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BALLET

ADESOLA AKINLEYE
EDITOR/CURATOR

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4

Portrayals of Black people from the African diaspora in Western narrative ballets

Sandie Bourne

Introduction

Non-western cultures, such as ancient Egypt and India, have inspired European ballet repertoire, as shown in the choreographic narrative works of Marcus Petipa (1818–1910) and Michel Fokine (1880–1942). In this chapter, I investigate the representation of non-Western people in ballet, with a particular focus on the portrayal of Black people from the Africa diaspora in narrative ballets dating from the seventeenth century (Bloechl 2015). Although existing as characters, Black dancers have historically been absent from the stage in established Western ballet companies (Bourne 2011). Calls for greater diversity in the field are being answered as seen in prominent press coverage of Black ballerinas (Jennings 2012; Mackrell 2008; Marsh and Goldhill 2012). Despite the increased focus and greater numbers joining mainstream companies, underlying issues of casting discrimination, stereotyped representations and exoticism continue to be perpetuated in classical ballet performances.

A historical inaccuracy is often circulated that Black people did not participate in ballet prior to the mid-twentieth century. One reason for this is that Black people were more often associated with traditional dance styles, such as traditional African dances, or vernacular styles such as jazz dance from the United States (Martin 1970: 178–79; Stodelle 1988: 319). Dance scholars have documented that, prior to the 1930s, trained Black dancers were physically absent from the ballet stage (Perpener 2005: 69). I argue that ideas about the Black body, and by extension Black people, were represented in ballet from its very origins in the seventeenth century. For example, White dancers performing in ‘blackface’ or ‘brownface’ make-up were, and still are, a standard feature of many ballet classics, including *La Bayadère* (1877), *Cléopâtre* (1909), *Petroushka* (1911) and

Schéhérazade (1910). These ballets, and the racialization and colorism evident in their use of makeup, are discussed in detail below.

The representation of Black people in narrative ballets is investigated through analysis of key historical points. Russian choreographers Petipa and Fokine created ancient Egyptian and Middle Eastern-themed ballets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first section of this chapter explores how King Louis XVI adopted elements of Black culture through his creative performances in ballet. The second section investigates the creation of the 'exotic' in ballet, examining its links to colonial exploration and the ideologies of race and empire. The third section examines early European portrayals of Black people on the ballet stage. The final section examines how non-Western narrative classical ballets represent Black people in *The Pharaoh's Daughter* (1862), *Cléopâtre* (1909), *La Bayadère* (1877) and *Schéhérazade* (1910). Twenty-first century dance reviews of Western companies that performed these ballets are explored to investigate whether seventeenth-century stereotype Black character roles were still staged.

King Louis XIV's appreciation of ancient Egyptian culture

Dance historians have documented how the ballet repertoire from the seventeenth century was inspired by ancient Greek and Roman civilizations (Adair 1992: 83; Kirstein 1984: 29; Lee 2002: 27). These early empires stretched from Western Europe as far as Scotland to north Africa, spanning present-day Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. It is evident that early cultural interactions, especially within north Africa, were initiated by conquerors such as the Greek King Alexander the Great, who occupied Ancient Egypt in 332 BCE (Ofori-Amoah 2019: 34). Missing from these standard narratives are the symbolic traces of African cultures in the early ballet, in the form of ancient Egypt.

King Louis XIV established and institutionalized ballet with his formation of the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661. As a 15-year-old boy, Louis XIV performed the role of the 'Sun King' in *Ballet de la nuit* (1653) by Jean-Baptiste Lully. The boy king adopted the nickname and was referred to as such in the royal court (Bernal 1991: 177; Lee 2002: 68). Dance historian Carol Lee explains: 'Just as Egyptian rulers of antiquity had identified themselves with the sun, so too, from this time on Louis embraces the idea that he was "Le roi soleil," the Sun King who was the light, the center, the energy source of France' (2002: 68). The Sun King is associated with many ancient gods: the Romans called their sun god Apollo, while the Egyptians had Ra or Re. According to historian Martin Bernal, during Louis XIV's reign, 'there was an issue of whether the Moderns were now morally and artistic superior to the Ancients' (1991: 177). Bernal's comments may explain Louis XIV's behavior: by

naming himself a sun king, he demonstrated his affinity with ancient religions and divine power. Bernal's (1991: 454) research also reveals what would now be considered the 'cultural appropriation' of the Egyptian gods by ancient Greece.

It is ironic that King Louis XIV idealized the supremacy of an ancient African god, although mediated through Greek symbolism, in contrast to the usual Eurocentric association of ballet and Whiteness. Louis XIV's early performances and his insistence on being known as the Sun King reinforces perceptions of ancient Egypt as a powerful civilization, whose ideology he wanted to channel. Although Louis XIV's early recognition of African culture was adopted in the royal court and in ballet, the next section investigates how and when Black people were incorporated into nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ballet narratives through 'exotic' cultures that are still performed today.

Creating the exotic in ballet

Unravelling how Black people came to be represented in narrative ballets involves unpacking the concept of exoticism. 'Exotic' refers to the unfamiliar and the exhilarating, from far-away foreign countries (Stevenson 2010: 614) such as those explored by Christopher Columbus in the fifteenth century. In the European imagination, exotic cultures often meant people from the 'Orient' (Asia) or the African diaspora. I contend that the idea of the exotic was foundational to the creation of some of the most popular narrative ballets, such as *La Bayadère* and *Schéhérazade*.

During the nineteenth century, the Europeans' preoccupation with exoticism had a profound influence on the circulation of foreign cultural artefacts. Impresario Lincoln Kirstein (1984) describes how choreographers thrived on adopting other cultures as inspiration for their narrative ballets:

Great international exhibitions began to be organized in Paris and other European capitals after 1850. Choreographers saw exotic provincial and colonial dances. They could increase authentic borrowings, since designers had gained more knowledge from scientific archaeology and research in unfamiliar architectural styles.

(Kirstein 1984: 26)

Although choreographers were stimulated by exotic themes, as suggested by Kirstein, these were only adaptations of cultural dances performed through interpretations of movements, gestures and costumes (Shay 2008: 129), rather than traditional dances modified for the stage. In the 1830s and 1840s, many romantic ballets were influenced by 'exotic' cultures. As Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell (2010: 377) note, this

parallel[s] the vogue for exotic, escapist fantasy which dominated Romanticism in all the other arts [...] Romanticism was a fascination with the exotic, which was figured through gypsy or oriental heroines and the use of folk or national dances from 'foreign' cultures (such as Spain, the Middle East, and Scotland).

Characters and themes evoking unusual locations brought contrast to the portrayal of ethereal lightness in the classical ballet technique. Tim Scholl (1994: 23) explains how key countries influenced the Russian ballet repertoire, noting that: 'The usual "stylization" of Russian nineteenth-century ballets bordered on exoticism, rather than authenticity. Locales such as India, Spain, and ancient Egypt offered visually arresting scenery, provocative costuming, and a measure of local color in the music and the choreography.'

It is important to note that although ancient Egypt is in Africa, in the 1900s Europeans often considered it part of the Orient (Dickinson 2017: 41).

Despite being a European country, Spain was also considered an exotic setting for narrative ballets, due to its history of 800 years of Islamic rule by North African Moors: 'Spanish dance is also a point of contact between eastern and western dance. [...] it is a complex art of spectacle and tradition' (Cass 1999: 31). The Spanish influence extended to choreographers such as Petipa, who toured and studied in Spain from 1843 to 1846 (Craine and Mackrell 2010: 348), leading him to create many Spanish-themed ballets, including *Carmen et son toréro*, *La Perle Séville*, *L'Adventure d'une fille de Madrid* and *La Fleur de Grenade*. *Don Quixote* (1869) is another of Petipa's iconic ballets. Twentieth-century Ballets Russes dancer/choreographer Léonide Massine (1896–1979) was also influenced by Spanish culture in his creation of ballets like *Las Meninas* or 'The Maids of Honor' (1916) and *Le Tricorne* (1919) (Garafola 2005: 277; Lee 2002: 258). However, the presence of a Spanish-Islamic influence is most evident in Fokine's character of the Moor in *Petroushka* (1911), set in a Russian fair (analysed later in the chapter).

Indian culture was another major influence on choreographers during the nineteenth century, mainly through Indian dancers/*bayadères* touring in Europe. Robert Greskovic (2005: 361) notes that this inspired the 'Romantic era tastes for exotic local color and for sensuality entwined with chasteness'. India became culturally popular and artistically influential in all forms of Western art, inspiring works such as Filippo Taglioni's *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* (1830), Petipa's *La Bayadère* (1877) and Fokine's *Le Dieu Blue* (1912) (Hanna 1988: 32–33). However, the idea of and representation of the Orient was created and fixed by the European imagination, as Edward W. Said (1978: 63) analyses:

(RE:) CLAIMING BALLET

The Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.

Said's definition can apply to choreographers such as Taglioni, Petipa and Fokine, who incorporated the exoticism of the Orient in ballets by representing aspects of its culture. However, when a choreographer selects only certain aspects of a culture, the risk is that a 'fixed' stereotype will be created, which may not change along with the social-political climate or may even convey derogatory misconceptions.

The European cultural mania for ancient Egypt similarly increased with Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt and Syria. As Kirstein (1984: 162) notes, 'Egypt had been a normal source for opera and tragedy since translations of the Bible, Plutarch, and Shakespeare. Napoleon's Egyptian campaign (1799) precipitated scientific archaeology, collection, and publication by the great European museums.' Ancient Egypt's influence on ballet is captured in Petipa's *The Pharaoh's Daughter* (1862) and Fokine's *Cléopâtre* (1909). These ballets will also be discussed in the following sections in relation to their representations of Black people.

Many of the exotic narrative ballets were love stories involving characters from the Orient or the Middle East, and these were often performed by White dancers in blackface Bellow (2015: 161). In this way, choreographers exerted their power to control who the audience was watching: using White dancers representing 'people of color' on stage still privileged White dancers and meant that Black people effectively remained unseen on stage. While Black people of various skin-tones existed in both regions, choreographers either subconsciously or consciously depicted the main exotic character as 'brown/light skinned', consequently making them more palatable to the audience. Petipa and Fokine's racial choices in these early productions were the beginnings of 'colorism' in ballet (Hunter 2007: 237). Margaret Hunter's (2007: 237) theory of 'colorism' explains this preference for certain skin shades: 'Hidden within the process of racial discrimination is the often overlooked issue of colorism. Colorism is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts' (Hunter 2007: 237).

Colorism would later affect how Black dancers were chosen for character roles in ballet. Researching Black ballet dancers in the United States, Nyama McCarthy-Brown (2010: 385) explains: 'I found few leading light-skinned swans and even fewer leading dark-skinned ones. Color casting has riddled the African American community throughout the American history.' From the countries and themes that Petipa and Fokine included in their narrative ballets, colorism is demonstrated through the blackface/brownface makeup as a conscious part of 'authenticating' the racialization of characters' roles.

European interest in the so-called exotic cultures inspired choreographers to incorporate this element into new narrative ballets. Craine and Mackrell (2010: 130) highlight a trend that integrated 'more ornamental design. Extravagantly detailed scenery reflected the period's love of spectacle, with ballets taking place in rajahs' palaces, temples' (2010: 130). Ballets created, interpreted and reflected the European visions of the exotic in their costume and stage designs.

Some of Fokine's early set and costume designs were created by Russian painter Léon Bakst (1866–1924), who worked with the Ballets Russes from 1909 to 1921. Davinia Caddy (2012: 11) notes how the Ballets Russes used exoticism to promote the company as 'a calculated and commercial strategy', which 'helped entrench the troupe's foreign status whilst satiating a deep-desire amongst the French for all things Oriental'. With the inclusion of non-Western exotic narrative ballets, the industry began to thrive commercially through its exploitation of the 'other'. Choreographers like Petipa and Fokine used blacked-up White dancers to create an illusion, thus engaging in cultural appropriation. Consequently, through the racialization of exotic cultures, Black people began to be represented in narrative ballets. The next section considers how they were portrayed.

Portrayals of Black people in ballet

The desire to portray Black people in theater or in other social performances like the French courts was a result of social-political factors and the racialization of the 'other'. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997: 239) notes, the process

began with the sixteenth-century contact between European traders and the West African kingdoms, which provided a source of black slaves for three centuries. Its effects were to be found in slavery and in the post-slave societies of the New World.

Ian Smith similarly describes the representation of Black people during this period of cross-cultural exchange:

Contingent on the changing ideas concerning race, however, are the multiple theatrical techniques of racial representation employed from the sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. As theatrical techniques changed and different materials were used for racial simulation, the visual spectacles of blackness took on new emphases and meaning that, in turn had a direct impact on the audience's perception of the black body.

(Smith 2014: 101)

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From the sixteenth century onwards, early representations of Black people in theater involved White actors wearing dark make-up or 'blackface', as in Shakespeare's play about a blackamoor, *Othello* (1604) (Bourne 2018; Thompson 2001: 115). Virginia Mason Vaughan (2005: 93) comments that, 'Othello is undoubtedly the most famous role that required an actor to perform in blackface.' She also notes the impact of racial stereotypes through blackface:

The white actor in blackface may speak and act in ways that reinforce stereotypes about black people, but because he is not the thing he pretends to be and the audience knows it, his gestures and attitudes suggest that his identity is adopted, not inherited.

(Mason Vaughan 2005: 4)

Blackface in theater was possibly one of the first examples of Black people being represented on the stage, although through a process of racial stereotype illusions. However, the first Black actor to perform the lead in *Othello* was African American Ira Aldrige, at the Covent Garden Theatre in London in 1833 (Lindfors 2010: 137). Blackface also occurred in ballet during this period, as music historian Olivia Bloechl (2015: 89) notes: 'during the reign of Henri IV, a Ballet des Nègres was danced in 1601', which implies historical links with the use of blackface performed in the French courts of King Henri IV and his grandson, Louis XVI. As Bloechl notes:

French nobility and royalty sometimes dressed in blackface for court musical theatre, adopting both high- and low-ranking personas [...] In the eighth entry of the ballet for *Les Noces de Pelée et de Thetis* (1654), the young king danced this role in blackface and feathers.

(Bloechl 2015: 89)

Early representations of Black people performed in blackface or racially caricatured in the royal courts became fashionable. Consequently, this trend was replicated in ballet narratives and has remained a tradition that continues in some European ballet companies today. The following section summarizes racially stereotyped character roles and blackface, and analyses how traditional ballet narratives are perceived in today's multicultural society.

Nineteenth-century narrative ballets and Black people

Narrative repertoire from the nineteenth century – especially the Romantic era – clearly shows that alleged 'exotic' cultures were a creative influence. In some of

these ballets, the choreographers racialized the characters by blacking up White dancers. This practice extended into the early twentieth century in the works of the Ballets Russes, as Juliet Bellow (2015: 161) notes. European choreographers used their position of White privilege to portray racial stereotypes on the ballet stage, reinforcing dominant power relations towards people who had been colonized. Homi Bhabha (1996: 199) argues that ‘colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible’. Bhabha’s theory can be applied to show how choreographers fixed a ‘stereotyped reality’ of ‘exotic’ cultures in the ballet repertoire.

Russian choreographers portrayed Black people in Egyptian-themed ballets such as Petipa’s *The Pharaoh’s Daughter* (1862) and Fokine’s *Cléopâtre* (1909). Black people were also portrayed as slaves (usually in the corps de ballet) or as Moors, and were often characterized as erotic or sexualized (Bourne 2018; Cowart 2008: 33; Nava 2007: 28). Examples of ballets that include slaves are Petipa’s *The Pharaoh’s Daughter* (1862) and *La Bayadère* (1877) or Fokine’s *Cléopâtre* (1909) and *Schéhéhérazade* (1910). Irina Novikova notes that Fokine’s *Petroushka* (1911) ‘presented a primitive blackamoor, sensuous, stupid, and even capable of violence’ (Novikova 2017: 46). Novikova’s description echoes negative Eurocentric representations of Black men investigated by Hall (1997: 263). More research is needed to fully compare the representations of Moors/blackamoors to those of Black slaves in ballets, a situation complicated by identities of White dancers in blackface.

The next section investigates how non-Western narrative classical ballets represent Black people in *The Pharaoh’s Daughter* (1862), *Cléopâtre* (1909), *La Bayadère* (1877) and *Schéhéhérazade* (1910). By examining dance reviews, this section also explores how twenty-first century Western ballet companies portray seventeenth-century Black character roles.

Egyptian themes and the Russian ballet

Ancient Egypt inspired Petipa to choreograph *The Pharaoh’s Daughter* (1862), and almost half a century later inspired Fokine to create *Cléopâtre* (1909). Deborah Jowitt discusses these two ballets and their ‘metamorphosis in exotic roles’ (1992: 105). She notes that both were inspired by the French poet, novelist and critic Théophile Gautier’s (1811–72) stories of the Orient. Some of the costumes from Petipa’s *The Pharaoh’s Daughter* were reused for *Cléopâtre*, and both ballets were performed at the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg (Jowitt (1992: 105). These ballets will now be discussed with reference to their representation of Black people.

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The Pharaoh's Daughter (1862)

Petipa choreographed *The Pharaoh's Daughter* for the Italian ballerina Carolina Rosati's (1826–1905) last performance before her retirement from the Imperial Theatre. Dance historian Lynn Garafola (2007: 154) notes that the ballet was inspired by Gautier's short story 'The Romance of the Mummy' (1857) and responded to wider interest in 'Egypt's fabulous monuments and the building of the Suez Canal'. The love story is about an English archaeologist Lord Wilson and the pharaoh's daughter, Aspacia. Lord Wilson and his servant John Bull are caught in a sandstorm and take shelter inside a pyramid. They smoke opium and hallucinate about the mummies coming alive. Lord Wilson is transported back in time as an Egyptian man named Taor, who falls in love with the pharaoh's daughter Aspacia (Craine and Mackrell 2010: 350). Ironically, the eroticism of the ballet is based on the fantasy of an elite White man who takes drugs and transforms himself into a 'primitive and free' African Egyptian man lusting after an African woman. The plot resembles aspects of the orientalism of *La Bayadere*, with its drug-induced hallucination and White man's love for an Indian temple dancer.

Petipa's *The Pharaoh's Daughter* became one of his first major successes, which led to his promotion to second ballet master in the company (Ezrahi 2012: 267). Some of the dancers wore brownface and blackface due to the ballet's setting in ancient Egypt. The only representations of Black people in this African-inspired ballet were as slaves. Furthermore, colorism was evident in the different shades of makeup worn. Aspacia's Nubian slave Ramze wore brownface, compared with the corps de ballet dancers, who wore much darker makeup. The representation of Black people as having lower status reflects the Eurocentric perceptions of anthropologists and scientists at the time, who defined and fixed the inferiority of the 'negro' within society (Cohen 1999: 182).

In Russia in 2000, the Bolshoi Ballet performed Pierre Lacotte's version of this ballet. The ballerina Maria Alexandrova danced in brownface as Ramze, Aspacia's Nubian slave. Zoe Anderson describes how Lacotte amended Petipa's version:

Lacotte's designs also evoke the grand spectacle of the original, with palaces, temples and forest scenes. The women wear tutus with 'Egyptian' detailing, such as lotus patterns around the skirts. Shockingly, the production also features blacked-up 'slave' characters: some corps de ballet dancers wear caricatured blackface, white Aspacia's servant Ramze is painted brown.

(Anderson 2015: 303)

The continued use of blackface in *The Pharaoh's Daughter* is disturbing and racist, considering that the practice was banned from television in the late 1970s in both

Britain and the United States (Bourne 2005: 5; Lott 1993: 73). It is shocking that Lacotte perpetuates the degrading representation in 2000. Whatever the reason, his actions remind viewers that Eurocentric racial stereotypes are still considered acceptable in Russian and French ballet establishments in the twenty-first century.

Cléopâtre (1909)

Fokine's first Egyptian-themed ballet was the *Egyptian Nights* (*Une Nuit d'Égypte*), which was staged at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg in 1908. This ballet was revised, lengthened and renamed *Cléopâtre* for Paris in 1909 and performed by the Ballets Russes (Jowitt 1992: 105). Bakst reworked the costume and set designs for *Cléopâtre* and Deborah Jowitt (1992: 118) notes the reaction to his designs, in which 'its colonnade of pharaonic statues' added to an aura of authenticity in the ancient Egypt theme.

Cléopâtre is an ill-fated love triangle between the Queen of Egypt and two young slaves, Ta-Hor and Amoun. Amoun falls in love with Cleopatra and, after spending the night with her, poisons himself to quell his betrayal of Ta-Hor. The Russian prima ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881–1931) performed the role of Ta-Hor and Fokine played Amoun. Fokine and the other dancers wore brown body paint (McQuillen 2013: 194), which created a stronger illusion of Blackness than costume would have conveyed. Once again, Black people were represented only as slaves in this ballet. Cleopatra is of African descent, but portrayed by White ballerinas. Cleopatra's character is an exotic, sexualized female, who makes love to a Black slave, hence Fokine racialized Black people. This process is a White gaze fantasy; as Hall (1997: 262) explains, 'whites often fantasized about the excessive sexual appetites and prowess of Black men', so the Black body becomes a 'racialised gaze' (Hall 1997: 274). The Black male character Amoun is also eroticized, a feature found in multiple Fokine ballets, as Bellow (2015: 137) discusses:

Like *Schéhérazade* and *Le Spectre de la rose*, *Cléopâtre* presented the male body as an erotic spectacle and an object of desire for the ballet's female characters (and even more crucially, for the men and women seated in the audience).

Bellow suggests that erotic perceptions of non-White characters were intentionally encouraged, especially in *Cléopâtre*, where Black people are stereotypically sexualized. She further confirms Fokine's intentions, in that *Cléopâtre* 'featured male and female characters who both possessed, and offered their bodies to, a desiring gaze' (Bellow 2015: 137).

In April 2001, the Houston Ballet premiered English director Ben Stevenson's \$1.2 million production of *Cleopatra* at London's Sadler's Wells (Schifferes 2001).

(RE:) CLAIMING BALLET

Two aspects of this adaptation were unique. First, it introduced a new storyline about how Cleopatra's brother Ptolemy and his friend Pothinus were trying to take her throne. Second, the role of Cleopatra was performed by African American principal ballerina Lauren Anderson. Stevenson's decision to cast a Black ballerina as Cleopatra in the twenty-first century was honorable, as it was a conscious decision to cast a Black dancer rather than blacking up a White one. However, the ballet centers on an exotic narrative in which Africa is interpreted through European eyes and stereotypes. Perhaps it is time to revise classical ballet's exotic narrative repertoire in a more modern and culturally informed way, if only to preserve some of the ballets.

Black slaves in Middle Eastern ballets

Black people also featured in Middle Eastern ballets such as Petipa's *La Bayadère* (1877) and Fokine's *Schéhérazade* (1910). Both will be analysed briefly here, with reference to their use of blackface, and to explore the continuation of this practice in present-day productions.

La Bayadère (1877)

La Bayadère was first performed by the Bolshoi Theatre in St Petersburg in 1877. Set in historical Royal India, it tells the love story of Indian temple dancer Nikiya and the warrior Solor. The High Brahmin is also in love with Nikiya, but she rejects him, which leads to her tragedy. Although the ballet is set in exotic India, it lacks cultural authenticity, building on 'the Parisian fascination with the exotic and reinforced stereotypes of the Orient' (Prickett 2018: 285). The perpetuation of negative stereotypes is starkest in the representation in Act II of Black children who perform in blackface. Garafola describes this scene:

There were innumerable divertissements, including 'Indian dances' that had nothing to do with India but featured lines of women with fans and parrots, as well as slave girls, demons, and diminutive 'blackamoors' – actually children in dark body make-up - in set pieces that could easily have found a place in the era's better music halls.

(Garafola 2005: 399)

Is it still acceptable for this tradition to continue in today's ballet companies? Dance critics have been highly critical, seen in Judith Mackrell's review of a London performance of the Bolshoi's *La Bayadère* where she comments on the use of blackface for the children:

The Bolshoi may have toned down the black face paint for what can only be described as the 'golliwog' dancers in its current staging of *La Bayadère*, but is it time to get rid of them entirely? For those who haven't seen or have blanked all memory of these exotic cuties, they are the eight little girls who are deployed as 'native' fan bearers in the first two acts of the ballet [...] Logically, we should be no more offended by these blacked-up dancers than by the crazy-eyed fakirs, the pantomime High Brahmin and the sexed-up temple dancers who are also crammed into the ballet [...] So is there an argument for cleaning up *La Bayadère*? The most offensive elements are not entirely intrinsic to the ballet's style and texture.

(Mackrell 2007: n.pag.)

Mackrell emphasizes the problems with eroticized and racist characterizations throughout the ballet, questioning whether one stereotype is worse than another. The Bolshoi's performance of *La Bayadère* was similarly reviewed in *The New York Times* by Alastair Macaulay (2007: n.pag.):

The Bolshoi's version features, among other horrors, white children dressed as black (black-wrinkled tights, black-gloved sleeves and black curly wigs, but with faces lightly daubed in various pale coffee hues). I'd like to think that the old tradition of whites in blackface might work again if it was well done (e.g. white actors as Othello, now exceptionally rare in theatre), but this looked ludicrous to be even grotesque.

It is astonishing that Macaulay in one instance expresses antipathy towards the use of White children in blackface, then in the next sentence, considers the act of blackface suitable if it is done properly. In 2013, Mackrell (2013b) again reported on the Bolshoi Ballet's the use of blacked-up children in *La Bayadère* at London's Royal Opera House. Is blackface still acceptable today? Even if ballet companies considered using Black children to perform this section of the ballet, the content would still be racist.

The topic of White children dancing in blackface in *La Bayadère* became public news when Benjamin Millepied, former Director of Dance of the Paris Opéra Ballet, resigned in 2016 due to the company's approach to race. Luke Jennings (2016: n.pag.) reported in *The Observer*:

Few would take issue with one of Millepied's most heartfelt concerns, that of the company's attitude to race. Its production of *La Bayadère*, reproduced by Rudolf Nureyev from the 19th-century St Petersburg original, contains a scene abhorrent to many contemporary eyes, in which children, listed in the programme as 'negrillons' (picaninies), are blacked up and caper around like savages. Millepied couldn't make the company cut the scene completely as almost all other productions

(RE:) CLAIMING BALLET

elsewhere have done, but demanded an end to the blackface, and listed the children in the programme as 'enfants'. In doing so, he roused the hostility not only of the Opéra establishment, but of the dancers, who objected to this rift with 'authenticity' and 'tradition', despite the fact that *La Bayadère* has only been in the Paris repertoire since 1992.

The Paris Opéra Ballet and The Bolshoi still maintain blackface in the corps de ballet, long after it was phased out in other forms of popular media. The rationale appears to be a desire to cling to claims of authenticity to the original productions; however, dancers' bodies, ballet technique and other production aspects are impossible to replicate. Therefore, the continuation of these companies perpetuating derogatory stereotypes and racist practices is distressing.

Schéhérazade (1910)

Michel Fokine's *Schéhérazade* is a Middle Eastern-inspired exotic ballet that also represents Black people as slaves in the corps de ballet. *Schéhérazade* is an ancient Persian love story based on the *Arabian Nights* or *A Thousand and One Nights*. In essence, the women of Shar set up the Sultan's favorite wife, Zobeide, to betray her husband with a Negro slave, called the Golden Slave. He seduces her and they both encounter a fatal ending (Craine and Mackrell 2010: 399). Bakst designed the set and costumes in a 'riot of paint lent a startlingly exotic texture to the production' (Lee 2002: 240).

The Polish dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950) performed the Golden Slave in blackface in 1910 (Burt 1995: 84). Bellow also notes that: 'In *Schéhérazade* members of the corps de ballet wore dark makeup and bodystockings that may have appeared convincing onstage' (2015: 161). Kevin Kopelson discusses the role of the 'mulatto slave' that Nijinsky portrayed: 'In his beaded tunic and feathered headdress, he seems rather exotic and vaguely Eastern [...] He seems somewhat barbaric as well, which for an Orientalist like Diaghilev, meant one thing and one thing only: sex' (1998: 16).

Arguably, Diaghilev's figure of the mulatto slave was more appealing for audience fantasies because he portrayed a light skin male character as opposed to the negative representation of the dark-skinned Moor in *Petroushka*. Yet the connotations and the sexualization of the slave remain. Kopelson explores this notion further and states that: 'Nijinsky represented the rough, transgressive sex civilized Westerners invented, weren't supposed to want, did want badly, and projected onto alien Others, many of whom they'd colonized' (1998: 16). Kopelson also cites Fokine's description of the Golden Slave, who was 'a primitive savage, not by the color of his body make-up, but by his movements. Now he was a half-human,

half-feline animal, softly leaping great distances' (1998: 63). Fokine's perception of the Golden Slave is similar to the animalistic, sexualized racial stereotypes of Black people created by scientists and anthropologists of the era (Lawrence 1984: 170–71). Through Fokine's choreography, the Black male was stereotyped in a demeaning manner and oversexualized. As Hall (1997: 262) notes, Whites often 'fantasized about the excessive appetites and prowess of black men'; consequently, Fokine fulfilled the 'white gaze' fantasy in the ballet.

Other performances of *Schéhérazade* have moved away from representing the Golden Slave in blackface, as Nijinsky did in the early twentieth century. Former principal dancer of the Royal Ballet, Cuban Carlos Acosta, performed this role in July 2013. Mackrell described his performance as a 'joyous romp' (Mackrell 2013a), clearly leaving an impression that includes eroticizing his character. Acosta fulfilled Fokine's choreographic intensions by portraying an exotic stereotypical Black male in this narrative ballet. Yet the implications of typecasting a Black male for this character perpetuate many racial stereotypes. Surely it is time to move on from these negative representations and/or recreate new roles with positive Black male role models.

Conclusion

This chapter explored non-Western cultures in ballet by focusing on the presence of Black people in narrative classical ballets and tracing their first appearances on ballet stages. Dance historians have documented how they were portrayed in narrative ballets and the chapter has investigated how they are embodied in contemporary productions of ballet classics. Black characters have been written into theatrical productions for centuries. King Henri IV and Louis XIV, along with members of the French royal court, performed in blackface makeup in the seventeenth century. The trend for blackface has continued unbroken since that time. In the nineteenth century, it was expanded in the exotic, romantic ballets choreographed by Petipa, such as *The Pharaoh's Daughter* (1862) and *La Bayadère* (1877). Fokine continued the trend into the early twentieth century in the stories from Egypt and Arabia, *Cléopâtre* (1909) and *Schéhérazade* (1910).

La Bayadère and *Schéhérazade* offer diverse examples of iconic narrative ballets. The exotic plots were reinforced by the popular fascination with stories circulated by anthropologists and explorers, whose new discoveries inspired romanticized interpretations of faraway lands such as India and Arabia. Yet, although aspects of the sets and costume designs may have conveyed a visual sense of the countries, the ballets did not offer authentic portrayals of these cultures. As discussed in this chapter, Black characters were limited to portraying slaves or highly

sexualized seducers. Furthermore, I argued that the practice of blacking up White dancers to represent Black people reflects European racial ideologies and fantasies about an exotic 'other'. This, in turn, is based on the colonial creation of empires and the associated racial hierarchies (Hall 1997: 239).

Moreover, blackface makeup in ballet is related to skin colorism, which was introduced and controlled by the 'White gaze' of choreographers like Petita and Fokine. As the examples show, White dancers in brownface makeup have leading roles, while those in blackface makeup dance as the slaves or are seen in minor roles in the corps de ballet. Both ballets are still popular in the twenty-first century; however, as recently as 2013, the Bolshoi Ballet maintained racist practices by blacking up White dancers in *La Bayadère*. In Britain, the Royal Ballet moved on to typecasting the right shade of brown in Carlos Acosta's 2013 performance of *Schéhérazade*. Although some dance journalists have been outspoken in criticizing the continuation of blackface and brownface in contemporary restagings of the classics, at times their language reinforces perceptions of Black dancers as the eroticized 'other'. There is clearly an urgent need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of the 'exotic' ballet canon that challenges these historical representations of Black people and suggests radical interventions to address the extreme racial stereotyping. Nevertheless, the racialized representation of Black people in narrative exotic ballets has been a creative influence all over the world.

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(RE:) CLAIMING BALLET

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