* 27.9.1916, also 1.10.1916; *The New York Herald* 22.10.1916 and 24.10.1916; *Musical America* 7.10.1916; *Vogue* November 1916; cf. *New York Evening Mail* 24.10.1916 did not believe the excuse and claimed Monteux simply would not familiarise himself with the new score. Bernays 1965, 115 gleefully admits he broke the story to the press; Sokolova 1960, 90 claims Monteux wanted "to disassociate himself from the fiasco", which, of course, it was not.

the baton for *Till*, with Monteux conducting the rest of the repertory; and after the premiere, *The New York Herald* reported *Till* clearly was a success since even the Frenchman applauded on the first night of new ballet.¹⁹ In November, *Musical America* published Strauss's plea for tolerance of enemy music – a snippet that was clearly due to the Monteux débâcle even if the Frenchman was not mentioned by name.²⁰

Meanwhile, the dancers were out of shape after weeks at sea. Nijinsky had to train the new dancers in the existing repertory and whip the company into shape in addition to choreographing his own new works. It is likely *Mephisto Valse* was dropped because the company could not manage the gruelling schedule; and the weaker troupe probably influenced Nijinsky's choreographic plans for *Till* as well.²¹ Then, on 3.10.1916, only days before the scheduled opening of the season, Nijinsky sprained his ankle in rehearsal and the entire season had to be postponed. At first, it was reported that the injury was not serious and that Nijinsky could dance as planned, but even after a week's postponement, the season opened without him on 16.10.1916.²² The repertory was shuffled so that the first novelty of the season was Bolm's choreography to Rimsky-Korsakov's tone-poem *Sadko*. The work disappointed critics: aside from Boris Anisfeld's set and costumes, which received much praise, the music (not to be confused with the composer's opera of the same name) was found nondescript, the drama tenuous and the choreography, as Henry Edward Krehbiel, the eminent critic of *New York Tribune* put it, "a pitiful illustration of the paucity of imagination possessed by the choreographers, whose most fantastic fancy is that they

¹⁹*The New York Herald* 24.10.1916.

²⁰*Musical America* 11.11.1916. According to Macdonald 1975, 208, Monteux did agree to conduct the work in Cincinnati in February 1917, and the advance notice in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* 21.1.1917 mentions only Monteux as a conductor of the orchestra. However, reporters may also assume the conductor is the person advertised.

²¹ Van Vechten 1917, 167 claims the "limitations of the company" influenced Nijinsky's choice of *Till*. However, see e.g. *The Christian Science Monitor* 7.11.1916 praising the company for having attained new team spirit, with improved individual dancers (Gavrilov, Bolm, Lopokova and Revalles).

²²*The New York Times* 4.10.1916 cf. 17.10.1916; cf. the reporter of *New York Tribune* 15.10.1916 had been more alert in the press conference and reported Nijinsky was said to appear later in the week; see also Nijinsky 1999, 158. Bernays 1965, 123 does not recall the postponement and claims that "Even without Nijinsky [!] the première of *Till* took the public by storm."

have discovered a new and potent art.”²³ The season thus began somewhat badly, and not entirely unlike the first, January one.

Together with Nijinsky’s accident, these events have given credibility to the legend that *Till*, which was finally performed on 23.10.1916, was an incomplete choreography, a failure, and thus proof that Diaghilev was really responsible for Nijinsky's choreographies as well as his dancing fame.²⁴ Actively propagated by Diaghilev's coterie and spearheaded by the jilted Grigoriev,²⁵ this hegemonic version of the events claims Nijinsky was an incompetent director and that he ran out of ideas halfway into the production, leaving the dancers to improvise their parts just before the premiere.²⁶ Some of the dancers in the production, notably Lydia Sokolova, who danced the part of the Apple Woman in *Till* but owed her stardom to Diaghilev, referred to Grigoriev’s book when reminiscing about the work.²⁷

Although several illnesses had incapacitated him over the years, Nijinsky had not actually injured himself badly enough to prevent him from dancing since his near-fatal fall in 1901.²⁸ In part, this indicates the high work ethic of the Russian dancers: in April 1916, Nijinsky had danced even after he ran a nail through his foot.²⁹

²³ H.E.K. in *New York Tribune* 17.10.1916; also H[erbert]. F[rancis]. P[eyser]. in *Musical America* 21.10.1916 was disappointed with the choreography; cf. *Musical Courier* 19.10.1916 liked *Sadko*; *The New York Herald* 17.10.1916 reported the audience preferred the older works.

²⁴ Haskell 1955, 268; Macdonald 1975, esp. 183, 199; Acocella 2001, 96-97; also Garafola 1988/1989, 132-134 thinks directing the company was “beyond his [Nijinsky’s] capacity” and that *Till* was filled in by the dancers.

²⁵ Grigoriev’s hostility towards Nijinsky is very evident in Grigoriev 1953, 67 onwards, see also 115-116 on *Till* and the Nijinsky tour.

²⁶ Obviously, Diaghilev knew *Till* was not a failure (he received regular reports from the Metropolitan managers), but insisted on spreading the rumour it was – for example, his lover, Léonide Massine 1968, 91 tells of hearing in Spain that *Till* and the subsequent tour were flops. On Diaghilev's reasons to dislike Nijinsky's success, see Järvinen 2010.

²⁷ Sokolova 1960, 89-93, 106-107, 110; cf. Macdonald 1975, 199-200 quoting Sokolova. Also Buckle 1983, 184-189 on the obvious falsity of both Grigoriev's and Sokolova's records.

²⁸ Nijinsky fell in a rigged high-jumping contest and lay in a coma for days. He was forced to a long convalescence that resulted in him graduating a year after his classmates. Nijinska 1992, 99-103.

²⁹ *The New York Times* 26.4.1916 “Nijinski Slightly Hurt. Ballet Russe Star Ran a Nail Into His Foot, but Danced Later” apparently with his usual skill.

However, in America, the public was entitled to remuneration if Nijinsky failed to appear, which made the star crucial to the success of the season.³⁰ As is evident from his so-called *Diary*, Nijinsky was quite aware of the public pressure to succeed: he wrote that his ankle still hurt when *Till* premiered, and that the critics noticed he danced badly.³¹ Although the critics, well aware of the star's injury, were far more lenient than Nijinsky makes them sound,³² his version of the events is confirmed by contemporary reviews, including Henry Taylor Parker, who noted that casting changes in the early November Boston season were due to Nijinsky's unwillingness to risk the leaps of *Le Spectre de la Rose* or *Schéhérazade*.³³

Although Nijinsky's own recollections are hardly unbiased, in the section of the *Diary* that remained in Romola Nijinsky's edited version he complained,

“Till” was a success, but it was produced too soon. It was taken out of the oven too soon and was therefore raw. The American audience liked my raw ballet because it tasted good. I had cooked it very well. I do not like uncooked things, because I know what a stomachache [sic] one gets afterward. I did not like this ballet, but I said that it was “good”. I had to say it was good because if I had said that the ballet was not good, no one would have come to the theater, and it would have been a financial failure.³⁴

In other words, the choreographer was belatedly admitting he was not satisfied with his work, which has been used to support the claim that *Till* was composed mostly by the dancers whilst the choreographer was slowly going insane. What is actually obvious, here, is that the choreographer knew the value his own reassurance had in convincing both the management and the audience: Nijinsky went on to explain he had arranged a press conference for the critics in which he could explain the ballet to them, and this helped them to understand his work. “The reviews were favorable and

³⁰ See Järvinen 2010, 93-94 for discussion.

³¹ Nijinsky 1999, 158.

³² See e.g. Olin Downes in *Boston Post* 7.11.1916. Downes was a champion of Toscanini and Sibelius, and later a prominent music critic in *The New York Times*.

³³ H.T.P. in the *Boston Evening Transcript* 7.11.1916. Parker dropped out of Harvard and wrote extensively on theatre and dance as well as music in his native Boston. His reviews are quite hegemonic amongst dance historians, republished as an easily available book (Parker 1982).

³⁴ Nijinsky 1999, 158-159; cf. Nijinsky 1991, 95.

sometimes very intelligent,” he concluded, although with a complaint that one critic had thought he did not understand a section of the music when in fact he had been trying to spare his ankle.³⁵

Nijinsky did not speak English and had to rely on a translator for his impressions about the reviews, but he clearly was well informed: what was actually said in the press is very much the opposite of the legend of *Till*'s failure. Some critics noted that the epilogue “seemed a bit beyond the capacity of the choreographer”,³⁶ which seems to indicate the ending had not been given enough attention (or rehearsal time). But overall, the reviews were positive and in most cases adulatory: for example, Morris Paul of *The Theatre* praised *Till* as “one of the most impressive entertainments which New York has seen in a long time”³⁷ and *The New York Times* saw it as “one of the most impressive exhibitions of the kind to be seen anywhere on our stage today.”³⁸ Even when Walter Anthony of *San Francisco Chronicle* complained *Till* “left us a little cold” he explained this was due to latecomers who “kept those inside the theater as busy, almost, in sitting down and rising again as was Nijinsky in his irrepressible leapings on the stage.”³⁹ Some newspapers reviewed more than one performance of *Till*, reporting the work deserved its success, as shown by the enthusiastic response of full houses.⁴⁰

Of all of Nijinsky's choreographies, *Till* was the only one not met with outrage or disdain by any contemporary critic, but popular success and canonisation do not always go hand in hand. This raises the question how we evaluate choreography or past performances in general - why write of *Till* nearly a century later? As will be

³⁵ Nijinsky 1999, 159.

³⁶ H.K.M. in *New York Tribune* 24.10.1916; also Kachouba 1979 claims Nijinsky was alone and hard pressed at the time, and finally told the dancers to “do just what you want to do” for the ending.

³⁷ Morris Paul in *The Theatre* December 1916.

³⁸ *The New York Times* 24.10.1916. The article is unsigned.

³⁹ Walter Anthony in *San Francisco Chronicle* 3.1.1917. Anthony was a music and theatre critic also for *San Francisco Call* and later worked as a scriptwriter for major Hollywood studios. Lengyel & al. 1942, 465; Miller 2012, *passim*; “Walter Anthony” [9.5.2014].

⁴⁰ Aside from the first night, performances of *Till* was reported e.g. in *The New York Post* 27.10.1916; *New York Tribune* 27.10.1916; *The Christian Science Monitor* 13.11.1916; *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916.

shown, what was actually said of the dancing in the reviews is very limited, even in comparison to how the same critics wrote of other Ballets Russes works, but this actually says something important of the process of canonisation. Even as he praised Nijinsky for putting art "above vulgar self-exploitation", the San Francisco music critic Redfern Mason may well have hit the mark when he wrote that "people were more moved by the wonderful music of Strauss and the phantasmagoric perspective of Bakst's [sic!] mediaeval German city than by the grotesque miming of the Russian artist."⁴¹ What charmed in *Till* was Nijinsky's rendering of what was, to the reviewers, a familiar story to familiar music.

Narrative Music

Richard Strauss's tone-poem, *Till Eulenspiegels lustische Streiche, nach alter Schelmenweise, in Rondo Form* (Till Eulenspiegel's merry pranks after old broadsheet songs in rondo form) deals with the merry pranks of a medieval German popular hero, a kind of prankster-meets-Robin-Hood figure. The composer originally refused to attribute specific events to the music, for fear of censorship and scandal.⁴² Especially after the 1907 *Salomé* scandal, Strauss's music was well represented in the repertoires of American symphonic orchestras, and the *Eulenspiegel* tone-poem from 1895 was one of the most popular Strauss pieces in the repertory. Consequently, critics seem to have assumed that the events (narrative) of Strauss's music were well known, although most reviews of *Till* reiterated at least the outline of the work. Yet, this assumption speaks worlds about what kind of audience the Russian Ballet was expected to attract: the élite familiar with symphonic music.⁴³

⁴¹ *The San Francisco Examiner* in NYPLDC Nijinsky clippings, undated. The paper was part of the Hearst empire and Redfern Mason was another progressive critic and advocate of Schoenberg's work. Miller 2012, esp. 186, 233 also note 175 and adjoining text below.

⁴² On Strauss refusing to state the programme of the ballet, see e.g. *New York Times* 24.10.1916.

⁴³ Järvinen 2010, esp. 82, 86 on why, during the first season, the management's emphasis of the Ballets Russes as an elite company for the social elite did not work.

Most critics noted Nijinsky's choreography followed the scenario very closely.⁴⁴ Yet, there was little interest in describing *how* the narrative was performed on stage, which gives little to go by in terms of imagining the choreographic composition. The critics did not focus on the dancers' specific movements, and wrote very little on movement qualities or step sequences. Since the work was only performed during the 1916-1917 tour of the United States and parts of Canada, there is far less critical variety in the responses than with Nijinsky's earlier works. No notation or notes by the choreographer or extensive notes by any of the dancers or audience members exist; the interviews with Nijinsky did not discuss formal aspects of the choreography but focused more on Nijinsky's general views on dance; and as most of Diaghilev's collaborators either chose to deride the work or never saw it in the first place, reminiscences are scarce and obscured both by the self-interest of the writers and by the choreographer's later institutionalisation. Consequently, *Till* can scarcely be called "very well documented"⁴⁵ as a ballet.

Beyond costume designs, there are only a dozen or so photographs of the ballet, a large majority focusing on Nijinsky himself. These include a series of photographs by Karl Struss,⁴⁶ all of which are slightly out of focus (perhaps because of lighting

⁴⁴ Contemporary reviews speak of Nijinsky using the text by Wilhelm Mauke (*The Nation* 2.11.1916) although some attributed the scenario to the conductor Franz Wüllner (*Musical America* 28.10.1916); and Van Vechten 1917, 168 claims Nijinsky used Wilhelm Klatte's version - Klatte being an early biographer of Strauss. The audience's familiarity with Strauss's piece might have had something to do with the predominance of Germans in American musical life.

⁴⁵ Hodson in Hodson & Archer 1995, 43; similarly, Archer & Hodson 1994, 105-108. As usual, the reconstructors fail to provide a convincing case that any of this "documentation" describes choreography. The reminiscences of Nikolai Zverev, for example, come via his wife; and as Acocella 2001, 96-97 notes, dancers' recollections of a work they danced a few dozen times *over seventy years* earlier are anything but trustworthy. This has not stopped Hodson from drawing conclusions about the movement language even more far-fetched than her work on *Sacre*: e.g. Hodson 1996, xiii claims that Nijinsky chose to portray the class-system by giving the dancers different stages of turn-out: the rich started from the classical position, confident of their status, the middle classes with parallel feet, and the poor hunched and turned-in. There is no contemporary evidence of such a 'system' in any of the primary sources I have unearthed.

⁴⁶ Struss was a pictorialist photographer, a member of Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession group and his work was published in *Camera Work* as well as in *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. He later

conditions in the rehearsal room or the inexperience of the photographer in picturing dance). The shadows that Struss clearly used as an aesthetic element in his compositions make the use of these images as documents of a stage production rather difficult, even as they give some ideas as to what kind of movement qualities the contemporary reviews call "grotesque", "strange" or "queer".⁴⁷ For example, Nijinsky as Till has a very straight, vertical line of the body, broken by the twist of his neck, the right arm held at shoulder level with the elbow in a sharp angle and his right leg raised with a slight outward twist, the calf parallel to the floor and the foot at right angle. The fingers of both hands are splayed wide, reminiscent of the hands of the nymphs in *Faune*.⁴⁸ Images of Till disguised as a professor, a courtier and a priest (or a monk) show more conventional exaggerated poses: the professor struts holding his wide gown in front of him, the courtier is in the process of donning a feathered hat, the priest is shown in mock prayer and displaying his empty pockets.⁴⁹ Contemporary reportage includes a few photographs of other characters as well, including Sokolova as the Apple Woman, Dmitri Kostrovsky as the Baker, Flora Revalles as the Chatelaine.⁵⁰ Also the costume and set designs were popular illustrations, in part because they were designed by an American artist, Robert Edmund Jones – for example, *Vogue* reproduced designs for Nijinsky's costume, as well as those of a street urchin, a professor and a chatelaine as well as Mephisto from the planned *Mephisto Valse* that never materialised.⁵¹ Some of the designs have body postures

became a cinematographer and a pioneer in 3D photography. Néagu 1990, 62; Bailey 2009a and 2009b; Acocella 1987, 49-50.

⁴⁷ E.g. *The New York Times* 24.10.1916; *Boston Evening Transcript* 7.11.1916; *San Francisco Chronicle* 10.1.1917 (a review of the Oakland performance).

⁴⁸ Magriel 1977, 43.

⁴⁹ Magriel 1977, 50. In *Faune*, the splayed fingers seem to have indicated surprise. Guest & Jeschke 1991, 21-22, 27, 40-41, 46, also 62-63 images of the hands of the nymphs.

⁵⁰ *Vanity Fair* October 1916; in addition, e.g. *Indianapolis News* 19.1.1917 published a photograph of one of the professors, calling it "A Grotesque Figure"; and *Current Opinion* December 1916 (also in Magriel 1977, 57) showed Nijinsky making up the Wife of the Rich Merchant (Janina Boniecka). This must have been a publicity shot as Nijinsky is not himself dressed for the ballet.

⁵¹ *Vogue* November 1916.

similar to the photographs: Till's fingers are spread wide, a Chatelaine holds her gown.⁵²

For an eighteen-minute ballet,⁵³ *Till* was packed with action and people, even if the choreographer left out Till's horse wrecking havoc at the market-place in Strauss's score:

“Till Eulenspiegel” tells the story of a mythical rogue with some of the characteristics of Puck. Weary of the hypocrisy of his townspeople, he plays a series of pranks on them. He rushes into the market place where the tradespeople are engaged in selling their wares, knocking everything topsy-turvy, but disappearing before he can be stopped. Next he imitates a priest in satiric mood and later makes love to a lady of high station who repulses him. Into the midst of a group of professors he next makes his way to poke fun at their superior ways. Finally he is arrested for his tricks, and convicted to the gallows.⁵⁴

Till thus described an entire day from the opening of the market at sunrise to night, when Nijinsky, like Strauss, resurrected Till from the gallows.⁵⁵ The action seems to have required that most dancers in the company performed in the work. A look at the programme notes reveals a very odd list:

Till – M. Nijinsky
First Chatelaine – Mlle Revalles
Second Chatelaine – Mlle Doris
Third Chatelaine – Mlle Pflanz
A Cloth Merchant – M. Kremneff
A Shoe Merchant – M. Kegler
A Confectioner – M. Pianowski
A Baker – M. Kostrovsky
An Apple Woman – Mlle Sokolova

⁵² See Magriel 1977, 50 for the image of Till; *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916 showed a single Chatelaine lifting the extraordinarily long hems of her dress; cf. similar poses in the sketches reproduced in Magriel 1977, 53.

⁵³ At least this was what *The New York Post* 24.10.1916 gave as the duration of the action.

⁵⁴ Morris Paul in *The Theatre* December 1916.

⁵⁵ See e.g. *New York Tribune* 24.10.1916; *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916 and 9.11.1916.

First Street Urchin – M. Zverev
 Second Street Urchin – M. Kostecki
 Third Street Urchin – M. Kawecki
 Fourth Street Urchin – M. Ochimowski
 Fifth Street Urchin – M. Worontzow
 One of the People – M. Gavrilow
 A Rich Citizen – M. Statkiewicz
 His Wife – Mlle Boniecka
 A Poor Citizen – Mlle Zamouhovska
 First Policeman – M. Tariat
 Second Policeman – M. Maximoff
 Professors, Judges, Priests, Hangmen, Soldiers, etc.⁵⁶

In other words, of the groups of people who end up suffering from Till's pranks, this strange list does not name the dancers for the professors or the priests; or the people finally executing the merry prankster. Simultaneously, some characters listed are not mentioned in the libretto or in the reviews (such as the Rich and Poor Citizens). The list also seems to follow the narrative chronology: with the exception of Till and the Chatelaines, preference is given to when the characters appear on stage, not to what their position is with regard to the narrative (i.e. how prominent their role is). This implies the cast list was simply a casting list cut off at the figure of twenty, that is, roughly half-way through the company numbers. The remaining groups mentioned would have each included at least two people (plural), and some roles obviously were not mentioned (note the "etc."). The company may even have used supernumeraries (figurants) for the crowd.⁵⁷ However, since the list does not indicate whether each dancer only had one role to execute, it leaves open the possibility that some dancers performed more than one role.

As in Nijinsky's earlier works, the roles are in fact character types rather than people – nobility, merchants, clergymen, scholars, officers of the law, and a gang of juvenile

⁵⁶ From the programme notes in NYPLDC Ballets Russes (Diaghilev), Programs.

⁵⁷ Nijinsky had never used figurants for his compositions. *Indianapolis News* 13.1.1917 claims "drilling of numerous supernumeraries" was a reason why the presentation of the work in Indianapolis was not confirmed until a fortnight before the performances, but as figurants would not travel with the company, it is odd that none of the local papers mention supernumeraries hired for the occasion.

delinquents, headed by Till himself.⁵⁸ Reviewers usually named only Nijinsky as Till, Revalles as the First Chatelaine, and sometimes Sokolova as the Apple Woman. In terms of the action, this heightens the subjectivity of Till, who is also the only character without an exaggerated costume. This, in turn, points to how the ballet was conceived not only as a story about Till but *by* him: the stage was turned into the fantastic, subjective space of expressionism.

Subjective Space

Most East Coast critics had positive expectations about the Ballets Russes producing new works for American audiences. As Morris Paul noted in *The Theatre*, “Since the beginning of the war no pantomime ballet of real account had been devised. And nothing approaching “Till” in the way of artistic dance spectacle had ever originated in America.”⁵⁹ *Till* was clearly seen as compensation for the lack of courage Diaghilev had shown in not bringing to America *Jeux* and *Sacre*, which were set to music specifically composed for these ballets and as yet unheard in America.⁶⁰ Even if *Till* was a well-known piece of music, it was still a work by one of the leading contemporary composers. Yet, the key factor in the success of *Till* was Nijinsky's choice of set and costume designer, the young American artist Robert Edmond Jones.

Edward Louis Bernays, the press agent of the company (and a nephew of Sigmund Freud), later thought Jones was brought in because of the management's growing fears of public dislike of the Ballet as an imported art,⁶¹ but contemporary papers attributed the choice of Jones specifically to Nijinsky, who may have met him thanks to common acquaintances.⁶² Both are likely to be true: in any case, the choice was

⁵⁸ Till was indeed leading the gang, as noted e.g. by H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916.

⁵⁹ *The Theatre* December 1916.

⁶⁰ H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 4.2.1916.

⁶¹ Bernays 1965, 122. See also Järvinen 2010, 82-84.

⁶² E.g. H[erbert]. F[rancis]. P[eyser]. in *Musical America* 28.10.1916; de Meyer in *Vanity Fair* November 1916. Peyser had started as an assistant to Finck at *The New York Post* and became a prominent musicologist: de la Grange 2008, 60n204; Baron de Meyer was a pictorialist photographer

astute and generated much positive publicity for the company.⁶³ An instructor at the Art School of Harvard University, Jones had recently made sensational sets for the American premiere on Broadway of *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* by Anatole France. In 1913-1914 he had been in Berlin and seen Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater and its 'new stagecraft', which combined acting, lighting, and set design into a dramatic total work of art.⁶⁴ He had seen ballet before, but had not taken to the art form. Jones was also one of the American artists who openly professed his patriotism: although he admired the stagecraft of the Russian Ballet and felt American artists could learn much from Europe, he thought there was no need for America to import artists from Europe, let alone for American art-merely to copy European models.⁶⁵ As these were the principal complaints against the Ballets Russes, Nijinsky's choice of collaborator was very astute: it was bound to attract favourable publicity for the new work.

The collaboration between Nijinsky and Jones seems to have worked to their mutual advantage. As *Current Opinion* summed up in December, there was a marked change in Nijinsky's public image:

Last year, Nijinsky was represented to us as the spoiled child of the company, who, like a petulant prima donna, refused to go on unless certain conditions were fulfilled to suit him. To-day he is revealed as the really great artist who is the very soul of the enterprize [sic], whose poetic imagination and idealism supply its foundation.⁶⁶

who had taken a famous series of photographs of Nijinsky in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, published as a collectible book and exhibited widely (see e.g. *The Bystander* 26.2.1913). Néagu 1990, esp. 56, 62.

⁶³ E.g. *Indianapolis News* 25.10.1916 and 23.12.1916.

⁶⁴ Several critics noted the spectacular lighting effects of *Till*: e.g. *New York Times* 24.10.1916; Olin Downes in *Boston Post* 7.11.1916. See also next fn.

⁶⁵ Jones in *The Theatre* May 1917; also Jones 1977, 56, 59; For information on Jones, see Hiram Kelly Moderwell's appraisal in *Theatre Arts Magazine* February 1917. Moderwell, like Jones, was a Harvard graduate.

⁶⁶ *Current Opinion* December 1916.

The reviewers bent over backwards to praise Jones as a promising artist, and many claimed the success of the work was due to his designs.⁶⁷ His greatest advocate, Hiram Kelly Moderwell, compared Jones to Bakst:

Mr Jones's methods are entirely dissimilar from those of Léon Bakst. The great Russian seeks to capture the citadel of the senses by assault; but Mr. Jones besieges it more wooingly and charms it amiably to surrender. Bakst is mightier in color; Mr. Jones is stronger and more steady in design. The young American displays a finer feeling for the poetry of linear patterns; but he lacks, of course, the riotous profusion of the Russian when the latter revels in a gorgeous splash of color.⁶⁸

By contrast, *The New York Herald* reported that Nijinsky was said to have praised Jones as a greater colour artist than Bakst, and the *New York Tribune* wrote: "Higher praise cannot be spoken of it [Jones's work] than to say that it was worthy of Strauss's music and Nijinsky's pantomime."⁶⁹ However, some reviews also noted a marked difference in *Till* from Jones's earlier designs, and this was usually seen as a positive development: "[Jones] has transcended his previous accomplishments in audacity of conception as well as unexampled novelty – and felicity – of effect."⁷⁰

In his reminiscences, Jones freely admitted *Till* was the production that placed him in the public eye altering "the course of my entire life"⁷¹ and bringing him "unexpected and profuse hospitality, but I soon realize that I am being sought after only in order that my various hosts and hostesses may induce me to bring the great dancer to their tables."⁷² As part of the advance publicity, Jones was asked how he liked working with the famous Russian:

⁶⁷ Hiram Kelly Moderwell praised both Jones (in *Theatre Arts Magazine* February 1917) and Nijinsky's works (in *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916); Baron de Meyer, who took photographs of *Faune* wrote in *Vanity Fair* November 1916 in praise of Jones and Reinhardt; and Reinhardt, according to Nijinska 1992, 453fn, admired Nijinsky's *Faune*.

⁶⁸ *Vogue* November 1916. In Moderwell 1914, 143, the critic had called Jones "[p]erhaps the most imaginative of the young American designers [--] often extremely daring, though never vulgar" in his designs.

⁶⁹ *New York Tribune* 24.10.1916; *The New York Herald* 24.10.1916.

⁷⁰ H.F.P. in *Musical America* 28.10.1916; similarly, Van Vechten 1917, 167.

⁷¹ Jones 1977, 45.

⁷² Jones 1977, 52.

"Immensely," he replied. "He's the sort I react to as if he were a whip. He believes you can always outdo your best, and I like that. Usually people get tired, or bored, or lose interest before I do. But he will expect something every minute. No wonder he's the dancer he is. He believes that nothing is impossible."⁷³

The young artist seemed quite in awe of the dancer, who was two years his junior and yet world famous. Jones obviously had Nijinsky to thank for placing him on a par with some of the leading artists in the field, most notably Bakst, and *The New York Journal* urged the Metropolitan management to take "several sheaves" out of Jones's book in planning their future productions.⁷⁴

As the artistic director of the company responsible for his choreography, it was only natural for Nijinsky to take a keen interest in Jones's designs, and *The New York Herald* even stated that "Robert E. Jones designed the costumes and scenery *with the aid of Mr. Nijinsky*".⁷⁵ As with *Sacre*, Nijinsky seems to have designed the dancers' make-up.⁷⁶ Some of his interventions were less than felicitous: at one point, Nijinsky insisted that the sets were to be painted in the Russian manner, flat on the floor with brushes, which no-one in New York could do.⁷⁷ Jones's reminiscences are rather coloured by the artist's knowledge of Nijinsky's insanity and they contradict contemporary accounts and evidence of the collaboration. For example, when the set did not fit the stage of the Manhattan Opera House, Jones recalled he had to add "a piece of canvas ten feet high" at the bottom, "painted with an impression of foliage in

⁷³*The New York Times Magazine* 1.10.1916. The interview was widely cited, e.g. in *Indianapolis News* 23.10.1916.

⁷⁴*New York Journal* 24.10.1916; H.K.M. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916; see also Jones 1970.

⁷⁵*The New York Herald* 24.10.1916, emphasis added. See also Hiram Kelly Moderwell in *Theatre Arts Magazine* February 1917; Nijinsky 1999, 158.

⁷⁶ Kachouba 1979 says she assisted Nijinsky in the strange, geometrical make-up of the grotesque types – she was responsible for the girls, who resented her for not having been trained in the Imperial Ballet School. See also Magriel 1977, 57 for a picture of Nijinsky making up Boniecka.

⁷⁷ Nijinsky consented, after a visit to the studio where the scene painting was in process. Jones 1977, 52-55.

broad washes of ultramarine".⁷⁸ Yet, photographs of the finished set show the added canvas with painted houses.

Ernest de Weerth, who acted as a translator between Nijinsky and Jones at the time, recalls how:

Jones spread his very effective sketches over the floor. Nijinsky, in one of his characteristic poses that invariably suggested he was about to leap, stood studying the paintings for some time, first as a whole, then one by one. He turned to me: 'Pencil. Two pencils. One black. One red.' To [the rehearsal pianist Cortland] Palmer's and my surprise (and unquestionable consternation of poor Bobby Jones) Nijinsky dropped on the floor and began drawing lines on the actual sketch of the stage set. With the black pencil he threw all the houses and towers out of gear, making them crooked and leaning and toppling in every direction. Just as a naughty child might act, he looked up, thoroughly satisfied with his mischief and grinned from ear to ear. 'Till see everything distorted!' he explained.⁷⁹

Next, the choreographer drew on the costume designs to exaggerate them in similar manner. Nijinsky's meddling with the designs of costumes and sets apparently convinced Jones of the validity of the principal innovation in *Till*: through the designs, the stage was turned into a subjective space where events and characters are seen through the eyes of the title character. Of all the character designs, only the figure of Till himself was *not* blown out of proportion.⁸⁰

This exaggeration "out of all normal semblance"⁸¹ was also seen in the costumes, which were different from anything the dancers had worn before. Jones, taking heed of contemporary European stage design, broke with all 'realistic' traditions of period dress. The 'historical' manner of dressing the dancers according to the fashions of the general period and area in which the narrative was set was one of the key points of criticism directed against the Ballets Russes by reformers of the theatre such as

⁷⁸ Jones 1977, 58.

⁷⁹ De Weerth 1961, 29.

⁸⁰ An early version of Jones's set design can be seen in Magriel 1977, 55 - it is stylised but not distorted. Nijinsky's costume is shown in Magriel 1977, 53.

⁸¹ *Boston Evening Transcript* 7.11.1916.

Gordon Craig. In *Till*, the costume, instead of being a mere cover for the body, became, as Craig had insisted, “that which uncovers the Soul”⁸² – the costume revealed the *characteristics* of the characters. Thus, for example, the baker looks like a bun and the professors have hats that look like large scrolls. In a comic ballet, this kind of characterisation was seen as particularly appropriate, adding to the humour of the piece. *The Theatre* praised the Jones costumes for giving “an exaggerated poetic suggestion of the character”⁸³ of each individual on the stage.

Nijinsky’s choice to present a ballet through the eyes of a character has caused much speculation: Nijinsky may have imitated the impressive towering effect of Gothic cathedrals and the grotesques of Medieval painting and sculpture; or he may have seen German Expressionist painting, or similar Russian experiments;⁸⁴ or he may have reproduced the effect of the New York skyscrapers and the variety of people on the streets.⁸⁵ Certainly, he was imagining a subjective stage four years before the German Expressionist film classic, *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (1920).⁸⁶ Yet, as Nijinsky apparently never uttered a word on why he chose to create a subjective space for *Till*, this kind of speculation is useless, and reduces the complexity of artistic creation (and collaboration) into simple imitation of pre-existing models. In 1912, during the planning of *Joseph*, Nijinsky complained that von Hofmannsthal's initial libretto had too conventional a hero, insisting the work should focus on the inner struggle of the leading character.⁸⁷ In *Till*, this focus on the leading character makes the eponymous hero a solitary figure, whose appearances and disappearances are indicated by musical cues in the orchestra.

⁸² Craig 1977, esp. 81-84 (orig. 2.10.1911) had criticised the Ballets Russes costumes for the lack of such characterisation. See also Kirstein 1983, 279.

⁸³ *The Theatre* December 1916.

⁸⁴ Meinertz 1994(a), 13.

⁸⁵ Archer & Hodson 1992, 14-17; this comes from Nijinsky 1980, 264 who claims her husband never got tired of watching the procession of human types on Broadway.

⁸⁶ See West 2001, 95-99.

⁸⁷ Kessler to Hofmannsthal 12.8.1912: “Im übrigen stammt diese Idee und der Wunsch, Faustkämpfer an die Stelle von Säbelgefechten zu setzen, nicht von mir sondern von Nijinski, der eine Wiederholung bereits von Fokine inszenierter Dinge vermeiden wollte.” Kessler & Hofmannsthal 1968, 355.

Leitmotifs in the Critical Reception

The music by Strauss was the clearest example of a music based on a leitmotif that Nijinsky used for ballet. Nijinsky chose the obvious solution and made Till's character follow the Till leitmotif, present in different guises throughout the work. Apparently, this was exactly what the audience and critics anticipated.⁸⁸ Nijinsky's April performances and the manner in which he had changed the choreographies had already predisposed music critics in his favour: the musicologist and composer Sigmund Spaeth, who had attacked the "obviously limited abilities of many of the performers"⁸⁹ and "almost constant absence of rhythmic sense",⁹⁰ had praised Nijinsky's "exact correspondence of music and action".⁹¹ Writing shortly on *Till*, Spaeth praised how "The pantomime actually fits the music, while the synthesis of colors, lights, outlines and action makes a consistent and definite impression."⁹² In complete contrast, Henry Taylor Parker of *The Boston Evening Transcript* found that Nijinsky's choreography bore no relation to the music, or only coincided with it now and then:

the orchestra is no more than background to the whole, like Debussy's music in the mimed episode of the faun or Schumann's among the fancies of "Butterflies." Once and again, it rhythmized the dancers and mimes as in the passage that celebrates Till's love-making; here and there the acute intelligence of and the ingenious invention of Mr. Nijinsky gave a musical turn to the action as when the learned pedants answer the jeers of Till in kind of scholarly counterpoint. Momentarily, too, the accent of this action was the accent of the music; but usually Strauss's tone-poem was no more than a background to the illusion even as was Mr. Jones's decoration.⁹³

These divergent takes on the relationship of the dance and the music may indicate how the expectations of a professional musician differed from those of a professional critic. However, Parker's view was a minority one: precisely those critics who had so

⁸⁸ H.F.P. in *Musical America* 28.10.1916.

⁸⁹ Spaeth in *New York Evening Mail* 19.1.1916.

⁹⁰ *Opera Magazine* February 1916.

⁹¹ *New York Evening Mail* 13.4.1916.

⁹² *New York Evening Mail* 24.10.1916.

⁹³ H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 7.11.1916.

far been extremely critical of the manner in which the Ballets Russes used music praised *Till*. For example, in *The New York Tribune*, Krehbiel compared the Nijinsky ballet to Bolm's choreography of *Sadko* that had premiered the previous week, and placed *Till* in a class of its own: "There was evidence of creative thought and imagination of a vastly different character in this production than in the novelty last week, not only in the composition of the piece, but also in its execution and its scenic investiture."⁹⁴ The previous spring Krehbiel had viciously attacked the Ballets Russes for "intellectual pretense", "maltreatment" of music, and general contempt towards the audience.⁹⁵

Like Spaeth and Krehbiel, the anonymous critic of another Boston paper, *The Christian Science Monitor*, had complained of how the Ballets Russes performances seemed to require the orchestra to stress the beat:

The orchestral playing has the regular pulsation and mechanical exactness noted in former ballet accompaniments. Mr. Ansermet cannot be said to have attained a symphonic flow even in the masterful music of Stravinsky. He is wanting, too, in rhythmic elegance in the older music of Tchaikowsky and Rimsky-Korsakoff.⁹⁶

With *Till*, the same paper published a laudatory article acclaiming how:

At last the Russian dance is beginning to come to terms with music. The members of the Diaghileff troupe show in "Till Eulenspiegel," as in no other work of their repertory, not even in "Petrouchka," a willingness to accept the men in the orchestra as their artistic equals, instead of their artistic servitors.⁹⁷

This article went on to praise Nijinsky for revealing a possible new direction for ballet as an art form,

making it possible for somebody to construct a symphonic ballet correctly some time, from a foundation of free melody and theme, instead of from a

⁹⁴ H.K.M. in *New York Tribune* 24.10.1916. Krehbiel was one of the leading American music critics, a major proponent of Wagner's early work. He authored a dozen books, including popular works on how to listen and appreciate music as well as one of the first treatises on African-American music, Krehbiel 1914; de la Grange 2008, 54, 58-59.

⁹⁵ *New York Tribune* 16.4.1916; also 17.10.1916 on Krehbiel attacking Bolm's *Sadko*.

⁹⁶ *The Christian Science Monitor* 18.1.1916.

⁹⁷ *The Christian Science Monitor* 7.11.1916.

foundation of conventional rhythms. He is indicating how a ballet can be composed in which the dance of interpretive step and gesture will replace the dance of merely acrobatic motive. [- -] "Till," under Mr. Nijinsky's portrayal, is a translation of the vital melody of the Strauss rondo into character, and is therefore a man; whereas other masculine figures in the repertory are translations of mechanical rhythm into character, and are often hardly more than manikins.⁹⁸

The critic emphasised ballet needed music that would enable it to be regarded as an art equal to opera. Even as it confirms that in contemporary American discourse ballet was not yet seen as an art in these terms, the article points to the importance placed on music specifically made for dancing. One of the reasons that contemporary renovators of art dancing used symphonic music, was that ballet music tended rely on simple rhythms and melodies that were understood as 'danceable'; conversely, professionals and audience members alike expected dance to relate to the music in a manner that can only be called simplistic - steps that matched a clear-cut beat in the orchestra.⁹⁹ Although this is not to say that Parker's interpretation of how music figured in *Till* would be mistaken, it is nonetheless evident that Nijinsky's treatment of the Strauss score differed from other works in the Ballets Russes repertory in a manner that many music specialists found heartening and "correct".

From these quotations it is also clear that American music critics paid a great deal of attention to the orchestras accompanying the Ballets Russes performances.¹⁰⁰ They

⁹⁸ *The Christian Science Monitor* 7.11.1916.

⁹⁹ As Marian Smith 2000 has shown, ballet scores reserved structural and chromatic complexity for mimed sections. See Järvinen 2014, 31-32 for European discussion on this matter. When working on *Joseph*, Nijinsky apparently insisted on the music to be "die gelösteste, die untanzmäßigeste, die nur Straussische Musik von den Welt hinzusetzen". Hofmannsthal to Strauss 13.12.1912 in Hofmannsthal & Strauss 1954, 177. In contrast, Mikhail Fokine 1961, 184-190 disliked Stravinsky's rhythmic complexity.

¹⁰⁰ See e.g. *San Francisco Chronicle* 26.11.1916. This interest was, in part, philanthropic, since the ballet performances expanded the audiences of the contemporary music used in the spectacles. Frederick H. Martens of *The Musical Observer* November 1916 claimed that "Nijinsky's 'L'Après-midi d'un faune' has made a nation-wide propaganda for Debussy's music among people who might otherwise never have known it existed." A critic for *Musical Quarterly* as well as other trade journals,

often found the quality wanting - for example, with *Till*, Anselm Goetzl's directing was criticised as lacking in exactitude of detail and numbing the nuances of the Strauss work.¹⁰¹ Had Nijinsky's choreography required the kind of correspondence between gesture and musical score evident in his notation for *Faune*, where the dance almost seems a commentary on the failings of real individuals vis à vis the ideal reality of the music,¹⁰² the orchestral playing would definitely have affected the choreography as well. Yet, it seems *Till* was not as intricate as this, which may indicate Nijinsky maturing as a choreographer in terms of deigning to take into account what a company fresh from weeks at sea could accomplish in only three weeks of rehearsals.¹⁰³

Many contemporary critics noted that apart from *Faune*, the other Nijinsky choreography in the repertory, *Till* was reminiscent of *Petrouchka*.¹⁰⁴ The Wagnerian critic Henry T. Finck placed *Till* next to the Stravinsky ballets that he had called "genuine works of art"¹⁰⁵ in an otherwise mediocre repertory.¹⁰⁶ This might indicate a similarity observed in the movement style of the title characters – *Petrouchka* was seen as a precursor of Nijinsky's choreographic style, and Nijinsky himself alluded to it in his interview with H.T. Parker:

[*Petrouchka*] is more interesting, more touching for what he is than for what he does. [- -] He touched his audience by what it felt about him rather than by what it merely saw him do. Why not, then, go forward to a ballet that should

Martens also wrote and translated articles on music. Similarly, the anonymous critic of *The Lincoln Star* 17.12.1916.

¹⁰¹ H.K.M. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916; H.T.P. in the same paper 7.11.1916; cf. *Musical Courier* 26.10.1916 praised Goetzl; and Spaeth in *New York Evening Mail* 24.10.1916 found him "a more than capable substitute" for Monteux.

¹⁰² See Järvinen 2009, 53 after Guest & Jeschke 1991, 37-38.

¹⁰³ With his earlier works, Nijinsky seems to have been more exacting with the dancers, even outright intolerant (e.g.) although this may be an artifice created by lack of source material on the rehearsal process of *Till*.

¹⁰⁴ *The New York Herald* 24.10.1916.

¹⁰⁵ Henry T. Finck in *The Nation* 27.4.1916. Like Krehbiel, Finck was a passionate Wagnerian, wrote the first American biography of the composer, and a prolific author and a prominent critic, primarily for *The New York Post*. Dizikes 1993, 236; de la Grange 2008, 54, 60-61.

¹⁰⁶ Henry T. Finck in *The Nation* 2.11.1916.

depend much more upon this static suggestion, a ballet that should not be full of dynamic emphasis, a ballet almost – to put an extreme case – without movement?¹⁰⁷

This lack of movement certainly rings a bell in view of the critical reception of Nijinsky's 1912-1913 works, but whether or not the perceived pantomimic quality in *Till* had anything to do with this principle has to remain moot, because pantomime was not considered dancing.

Before returning to this issue of expected movement, however, I wish to note that there are real similarities between *Till* and *Petrouchka*: both are set in a market-place with a crowd of characters; both end with the death and revival of the title character, who then mocks his executioners. The similarity of the subjective space in *Till* is also echoed in the scene of *Petrouchka* in his cell, with the portrait of the Magician staring down at the title character of the work. Yet, as American critics pointed out, both the setting and the revival of the title character in the end were written into Strauss's music, composed in 1895, so if anyone was imitating anyone else, it was Stravinsky.¹⁰⁸ However, there can be little doubt that Nijinsky chose this piece of music because of his interest in pursuing further the elements familiar from *Petrouchka*, particularly the subjective position of the title character. Whereas the resurrection of *Petrouchka* (on top of the Magician's booth with the doll's body in evidence, which underlined the liberation of the soul of the title character) served to convey the ballet's message, the resurrection of *Till* was crucial in enabling the story to be told at all. Unlike *Petrouchka*, *Till* is narrated through the eyes of the title character, and the only reality on stage is his subjective reality. The story of *Till* is told as if the ghost of Till were sitting next to the spectator, explaining the story to one's ear, pointing to the oddities of all but himself. *Petrouchka* never crosses over from the stage like this, he is never the narrator of the story, and he only comes to

¹⁰⁷ H. T. Parker in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916 paraphrasing his interview with Nijinsky.

¹⁰⁸ Strauss's *Till* was presented as the obvious model for Stravinsky's ending in both *The New York Sun* 25.1.1916 (unsigned, possibly William James Henderson (see de la Grange 2008, 56-57)); and by Lawrence Gilman (an autodidact music critic and piano pedagogue, see *Lawrence Gilman Papers*) in *The Opera Magazine* March 1916 – both published before Nijinsky's ballet was first mentioned. Gilman in particular thought Stravinsky very derivative, whereas Strauss was, with Puccini and Debussy, one of the "three salient figures" after Wagner. Gilman quoted in Dizikes 1993, 311.

focus in the tableaux inside the Magician's booth. In contrast, Till lives (and has to live) on stage from the first curtain to the last.¹⁰⁹ The resurrection of Till thus served the purpose of justifying the use of subjective space throughout the ballet, and it created a different kind of "endless" plot structure, the likes of which Nijinsky had explored in *Faune* and *Jeux*. As I have discussed in previous articles to *Dance Research*, both of these earlier works had appeared almost like accidental fragments from everyday life without any particular "message" - presumably, the anonymous characters of *Faune* and *Jeux* might or might not engage in something similar the next day, they lack even the significance of archetypes. The recurrence in *Till* - the resurrection of the title character that makes possible the story told - draws attention to how folktales are a form of recurring narration, stories that live in and through the telling: the character of Till is not only more of a subject and thus heroic than the characters of Nijinsky's earlier works, but he re-lives, returns in slightly different guises, with each telling of his story.

As Nijinsky pointed out, his interest in *Petrouchka* had to do with the power of the character to touch the spectators, not through narrative means (what they saw him do) but through affects (what they felt about him).¹¹⁰ The title character of *Petrouchka* had little to do with the Russian Punch-like figure he was named after, nor did he end up killing the other puppets as in the market-place show. But it is crucial to remember an important (though less apparent) similarity between Nijinsky's ballet and *Petrouchka*, which was set on a market-place littered with caricatures of Russian types from ballerinas to drunkards and dancing bears. The least obvious point of reference between *Petrouchka* and *Till* lay in their engagement with comedy.

¹⁰⁹*The New York Times* 24.10.1916 asked "should not he [i.e. Nijinsky] show himself at the very outset of the piece, when the orchestra very conspicuously sounds the "Till" theme at the opening?" The curtain - perhaps opening at this point - showed the 'Owl-glass' motif from an old German woodcut: see *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916; image in Magriel (ed.) 1977, 44. Certainly Till, the spirit of the people, could be seen as always-already present in the work, as the narrator of the events to its audience-observers.

¹¹⁰ H.T.P. "Manifold Nijinsky: The High Sincerities of his Faith and Practice" in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916.

The Merry Pranks

According to Robert Edmond Jones, when asked why he made *Till*, Nijinsky replied: “Pour faire rire”.¹¹¹ In his *Diary*, he wrote, “I made this a comic ballet because I felt the war. Everyone was sick of the war, and therefore people needed to be cheered up. I did cheer them up.”¹¹² As the title of Strauss's scenario, “Merry Pranks”, infers, in Nijinsky's choreography, *Till* was posited as a comic character with whom the audience was supposed to identify. As such, *Till* was something of an exception in the Ballets Russes repertory, where only *Carnaval* was explicitly comic, even if *Petrouchka* was sometimes read as such.¹¹³ However, even if the audiences would not have been aware of this, some of the most popular pieces in the repertory of the Mariinsky Theatre were comedies: Nijinsky himself had danced in, for example, *Le Petit Cheval Bossu* (*The Little Hump-Backed Horse* or *Konyok Gorbunok*, 1864) loosely based on Ershov's fairy-tale, and Petipa's féeries as well as works drawing from the commedia dell'arte (such as *Millions d'Harlequin*, 1900) often included comic characters.¹¹⁴ Nijinsky thus had a variety of comic ballets to draw from besides the forms of comedy that he would have known from circuses, carnivals, cinema, and other forms of popular entertainment.

A comedy was a 'safe' choice for pleasing an audience that thought ballet “light entertainment to be enjoyed after a hard day at the office”.¹¹⁵ Such a public might respond better to a comic work - certainly, in his *Diary*, Nijinsky portrays himself as

¹¹¹ Jones 1977, 51; Nijinsky 1999, 157-159 attests this.

¹¹² Nijinsky 1999, 159, also 157.

¹¹³ Johnson 1913, 15-33 on *Petrouchka* as funny in its misery. From the correspondence of Stravinsky and Benois in Stravinsky 1997, esp. 252-256 (Benois to Stravinsky 9./22.12. and 12./25.12.1910), 262-265 (Stravinsky to Benois 13./26.1., 21.1./3.2. and 2./15.2.1911), it is clear *Petrouchka* was to have something of the comic of the market-place show in it - the revelry hiding the exaggerated magical reality of the suffering puppets. In a letter to Benois 30.6./13.7.1911 in Stravinsky 1997, 285-287, Stravinsky called the work "Потешные сцены" which he translates as "Scènes burlesques" in the text, but which could also be translated as "mocking" or "amusing" scenes.

¹¹⁴ Nijinska 1992, esp. 247; Surits 1998, esp. 33-34; also Gutsche-Miller 2010, esp. 42 on comedy as a staple in music hall ballets.

¹¹⁵ Massine 1968, 80.

concerned with ticket sales.¹¹⁶ Henry Adams Bellows of *The Bellman* had criticised contemporary dance for excessive seriousness.¹¹⁷ Yet, comedy was (and often still is) expected to entertain in the moment rather than hold any lasting value or significance. The association of comedy with 'low' forms of popular theatre may even have influenced the scarcity of comic works in the Ballets Russes repertory: the company differentiated itself from popular ballets on variety stages and wished to establish ballet as a 'high' art.¹¹⁸ Although with *Till*, only one contemporary critic, the playwright William J. McNally, raised this issue, complaining that the work “does not stir one to the depths”¹¹⁹ (as *Cléopâtre* apparently did), comedy did affect the reputation of *Till* in two ways: firstly, comedy has made it easy to claim the work drew back from the avant-garde experimentation of Nijinsky's 1912-1913 works,¹²⁰ and secondly, the known tragedy of Nijinsky's 1919 institutionalisation makes laughter seem an inappropriate response to his last choreography.

Nijinsky seems to have always had a great admiration and love for comedians, perhaps dating back to his childhood in touring circuses.¹²¹ Lady Juliet Duff remembers that Nijinsky,

literally knew only two words of English: one the name of a London thoroughfare, which he called ‘Piccadill’ and the other was ‘Littler’, by which he meant [- -] Little Tich, an eccentric dancer, celebrated in London and Paris.... He wore boots with exaggeratedly long feet, and one of his turns was to bang his forehead on the floor from an upright position. ‘Littler’ Nijinsky would say inquiringly each time he arrived in London, and if his idol were

¹¹⁶ Nijinsky 1999, 158-159.

¹¹⁷ Henry Adams Bellows in *The Bellman* 13.11.1915. Bellows was another Harvard graduate, a businessman and the editor of the Minneapolis literary magazine. See Flannery 1995, 4-5.

¹¹⁸ See Järvinen 2014, esp. 29-37, 70, 100, 161, 238 on elitism and the strategies used to distinguish the Ballets Russes from variety stage entertainment.

¹¹⁹ William J. McNally in NYPLDC Nijinsky Clippings, unidentified [possibly *Minneapolis Star* 1916 if this is the playwright McNally]; also Redfern Mason for San Francisco Examiner [1916] in NYPLDC Nijinsky Clippings had his doubts, which he credited to Nijinsky's lack of masculine musculature in the leading role.

¹²⁰ E.g. Kirstein 1975, 148 suggest Nijinsky toned down his avant-garde attitudes; Acocella 2001, 96 calls the work "not a particularly original one". Garafola 1988/1989, 135 disagrees.

¹²¹ Nijinsky 1999, 126-127 on jesters; also Nijinska 1992, 28, 32, 41-43.

performing, seats would immediately be booked and he and Diaghilev would sit gazing spellbound; and one got just as much pleasure from watching their faces as from the antics of 'Littler' himself.¹²²

Music hall was also a venue for a new form of silent entertainment, cinema, and it is likely that Nijinsky had seen films at a time when former music hall comedians like Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin were becoming major stars.¹²³ Obviously, slapstick and pratfalls reigned supreme in silent, physical art forms, and the narrative of *Till* offered a perfect vehicle for Nijinsky to indulge in this kind of humour. *The New York Post* reported how:

The pranks and practical jokes [--] were cleverly acted by Mr. Nijinsky and his associates, who duly brought out the fun of the upsetting of things in the market place, the courting scene, the episode with the philosophers, and finally the tragedy of the gallows, which was most picturesque and gruesome.¹²⁴

In terms of the plot, *Till* was constantly being chased on stage as he upsets the stalls in the market-place and irritates his social superiors by imitating their mannerisms. Like the comic heroes of cinema and music hall, *Till* mocks and escapes punishment, hides and changes disguises in an action-packed spectacle that leaves him triumphant.

In addition, the exaggeration of the subjective space effectively turns all the characters in *Till* into visual caricatures of their social standing. The comic allowed for an exaggeration of gestures, partly imposed upon the dancers by what must have been cumbersome costumes. According to *The New York Times*:

¹²² Duff quoted in Buckle 1998, 304-305. Nijinsky 1980, 118-119 also claims that Nijinsky interrupted Harry Melville by insisting that "Little Tich, c'est un très grand artist. N'est-ce pas?"

¹²³ Nijinsky 1980, 331 claims Nijinsky loved "movies" but nothing more. A short article in *Portsmouth Daily Times* 25.9.1916 describes Nijinsky drilling dancers in a rehearsal with one of the female dancers imitating Charlie Chaplin, but as far as I know, this is the only reference to the comedian in conjunction with *Till*. A few months after the premiere, Nijinsky met Chaplin in Hollywood: *Los Angeles Examiner* 26.12.1916 quoted in Macdonald 1975, 205. However, Chaplin 1982, 191-193 is full of mistakes (e.g. he claims to have met Diaghilev, which whoever actually wrote the interview of Diaghilev in *The Literary Digest* 24.8.1929 also believes); cf. Buckle 1998, 454-455; also Levy 1990, 339. See also Franklin 2001 on Chaplin's various impersonations of Nijinsky.

¹²⁴ *The New York Post* 24.10.1916. The article is unsigned and does not match H.T. Finck's style.

As for the chorus movements, Mr. Nijinsky has furnished abundant proof of his genius as a stage director. There is almost none of what the average audience would call "dancing." It would be out of place as Nijinsky has conceived the ballet. Instead, the members of the company have been drilled in strange posturings and queer little movements that constantly pique the interest and remind you that you are in the midst of a mediaeval fantasy.¹²⁵

Another critic noted how Flora Revalles (in the role of the Chatelaine that Till courts) "does nothing but walk across the stage, yet her costume is so striking that all eyes center upon her during her brief stay."¹²⁶

The only character free to move as he liked was Till, described by H.T. Parker:

This Till grimaced with his feet, with his whole body, when he mocked the pious presence of the monks; wove the arabesques of the dance yet in and through them was derisive courtier when he pretended to woo the rich and high-placed dames; put a kind of counterpoint into his miming when he made a mock of pedantic learning. Then the Till, all the mantles of disguise thrown aside who danced in long swift lines in great arcs about the square, the elation of his power and victory, the happiness of a free spirit. Out of the face, the arms, the whole being of this Till spoke the jest that was more than half earnest when the rabble lifted him to deserved kingship. The miming of Till before the inquisitors was more within the ordinary scope of mimodrama with the twinges and twitches of dread in exact accord with the checked and tremulous leaps of Strauss's music.¹²⁷

The contrasts that Parker creates between the conventional and unconventional miming, and between the narrative sections and the dance of elation recalls how traditional ballet choreography associated danced sections with expression of feeling and mimed sections with the narrative.¹²⁸ In a work with an abundance of narrative, emphasis on pantomime was therefore to be expected.

¹²⁵*The New York Times* 24.10.1916.

¹²⁶ Morris Paul in *The Theatre* December 1916.

¹²⁷ H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916.

¹²⁸Smith 2000, esp. 6-18.

However, perhaps because of Nijinsky's reputation as an unconventional choreographer, the absence of conventional dancing does not seem to have caused as much consternation for the American critics as it had to their Western European colleagues. The critic of *The World* wrote that "while it contains little dancing and differs widely from the popular idea of a ballet [, *Till*] is charming picturesque and entertaining. It reveals Nijinsky as the thorough artist."¹²⁹ In contrast, Troy and Margaret West Kinney, writing some years after the fact, disliked Nijinsky's choreographies, accusing him of creating a "Danceless Ballet" which they deemed a "monstrosity".¹³⁰ For most contemporary critics, however, *Till* was simply "a pantomime, in which the story, with its living characters, is all, and the dancing is incidental only, and contributory, to the fable."¹³¹ Nonetheless, Hiram Kelly Moderwell, the author of this comment, describes *Till* fooling the professors by "read[ing] them a learned theme in dance, which they elaborate in pedantic and ludicrous fashion", and when night falls, the rabble "dance with *Till*", a scene interrupted by the law arresting the jester. Pantomime thus did not preclude (conventional) dancing, but it emphasised mimicry and gesture.

As was typical to the Russian 'new ballet' choreographers, Nijinsky believed that differences between staged epochs should be represented not simply by the costumes and setting, but by the dancing - the manner of being-in-space of a character.¹³² Yet, Nijinsky's understanding of what 'dancing' encompassed seems to have included what his contemporaries saw as mime or pantomime, and this was accepted as an indication of his originality – as part of his signature style, also evident in *Faune*, the other Nijinsky choreography in the American repertory. As is noted in the quotation from *The New York Times* above, Nijinsky was not satisfied with employing the kind

¹²⁹*The World* 24.10.1916. The article is unsigned.

¹³⁰ Kinney & Kinney 1936, 312. This is the second edition of the book, revised in 1924. For the authors, Pavlova was the best modern dance had to offer. However, some critics clearly were disappointed about the lack of conventional dancing in *Till*: e.g. J. H[erman]. T[human]. in *Cincinnati Enquirer* 7.2.1917, for whom it was in *La Princesse Enchantée* (i.e. the Blue Bird pas de deux) that "the dancing art of Nijinsky had a better opportunity to display itself" than in *Till*. On Thuman, see Osborne 2004, 188.

¹³¹*Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916.

¹³² Nijinsky in *Le Figaro* 14.5.1913; Fokine in *The Times* 6.7.1914.

of 'language of gesture' characteristic of his contemporaries: the movements of the dancers piqued the interest of the spectator precisely because they were “strange” and “queer” - atypical. This unfamiliarity is indicated in the title of H.T. Parker’s review, “The Strangeness of Till”.¹³³ Otherman Stevens of *The Los Angeles Examiner* said *Till* "made me wonder whether I had really been on the water wagon for six months."¹³⁴ This conventional language was described by Mikhail Mordkin in an interview to *The Literary Digest*, where he exemplified how to express the sentence “You have done me a grievous wrong and I hate you!”

First, the quality of hate is analyzed by master and pupil. [--] Hate is the direct opposite of love [- which -] means exhilaration. When love exhilarates, the body and the feet feel light.[--] Now, hate, being the opposite of love, must make heavy feet. [--] The feet however are only one item. The body must shoot the idea of hate across the stage into the auditorium in lieu of dialog and in lieu of the usual large reliance upon mobile features and facial expression. [-T-]he body is not inclined forward, towards the object of hatred. Neither is the body drawn back. [- Rather -] his hatred projects back into his head a spirit of strength in himself, and his body takes on upright rigidity.¹³⁵

The novelty of this new language of gesture was in the projection through body posture that sounds like Delsartian acting rather than the symbolic gestures of nineteenth-century ballet mime.¹³⁶ Nonetheless, there was an assumption that this 'language' was universal and self-evident - an assumption that Nijinsky's unconventional gesturing actually challenged.

Hence, it is not surprising that as their European colleagues had done with *Sacre*, several American critics argued that *Till* was also too complex to be appreciated at one go. Hiram Kelly Moderwell thought that:

¹³³*Boston Evening Transcript* 7.11.1916.

¹³⁴ Otherman Stevens in *The Los Angeles Examiner* 26.12.1916 quoted in Macdonald 1975, 205.

¹³⁵ Mikhail Mordkin in *The Literary Digest* 10.2.1912; paraphrased also in Caffin & Caffin 1912,194-195.

¹³⁶Smith 2000, 53-57, 97-123 on pantomime and what makes it intelligible; H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916; and *The Modern Dance Magazine* December 1916/January 1917 contrasted this kind of imitation with the Ballets Russes, particularly Nijinsky’s work.

It would be a little presumptuous to praise, not to speak of analyzing, Nijinsky's miming after a single view of it. It was a flash of vivid characterization, too absorbing to permit of critical attention. Moreover, it was so surprising that one had hardly recovered before the brief story was over.¹³⁷

By noting the work had been too absorbing for critical analysis, Moderwell perhaps wanted to excuse his own enthusiasm, writing as he did within hours of seeing the performance. Reviewing the first Boston performance, H. T. Parker agreed that "the repetitions of the week will doubtless clarify [the meaning of *Till*]",¹³⁸ and in his second review noted that the performance seemed "clearer".¹³⁹ However, as noted, not all reviews of the work were so positive, and in any case, reviews should not be equated with audience perceptions. Apparently, audiences, too, found *Till* disquieting - at least in Boston, which Henry L. Gideon found full of philistines:

Nijinsky's "Till" was impish, robustly humorous, convincingly human. He didn't look like a tone poem! And he didn't toe-dance either, so we *were* bewildered. Similarly puzzled we were by the flat, archaic beauty of "L'après-midi d'un faune." Though we had eyes, we saw not that one of the greatest living creative artists had opened for us the door to an art greater than any of which we had ever dreamed - an art primeval, eternal, unbearably beautiful. Nijinsky's "Faune" is just such an evangel of a new religion in art as was Debussy's "Pelléas." But, just as we sneered at "Pelléas" and clamored for the more obvious joys of "Trovatore," "Rigoletto" and "Thaïs," so we ignore "Till," gape at the "Faune," and triple-encore "Cléopâtre [sic]," that highly spiced Egyptian *fracassée à la Delibes*.

At present Boston likes Bolm better than it likes Nijinsky. The art of the latter is too titanic, too primeval, its language too new for easy or immediate popularity. But the language of Bolm is easy to understand, he is as Egyptian as Verdi's *Aïda*; he burns with Puccini passion; his feet are robust tenor.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ H.K.M. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916.

¹³⁸ H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 7.11.1916.

¹³⁹ H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916.

¹⁴⁰ Henry L. Gideon in *Musical America* 18.11.1916. Cf. how Macdonald 1975, 200 edits this article to turn it into an attack against Nijinsky. Gideon was a Jewish composer and Harvard-educated organist who taught at the Boston Conservatory of Music. See Dwyer-Ryan & Porter & Davis 2009, 150.

This observation is interesting because with it two important notions surface: firstly, that the (male music) critics considered themselves an élite and an avant-garde élite of sorts at that – which may explain why they refused to admit if they did not understand the work of a man heralded as a genius in his art form; and secondly, that although specific critics liked the work, it was by no means universally understood as an ‘easy’ piece, and that this was because of characteristics it shared with Nijinsky’s earlier works. Few of the critics elaborated on what made Nijinsky's choreography different or superior to other works in the repertory, possibly because most of them would only have seen *Faune* in the Massine rendering of 1916 that Nijinsky had forced the company to withdraw from the repertory; obviously its complexity had to do with how, like *Sacre*, *Till* had a large cast and a lot of people on stage simultaneously. Herbert Francis Peyser of *Musical America* found that “The movement is often too swift to evoke a proper appreciation and interest in some particular phases of incident,”¹⁴¹ which seems to connote suddenness in Till's appearances as well as the pacing of the events on stage. The movements of Till himself were, according to Olin Downes of the *Boston Post*, "as quick as thought, as elusive as the spirit of Till" and he described how the character "flashed to and fro" on stage.¹⁴²

This points attention to another peculiarity of the plot: the story-line of *Till* plays upon the *absence* of the hero. Nijinsky’s Till, like all of the characters, could be recognised through his clothing, but his pranks depended on various disguises. This meant that whenever Till appeared on stage, the audience had to notice his characteristic green clothing under the disguise, flaunted for only a moment before disappearing anew. Unlike the choreographer's previous works, *Till* was also more conventional in its staging (apparently, leading characters were placed in plain view of the audience) and in the importance given to the (comic) heroic actions of the title character (narrative). Till's character followed the leitmotif of the music, his presence audible for those who could recognise the orchestral theme. Yet, judging from the long list of characters in the programme notes, there seems to have been some events on stage designed to divert the attention of the audience during the short intervals Nijinsky needed to change Till’s disguise. Although from the critical responses we cannot know how

¹⁴¹H.F.P. in *Musical America* 28.10.1916.

¹⁴² Olin Downes in *Boston Post* 7.11.1916.

clear or confusing the stage action was for contemporary spectators, the periodic absence of the hero nonetheless created suspense and forced the audience to listen for the theme of Till and to look for his next prank on stage.

In terms of choreographic structure, Nijinsky seems not to have used the repeated stillnesses that disturbed spectators in his earlier works.¹⁴³ However, the numerous critics noting their surprise may mean the numerous personages onstage also did not pause every time Till appeared to conduct a prank. Since the narrative of the tone-poem was well known, Nijinsky may even have relied on the audience knowing where Till would next appear and in what kind of a disguise. Many of the actual pranks seem to have taken place in plain view of the audience and centre stage. The Chatelaines, for instance, had immense head-dresses that would have been immediately visible, and in contemporary photographs, they are shown on the "steps" of the cathedral in the backdrop.¹⁴⁴ Yet, based on the few descriptions of the staged events in the reviews, it was not always obvious where on stage Till was to emerge, adding to the sense of uncertainty for the audience. For example, *Indianapolis News* 30.1.1917 specifically noted how, with Nijinsky,

there is no artificially prepared entrance, focusing on him a forced attention. If, as last night, the ballet in which he first appears is a richly populous one, this mad elf may have been on the stage for several minutes before you are convinced of his presence.¹⁴⁵

Yet, another critic noted how the groups in which Till appeared were not obscured from view except once, "when the hero is before the gibbet, figures between him and the audience are allowed to obstruct a view of his characteristic miming at that point".¹⁴⁶ A similar device was also used in *Petrouchka* for substituting a dancer with a puppet, but this reviewer actually stressed the substitution in *Till* took place slightly later. Just as the Chosen Maiden in *Sacre* had been constantly surrounded during her dance of death, Till's distress is similarly half-hidden, which would also have added to the sense of anxiety as spectators lose sight of the character they want to follow. After all, despite the sporadic absence of Till, the action was chiefly concentrated on his

¹⁴³ Järvinen 2009, 46-48.

¹⁴⁴ *Vanity Fair* October 1916.

¹⁴⁵ *Indianapolis News* 30.1.1917.

¹⁴⁶ *The New York Times* 24.10.1916.

figure, to the extent that in the reviews he emerges as a solitary figure: most reviews do not comment on the actions – or rather, reactions – of the other characters on stage. Hence, we do not know, for example, what the Rich and Poor Citizens or One of the People actually did in the ballet.

Till is also an atypical hero for ballet, where the leading men were wont at least to fall in love with a pretty maid. Till does court the First Chatelaine, but gets rebuffed, which provokes his spite; and his only emotional attachment seems to be to his people, the street urchins, whom he defends by upsetting the stalls of the merchants and attacking the Apple Woman who refuses them food.¹⁴⁷Till, dressed in clothes so good he must have stolen them,¹⁴⁸ is the champion of the penniless and needy, who had never before been represented in this manner in an opera-house ballet.

Socialist Ethics for the Diamond Horseshoe

As H.T. Parker observed, *Till* was:

a mimodrama [- -] like no other in the Russian repertory, that courts a certain verity of illusion of time, place and circumstance; yet is impregnated with an everlasting symbolism; that under medieval [sic] guise masks intensely contemporary ideas; that takes its text from Strauss's music and from the folk-tale of Till and leaves Mr. Nijinsky thereon to preach the sermon; that fills the eye with pictorial illusion, the imagination with thick-coming fancies; the mind with thoughts that twinge. It is the handiwork of an intellect, invention and emotion that make Mr. Nijinsky more than the master-dancer of our time; it opens a new and fruitful field to mimodrama, it confirms the distinction that

¹⁴⁷ In contradiction of the reconstructors' claim in Hodson & Archer 1995, 45-46 (and Meinertz 1994(b), 15), there is no indication in any reviews that the Apple Woman would have been Till's sweetheart - on the contrary: see e.g. *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916 and 7.11.1916; *The New York Journal* 24.10.1916. *Indianapolis News* 30.1.1917 went as far as noting the work was refreshing for its "absolute independence from sex appeal".

¹⁴⁸ As H.K.M. noted in *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916.

marks the Russian Ballet as one of the driving artistic forces of our time. To an eighth art, almost, it goes forth.¹⁴⁹

Like Nijinsky's previous works, *Till* was thus somehow intensely of the present, even if its setting and topic were set far away in time and place. Parker, like many of his colleagues, spoke of *Till* as having a serious message hidden beneath the comic pranks of the title character. This tends to be the standard means by which the value of comic works is construed in artistic canons: the comic is not valuable in and of itself, only as a mask for something otherwise intolerable or dangerous.

However, before looking at what, then, was found to be the intolerable or dangerous message of *Till*, I would like to stress that the importance of the comic should not be underestimated as *only* a disguise. Leaving aside authorial intention and the positive response of the audience generated by the jocular pranks of Till, the subjective space and caricature-like costumes were both funny in themselves and reliant on the long tradition of comic irrationality and exaggeration - the familiar "topsy-turvy"¹⁵⁰ to which some critics also alluded in the reviews. The comic is only comic if recognised as such, and as noted, Nijinsky clearly drew on a generally undervalued theatrical tradition of slapstick and physical comedy to make his audiences laugh. In terms of the narrative of *Till*, the jester is duly executed by the powers-that-be, yet magically transformed into a spirit that continues to inspire - and tell his tale.

The comic also justified the affective focus of the ballet: *Till* was not only the first Diaghilev ballet in which serious contemporary ideas about social class and political equality were addressed, it was their first production in which the hero and the characters with whom the audience was supposed to feel affinity, were poor people of low social origin. Previously, ballet peasants were romanticised villagers living ideal lives and constantly dancing national dances in festive dress - they were "the usual peasants in silk shirts and corduroy trousers"¹⁵¹ with whom Anatoly Lunacharsky had contrasted the peasants of Nijinsky's *Sacre*. Although some pretty peasant girls like Giselle had their share of tragic roles, the lower class characters of ballet were

¹⁴⁹ H.T.P. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 7.11.1916.

¹⁵⁰ E.g. Morris Paul in *The Theatre* December 1916.

¹⁵¹ Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913, my translation.

generally comic, and aspired to improve their class status (usually through marriage); in contrast, Till taunted and ridiculed all who had possessions of any kind and never had a romantic interest.

In catering to the class of its audiences, ballet did not much differ from the dramatic stage: the first ‘tragedy in rags’, Georg Büchner’s *Woyzek*, written in 1837, was first performed only in 1913. Although there is no proof of Nijinsky knowing of the Büchner play, he would have had ample chance to know his Russian equivalents: since Social Realism had invaded Russian drama in mid-nineteenth-century, authors such as Aleksei Potekhin and Aleksei Pisemsky had written works with protagonists from the lower classes. This social realist tendency encompassed much of Russian theatre, especially outside the two capitals, and was never taken out of circulation by the later Symbolist, naturalist, or modernist movements.¹⁵²

In his long appraisal of Nijinsky’s new ballet, Hiram Kelly Moderwell pointed to how Till was an unlikely hero for an opera house ballet:

Least of the gutter rats of Brunswick, he represented all the miseries of the oppressed mediaeval proletariat. [- -] This Till, in short, is not the popular hero, which the Russian Ballet has been wont to show us – not the Sadko, hero of the merchants, whose glory it was to marry the daughter of a king. He is not a hero fit for the pomp of “The Firebird,” nor any Pétrouchka borrowed from Italian comedy, to be stylized into mural decoration. Till smells of garlic and the genius of the populace is his only greatness. This Volksstimmung, in the flesh and bone of the story, the Russian Ballet has never before given us. And it is Nijinsky’s greatest distinction, in the work which he staged last night, that he retained, in matter and in manner, the flavor of the original folk-tale. The work which he has done, has not justified us in expecting this. He has been to our imagination, either the finished technician or the “decadent” artist. We had supposed that the lively and objective tale of action lay outside the boundaries of his fancy.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Slonim 1963, esp. 69; Frame 2006, esp. 1-8 on theatre as building civil society, 160-161. I am grateful to the late Professor Richard Stites for pointing out Potekhin’s ‘comedies’ were not all funny.

¹⁵³ H.K.M. in *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916.

Although Moderwell's socialist sympathies are obvious, as he notes, Till was sufficiently surprising for the audience accustomed to Nijinsky's other roles to seem like a new dimension to his characteristic dancing genius, and one that had been missing from the repertory thus far.

In German Romanticism, and in the nationalist rhetoric that it gave rise to, geniuses were assumed to possess a spiritual link to the common people, and they could sublimate anything produced by the people into expressions of higher artistic truth.¹⁵⁴ In the Arts and Crafts movements everywhere in Europe, including Russia, the Medieval was the period of 'the common people' (das Volk), which usually denoted some kind of nostalgic idea of a national past that could, if allowed, cure the present of the ills of industrialisation. For example, in Russia, the Medieval represented the Russia that had existed before (and free of) European influences – it was the favoured period style of Slavophiles. The notion of the anonymous Medieval craftsmen unselfishly collaborating in the creation of masterpieces such as the Gothic cathedrals of Europe had led many Arts and Crafts artists to ideals of collective art works and the total work of art, but often the affinity with peasant crafts also joined with political ideas of art in the service of social reform.¹⁵⁵ In the United States, the Arts and Crafts movement took the form of the Craftsman style, and it is hardly coincidental that in advance of the second Ballets Russes tour, *The Craftsman* published a long piece on Nijinsky by the editor, Mary Fanton Roberts.¹⁵⁶

For the early twentieth-century modernists, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, the Medieval was an aesthetic inspiration for contemporary art, associated with aesthetic truth (simplicity, purity, spirituality) and with atemporality, works that stood the test of time. Only primitive cultures, Ancient Greece, and, of course, the present modernist art, could aspire to this kind of atemporal greatness. Techniques seen as

¹⁵⁴ Järvinen 2014, esp. 118-120.

¹⁵⁵ Notably, in the work of John Ruskin and William Morris. Cumming & Kaplan 1995, esp. 12-16. On German Expressionist fascination with the Medieval, see West 2001, esp. 46, 83-84, 143-149, 187; on the Russian Arts and Crafts movement, see Salmond 1996.

¹⁵⁶ Mary Fanton Roberts in *The Craftsman* October 1916. After graduating from the Albany Female Academy, Roberts made a lifelong career in journalism. For example, she created and edited *The Touchstone Magazine* and *Decorative Arts* - see Corley 2014.

Medieval, such as woodcuts, were brought back to contemporary artistic practice because these were seen as ‘authentic’ and ‘honest’ forms - and the curtain of *Till* was a reproduction of a German woodcut (the Owlglass).¹⁵⁷ In Russia, the influence of Medieval forms from *lubki* (popular prints) to old icons was extremely significant both in fine art and in contemporary theatre: Evreinov’s Ancient Theatre staged mystery plays, and Symbolist writers such as Andreyev, Blok, and Sologub placed works in Medieval settings.¹⁵⁸ *Till* may also have played on this connection between the Medieval period and ideas of (national) modernity.

Till was seen as filling a gap in the repertory of the Russian Ballet, something which Geoffrey Whitworth had demanded already in 1913, when he wrote that:

[Gordon Craig’s criticism] may at least remind us that there are worlds of feeling which the Russians have still to conquer, and that Nijinsky himself, though, indeed, he has shown us something of the dance under its first ritual inspiration, has as yet done nothing to restore to it that social significance which was once the secret of its appeal.¹⁵⁹

Social significance was certainly the thing Ballets Russes had most eschewed, if we do not count Nijinsky’s emphasis on the contemporary and the everyday in *Jeux* in particular as a precedent for tackling the political. In fact, social significance in ballet had always limited itself to praise directed at the patron of the art form – be it seventeenth-century aristocracy or the eighteenth-century Romantic artist. In aristocratic Russia, Realism and naturalism had bypassed ballet, its courts and sylphs were a world away from Chekhov’s plays or Gorky’s novels.

With *Till*, Nijinsky seems to have gravitated towards the social ethos of the Russian *narodniki* or Populists, who believed the common peasants of Russia preserved the nation’s true soul. *Till* can be seen as marking a change in Nijinsky’s way of thinking about ballet and art in general, a kind of a ‘second phase’ in his choreographic thinking, which differed from his earlier works not so much in what he did as how he

¹⁵⁷ See note 109 above.

¹⁵⁸ On Russian arts, see e.g. Gray 1971, esp. 97; Pyman 1994, esp. 115, 278; Slonim 1963, esp. 188-193; Segel 1993, 86-98. Also Järvinen 2014, esp. 202-208 on the influence of neo-nationalism on the *Mir iskusstva* movement, especially Diaghilev.

¹⁵⁹ Whitworth 1913, 103.

justified why he was doing what he did. This is what can be heard in the *Diary*, a book better read after Leo Tolstoy's *What is Art?* (1898) where Tolstoy claimed that great works of art were only great if they were accessible and comprehensible to everyone.¹⁶⁰ This was in direct opposition to the credo of Diaghilev and his friends from the *Mir iskusstva* days, who found their Symbolist ideas in ballet that escaped reality. Yet, when and how Nijinsky's aesthetic diverged from Diaghilev's is impossible to know. Nijinska mentions her brother as reading Tolstoy in 1910, but this was when virtually everybody was reading the works of the recently-deceased master.¹⁶¹ Rambert remembers a discussion with him aboard S.S. Avon in 1913 about Dmitri Merezhkovsky's article on Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in *Mir iskusstva*, but she does not tell what Nijinsky's attitudes then were.¹⁶² During the tour in the United States, Nijinsky befriended Dmitri Kostrovsky and Nikolai Zverev, spending much time with them talking about Tolstoyan ideals of the simple life, but their influence (if any) post-dates *Till*.¹⁶³ Similarly, we do know that Nijinsky is said to have taken a keen interest in society and that he appeared in charitable events and danced for war relief foundations, but this kind of altruism was common for public figures of his social standing and nothing much can be directly inferred from it.¹⁶⁴

It is also dangerous to read too much from Nijinsky's *Diary* into *Till*. In the *Diary*, Nijinsky's new doctrine on art marked a change in his attitude towards his earlier works and life in general, leading him to re-evaluate his previous achievements - a true Tolstoyan, he stamps both *Faune* and *Jeux* as due to Diaghilev's influence and proclaims he did not like works of art that have no moral aim.¹⁶⁵ He presents dance

¹⁶⁰ See Tolstoy 1959, esp. 56, 148, 176, 179, also 263-267. Also Tolstoy quoted in Bowlt 1982, 18.

¹⁶¹ Nijinska 1992, 312-323. This is something that escapes e.g. Acocella 1987, 66.

¹⁶² Rambert 1983, 72; Buckle 1998, 377. Nijinsky 1999, 113, 120 says he read Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* when he was eighteen. Dostoyevsky's character is closely linked with iurodstvo (madness for God).

¹⁶³ Kostrovsky was later diagnosed as suffering from epilepsy, which in the beginning of the century was treated in mental institutions (Nijinsky 1980, 305-306, 309; Ostwald 1991, 58) while Zverev went on to become quite successful, and even staged a version of the Dance of the Chosen Maiden in 1954 based on Nijinsky's and Massine's renderings. Hodson 1996, esp. x n17, xxii n74, 172-190 passim.

¹⁶⁴ *The World* 20.4.1916 "Nijinsky to Dance at War Relief Tableaux. His Only Unprofessional Appearance." Similarly, *New York Evening Mail* 20.10.1916 on Nijinsky performing with Lopoukhova in a Save-A-Home-Ball.

¹⁶⁵ Nijinsky 1999, 206-207; cf. Nijinsky 1991, 43, also 65-66.

and himself as the embodiment of his art form, able to bring about an understanding between people, and claiming, for example, that “there is no nation in dance”¹⁶⁶ as well as portraying himself later as a simple Russian peasant like those admired by Tolstoy for their expanses of feeling.¹⁶⁷ By comparison with Diaghilev, whose nationalism surfaced during the war in the form of anti-German sentiment (which led him to claim Nijinsky’s work had succeeded because of a ‘German conspiracy’),¹⁶⁸ Nijinsky, an exile from his homeland constantly plagued by his military status,¹⁶⁹ sympathised with the German people, probably because he really existed without a nation: a Polish *inorodts* Russian speaking in French about a ballet on a German theme premiering in America.¹⁷⁰

The success of Nijinsky’s *Till* seems so peculiar precisely because Nijinsky made the capitalist leisure-class audience of the Diaghilev Ballet cheer the triumph of an individual deriding the very values the American society was based on: money,

¹⁶⁶ Nijinsky interview by Isabel Goodwin (possibly the actress) in *Musical Courier* 7.12.1916; also NYPLDC Nijinsky Clippings R.C. Baily in *San Francisco Bulletin*. I have been unable to find reliable information on either of these authors.

¹⁶⁷ Nijinsky 1999, passim, esp. 59, 184 – however, 46, 76, 145 he also stresses he was not a socialist or a Bolshevik.

¹⁶⁸ Diaghilev to Stravinsky 20.11./3.12.1916 in Stravinsky 1997, ii:390-391; also Stravinsky 1984, 32-33. Diaghilev never again made a ballet to German music, with the exception of the plans in 1929 for a ballet with Hindemith that came to naught. In fact, after *Till*, the only artist from the German cultural sphere to take part in Diaghilev’s increasingly international company was Max Ernst for *Romeo and Juliet* (1926). Buckle 1993, 466, 469, 516-517, 536-537, also 519, 537 on Diaghilev’s rediscovery of Wagner in 1929.

¹⁶⁹ After leaving Russia in 1911 to escape the draft, Nijinsky's military status was not clear, and only aggravated by his recent internment in Austria-Hungary. In the beginning of the autumn season at the Metropolitan, he was again called to explain his status to the officials. Therefore, war was ever present in his life in a manner that set him apart from most of his colleagues, let alone Diaghilev, whose aristocratic status meant he was exempt from armed service under Russian law. *The New York Herald* 24.10.1916; *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 24.10.1916; *The World* 24.10.1916; and others. *The Diaghileff Ballet Russe Courier* (NYPLDC Diaghilev Scrapbook) made much of this, presenting Nijinsky as an honest man ready to take up arms for his country (the same collection of publicity materials also emphasised how the Ballet loved America to the extent that Revalles wanted to become a citizen.) Also Kobler 1988, 67-68; Matz 1984, 111 on Otto Kahn running interference for Nijinsky.

¹⁷⁰ Nijinsky 1999, 159 on wanting with *Till* to make the audiences feel the German people. He also noted the critics were Germans.

private enterprise and religion. In the narrative of the ballet, Till wreaks havoc with the stalls of the merchants, holds privileged ladies to ridicule, and jeers at priests and learned men, whose contemporary equivalents sat in the boxes of the Metropolitan Opera. This once more points to the importance of *Till* as more than just a mask for important ideas. Till acted like the fool in Medieval tales, which relied on parodic inversion. Every prank, no matter how subversive, in effect strengthened the normal order of things by taking the normal as the starting-point: parodic inversion could not be understood without knowledge of what was being parodied.¹⁷¹ However, Nijinsky's ballet could be praised without qualms because Nijinsky was a Russian dancer – and for the spectators, Russia was a country far more subject to criticism than America could ever be: an autocracy perceived as long overdue for a revolution.¹⁷² Regardless of how they were intended, the comic inversions of Till were easily read as a comment on German or Russian society, not as a critique of contemporary America, with its myths of egalitarianism, democracy and equal opportunities, and its own folk-hero outlaws from Jesse James to Billy the Kid.¹⁷³

The New York Journal 24.10.1916 compared the treatment of the Eulenspiegel legend by Strauss and by Nijinsky with an interesting emphasis, reflecting the newspaper's anti-elitist credo:

[Strauss's *Till*] is a devilishly modern attempt to interpret the ancient legend of the Middle Ages, the epic of the vagabond. [- -] Nijinsky has double modernism with modernism. Strauss attempted to recreate the heavy Teutonic prototype of the picaresque, and *Till* thus plays his pranks for the sheer joy of holding up respectability to ridicule and discomfort. Nijinsky has made *Till* the champion of the downtrodden, the hater of hypocrisy, whom hypocrisy duly brings to the gibbet. You see him flouting, in turn, the bourgeoisie, the priesthood and the social elect, and all with their own peculiar weapons. It is superb, but it is not Strauss – which, perhaps, does not very much matter. Nijinsky makes one understand what Paris became excited about.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Korhonen 1999, 214, 308-310.

¹⁷² E.g. Williams 1999, xiii-xiv.

¹⁷³ At least since the 1840s, American fortunes were amassed over generations and intellectual as well as financial capital concentrated on the small social elites. Pessen 1971; also Gilfoyle 2002, 281-282.

¹⁷⁴ *The New York Journal* 24.10.1916.

Nijinsky's interpretation was thus seen as inherently contemporary, again, much in the manner of his preceding works.

Yet, just as it is dangerous to take the authorial intentions Nijinsky expressed in his *Diary* as the guide for understanding *Till*, the journalists cited in this article also had their own agendas that influenced how they wanted to represent the only Ballets Russes work ever to premiere in America. Populism and socialist political leanings dominate amongst the most favourable reviews: the above-cited anonymous critic of *The New York Journal* basically found in the work the political anti-elitist ideals of the Hearst paper; Hiram Kelly Moderwell had ties to the labour union movements; Redfern Mason, writing for the flagship Hearst paper *San Francisco Examiner*, was later involved in union politics; and Robert Edmond Jones himself had been involved in the Paterson Pageant, an event supporting the striking silk workers of Paterson, New Jersey.¹⁷⁵ Another clear trend amongst the authors with positive takes on *Till* was their advocacy of African-American music and ragtime: Moderwell, Krehbiel, Mason and Van Vechten were all, in their different ways, passionate defenders of what most of their contemporaries would have condemned as a 'lowbrow' interest.¹⁷⁶ Not all critics found Nijinsky's ideas so praiseworthy: in *Musical America*, the paper with the closest ties to the organization that financed the Ballets Russes tours, Herbert Francis Peyser wrote that "the naïve suggestion of his [i.e. *Till*'s] perpetuity in the popular mind is a pitiful makeshift, an unconvincing compromise"¹⁷⁷ and he thought Jones's sets and costumes destroyed the "spirit of the original", meaning the Strauss music as he had imagined it.

Despite what the critics may have hoped, *Till* did not live long, its predicted lasting symbolism did not survive the war. The last performance of *Till* took place in Pittsburgh 21 February 1916 and the North American tour ended in Albany, New York on 24 February 1917, after which the company sailed to Spain for a season Diaghilev had organised in Madrid. On 7 March 1916, striking workers provoked

¹⁷⁵ On Mason, Lengyel & al. 1942, 468-469; on Jones, see May 1959, 313.

¹⁷⁶ As Lawrence Levine 1988, 221-222 points out, 'lowbrow' as a moniker for new forms of entertainment not only assumed an elevated (and class specific) 'highbrow' interest but shared the same biologist reasoning of racist rhetoric.

¹⁷⁷ H.F.P. in *Musical America* 28.10.1916.

unrest in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) that led to the abdication of Nicholas II on 15 March 1916. A fortnight later, on 6 April 1916, America entered the war on the side of the Allies.

Conclusions: Canonicity and Improvisation

To return to the questions of canonisation I presented at the introduction, why write on a work last performed nearly a century ago? Nijinsky's *Till* has been intimately tied with the choreographer's subsequent reputation. It was first written out of the expert narrative about the Ballets Russes as a commercial failure and as evidence of the choreographic author's madness; more recently, attempts at reconstruction have set it up as a masterpiece the worth of which rests largely on unfounded claims about authorial intentions.¹⁷⁸ For this article, I delved into the contemporary critical reception to find not only what was said of the danced element of the work but what was said of the work's significance. I was rather surprised to find that the critics wrote little about choreography or movement qualities but ascribed to *Till* a specific political message exceptional to dance at the time; and this required further work on these critics to determine whether their opinions would be of interest to academics today.

Nijinsky's alleged failure as a choreographer and as a director independent of Diaghilev worked to simplify the early hegemonic interpretation of the Ballets Russes as Diaghilev's troupe, in which Nijinsky was but a dancing star without creative or fiscal responsibility. But the second part of the myth is actually more interesting: what is the danger of the dancers improvising the last scene, why is this myth so crucial to degrading Nijinsky as a choreographer? Here, too, the principal reason may have been to give credit for Nijinsky's choreographies to others (Stravinsky and Roerich for *Sacre*, Debussy and Bakst for *Faune* and *Jeux*) by claiming that Nijinsky was

¹⁷⁸ See Järvinen 2014, 9-16 on the two opposing but essentially compatible hegemonic narratives about Nijinsky - the experts (like Grigoriev 1953 and Haskell 1955) vs. the fans (following Nijinsky 1980) - and how these formed the basis of a more recent, synthetic view (Buckle 1998 and Hodson 1996) that still ignores contemporary materials in favour of reminiscences. On the reconstructions, see e.g. Acocella 2001.

Diaghilev's puppet (disregarding the fact that the impresario dropped *Jeux* and *Sacre* from the repertory within three months of their first performances).¹⁷⁹ However, I suggest that this myth actually exemplifies the denigration of improvisation as a practice and thus acts to solidify the idea of art dance as the creation of an ideal work designed by a new author, the choreographer.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Nijinsky instituted the idea of the choreographic author demanding exactitude in the smallest detail of a work of dance, namely through his constant insistence that dancers only express the choreographer's design, realised also in the obsessive accuracy of his notation of *Faune*, which he himself advertised as his most important contribution to his art form.¹⁸⁰ In demanding 'accuracy' and authorship for the choreographer (rather than the dancer(s)), Nijinsky was following a trend in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century performance practice, which changed the ontology of these arts. The most important of these changes were first, the fixation of 'the work' (the dramatic text, the composed score, the choreographic sequence); and second, the emergence of substitute authors (the director, the conductor, the répétiteur) that 'guard' the absent author's intentions. The former shows in the exclusion of improvisation from the sphere of concert music and in denigration of virtuosity in theatrical arts in favour of preservation of authorial intention; the latter in the emphasis given to the conductor or the director as guardians of the (absent) author's 'original' intentions.¹⁸¹ Lynn Garafola sums up this manner of thinking when she writes: "But his [Nijinsky's] concern also implies that in the brief period since Fokine's departure from the company, his ballets had changed. What America was seeing was *the first copy of an original*, rather than *the original itself*."¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ See e.g. Nijinska 1992, 472-475. Critics who had praised Nijinsky's work and even some of those who had disliked them found Diaghilev's actions cowardly: see Jacques Rivière in *La Nouvelle revue française* 1.7.1914; Lunacharsky in *Sovremennik* July 1914 (reprinted in the August 1914 issue); Leonard Inkster in *The New Statesman* 4.7.1914; *The English Review* July 1914; also Blanche 1916, 62-63; Jane Molineau in *The Bellman* 30.12.1916.

¹⁸⁰ Nijinsky interviewed by H[erbert]. F[rancis]. P[eyser]. in *Musical America* 15.4.1916.

¹⁸¹ See Järvinen 2014, 87.

¹⁸² Garafola 1988/1989, 130. She goes on to claim today's versions fail because they are but a copy of a copy; similarly, e.g. Schouvaloff 1997, 10; see next fn.

In other words, the emerging idea of dance as authored by the choreographer, the person designing the (idea of) composed movement on stage, changed the twentieth-century discourse on dance so that choreographers predominantly relying on dancers' improvisation - notably, Mikhail Fokine - had to rewrite their practice to suit this new model of a 'fixed' work by a choreographic author.¹⁸³ The danger of improvisation was, as in the quote above, the danger of losing the (imagined) original, of losing the masterpiece that is the foundation of canons of art, and hence, losing the status of art (as opposed to entertainment). Yet, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, the notion of the copy underlies modernist ideas of an authentic artwork: the original focuses the discourse on simplified ideas of the artist's practice (the notion of the original genius) and ignores art as mimesis, process and experimentation that take years of effort.¹⁸⁴

For formalist dance discourse that strove to analyse dance in and of itself (usually meaning step sequences, spatial arrangement, and certain gestures), admitting to improvisation as a key element of choreography (or even as part of the choreographic process of creation) destroyed 'the work itself': if dancers improvise their parts in performance, each performance is different, so no work remains the same from one performance to the next, except in terms *extraneous* to the dance such as narrative or music. The idealist model on which formalism builds is one of absolutist hierarchy, not one of democracy: with improvisation, dance becomes the art of the dancer(s) rather than that of the choreographer; the idea of the choreography as 'the work' of dance is no longer simple and straightforward in the manner of the work of literature or painting; and consequently, dance cannot have a canon of (stable) masterworks and (original) geniuses; which in turn places the connoisseurship of the (formalist) expert into question. Thus, the problems Krauss iterates in the modernist discourse of art become exponentially worse. If Nijinsky, the idealist choreographer and original genius par excellence, suddenly relied on improvisation in *Till*, this had to be a failure of that particular absolute, a sign of his madness, and/or of the one, specific work (*Till*) rather than works of dance *in general*.

¹⁸³ This shows in the contradictory statements of Fokine 1961, e.g. 93 cf. 151.

¹⁸⁴ Krauss 1981, esp. 53-54, 58. See also e.g. Burt 1998; Carter 1998 on how "the original" or "the authentic" are problematic notions in dance.

I wish to stress the point that the denunciation of *Till* was an issue larger than the personal vendettas of Diaghilev and his collaborators, because similar power relationships are at work with each new dance work: the underlying idealist and modernist assumptions of the discourse focus attention on works not because of their intrinsic value but because of how the art market relies on saleable, copyrightable works by authors whose proper names simplify creative processes and help us make sense of the world. This discourse reflects a deep uncertainty about the status of dance as an art form worthy of the same kind of critical attention as other arts, which often results in either denial or glorification of ephemerality of performance practice. Yet, contemporary dance (and performance more generally) have struggled to break with idealist thinking since at least the 1980s, introducing score-based and process-oriented works that need not retain exact step sequences - works where the choreographer is more a facilitator for the emergence of new ensemble work or where authorship is shared. Today, improvisation is an acknowledged working method and a key element in numerous dance techniques from Authentic Movement to contact improvisation.

To answer the question implicit in any dance history - why is any of this relevant today? - the old explanations for *Till's* alleged failure reveal another change in our understanding of dance. In terms of the lasting hagiography of Diaghilev and his company, Nijinsky could now be accused for not first teaching dancers improvisation in a structured manner, but in 1916, this would have required inventing a technique to do so (and this, as noted, in three weeks, but geniuses are wont to do the impossible). But for me, it is actually more interesting that for the perfectionist, idealist choreographer that Nijinsky seems to have been, asking dancers to improvise would certainly have been a step in a new - or rather, old - direction. Improvisation was still standard practice in ballet choreography at this time, at least when it came to star dancers. Nijinsky had been accustomed to working out his own roles with the choreographer, but as a star, he was also accustomed to a degree of attention never given to the corps-de-ballet dancers, who may have received no more than a vocal instruction as to what to do.¹⁸⁵ Thus, the dancers Nijinsky worked with would not have had his experience in negotiating their parts, *particularly* not with Nijinsky

¹⁸⁵ On Fokine's manner of working, see Karsavina 1981, 287; Rambert 1983, 61, 78; Nijinska 1992, especially 286, 466.

himself, who had recently re-rehearsed *Faune* for the company. However, even given Nijinsky's obsessions with accuracy, it would be tenuous to claim the dancers' imperfect execution the cause for his dissatisfaction with *Till* - if anything, the choreographer must have felt grateful that the company worked so hard on what was, for the Ballets Russes, a large and complicated work given very little rehearsal time.

In the end, *Till* did prove a successful mixture of avant-garde elements and business-as-usual: as noted, it was the only one of Nijinsky's choreographies not received with outrage. Although the Ballets Russes in 1916 was not the ballet company it had been, American critics clearly thought Nijinsky had made a difference as a *régisseur* as well as a ballet master, and they were honoured to see the premiere of what, in 1916, was seen as the 27-year-old choreographer's *latest* work. Although *Till* created a fantastic, artificial world on stage, this staged reality was read as commentary on social justice - a ground-breaking change in how ballet signified, and one that may have further alienated Diaghilev and his *miriskusstniki* friends, who had started off as opposing the Russian Realist demand for art to serve political and social reforms. In terms of later discourse, such "message" further alienated *Till* from the formalist glorification of dance as abstract "pure dance". But precisely this politicization of dance is why *Till* may actually have merits beyond its choreographer's cult status: as Mark Franko has discussed, after the First World War, many American modern dancers aligned themselves with socialist ideas.¹⁸⁶ In the words of Hiram Kelly Moderwell, "Lessing and the purist can go hang"¹⁸⁷.

Having said this, the fact that we know so little about Nijinsky's thinking about *Till*, of the rehearsal process of the work, or of the choreographic composition (steps, movement qualities and patterns, pacing, etc.) encourages speculation and creates the danger of reading into *Till* the Tolstoyanism of the *Diary*. Political ideologies are hard to decipher when all that remains of a silent art are a few drawings, photographs, reviews and reminiscences. Subtle nuances can make a world of difference: for example, when *Till* gets executed for his pranks, we would need to know whether *all*

¹⁸⁶ Franko 2002.

¹⁸⁷ *Boston Evening Transcript* 24.10.1916. As an aside, it is hard to imagine a European critic using a colloquial expression like "can go hang" in a review discussing musical theory and the Russian Ballet.

the characters grieved for him, or only the poor who were deprived of their hero – the former would have fitted Tolstoyan rhetoric far better than the latter, more socialist composition. The reviews, then again, reflect the political views of the critics and newspapers to which they wrote rather than any authorial intention by the choreographer.

What is lamentable about how *Till* has thus far figured in discussions on the Ballets Russes is not so much the position it is given in the Nijinsky myth as a precursor to his madness. Rather, it is the hagiography, which has resurfaced in the form of reconstructions, and which tends to assume all his works unquestionable masterpieces even when, as I hope to have shown here, little can actually be said of either the choreographic or the rehearsal process or even of the end result. With a work like *Till*, this hagiography of the genius author obscures what we, today, could find of import in a past work, namely its focus on topical comedy, political message, and creation of staged space to express these interests. If anything, in the light of contemporary materials, *Till* seems a parallel development to German Expressionist dance, a work full of promise but little actual influence.

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