

PRODIGAL SON

Ballet in three scenes

Music: Sergei Prokofiev (Op. 46, 1928–1929)

Libretto: Boris Kochno

Choreography: George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust

Scenic and Costume Design: Georges Rouault

Premiere: May 21, 1929; Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt, Paris)

Prodigal Son, the last ballet made for Serge Diaghilev's famed Ballets Russes, premiered in Paris on May 21, 1929, just three months before Diaghilev's death. The music by Sergei Prokofiev was his third commission for the Ballets Russes, and the choreography by George Balanchine was his tenth ballet for Diaghilev.

The story was the idea of Boris Kochno, Diaghilev's assistant and frequent artistic collaborator. His libretto is based less on the biblical account of the parable found in St. Luke than on a passage from Alexander Pushkin's short story, *The Stationmaster* (1830), in which the author describes engravings depicting scenes from the parable that hang in a postal station somewhere in Russia:

In the first picture, a venerable old man in a night cap and dressing gown was bidding farewell to a restless youth who was hastily receiving his blessing and a bag of money. Another displayed in vivid detail the dissolute conduct of the young man, who was depicted seated at a table surrounded by false friends and shameless women. The last of the series showed his return to his father; the good old man, still in his night cap and dressing gown, ran out to meet him; the prodigal son knelt at his feet.

With *Prodigal Son*, Diaghilev showed a renewed interest in his dancers' ability to express emotion, a marked change from the usual detached affect he preferred for the company's chic repertory. He also was demanding of Prokofiev, making him re-write the ending of the ballet twice, reducing the composer to tears before finally approving the score. As for Balanchine, Diaghilev worried the subject matter might be beyond the young choreographer's capabilities as a dramatic storyteller.

Although *Prodigal Son* is Balanchine's second oldest surviving ballet, following the 1928 *Apollo Musagète*, the ballet was the 25-year-old's ninety-fourth choreographic work. And while *Apollo*, with its spare neoclassicism, shows us the Balanchine who was to come, *Prodigal* shows us a summation of the younger Balanchine, about whose work we far less than we do of his later accomplishments. Here we see the inventiveness and experimentalism said to have characterized his early ballets. Creativity and economy abound: The fence in the opening scene becomes a banquet table, a crucifix, a ship, and finally a fence again. Stylized movement and acrobatics show the influence of both the Machine Age, including Russian Constructivism, and the circus in the choreography for the Drinking Companions. (It was Balanchine's idea to make them bald.) The duet between the Prodigal and the towering Siren effuses both eroticism and spiritualism ("Byzantine icons," Balanchine once said to Edward Villella during rehearsal).

The experience wasn't easy for Balanchine. Kochno would sometimes lose inspiration, leaving the choreographer with bars of music to fill without instruction. Prokofiev hated Balanchine's stylized choreography. He had hoped for naturalism—real wine to drink and real cushions for lounging. After the premiere, the impecunious Balanchine dared to ask him for a share of his royalties (only the composer and designer received royalties because their work could be reproduced in print). Prokofiev angrily refused.

Designer Georges Rouault enjoyed the Monte Carlo highlife during the ballet's preparation, but when questioned by Diaghilev, had produced no designs (although he was skilled at balancing a chair on his nose, a feat he demonstrated during a break in rehearsals). Finally, Diaghilev booked Rouault's return ticket to Paris and the expressionist sketches materialized. Serge Lifar, who had been Balanchine's first Apollo, felt distanced from the role of the Prodigal, but on opening night had an epiphany and, not surprisingly, determined the ballet was all about him. Despite everything, the premiere was a success.

Prodigal Son was revived in 1934 for Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein's American Ballet. In 1950, Balanchine staged the work again, this time for New York City Ballet, with

Jerome Robbins in the title role and Maria Tallchief as his Siren. *Prodigal Son* has remained in City Ballet's repertory, where it became a star vehicle for Vilella and Mikhail Baryshnikov, among others. (Balanchine's now-famous coaching of Baryshnikov is captured on hours of film.) When Peter Boal was cast in the role in 1986, Robbins requested to coach him, a rarity given the choreographer did not rehearse ballets other than his own. Pacific Northwest Ballet's 2015 revival of *Prodigal Son* has been staged by Peter Boal, offering us a unique and direct connection to this iconic ballet's history.

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