

Spring Fever



A scene from *A Rite*, a collaboration between Anne Bogart/SITI Company and Bill T. Jones/Armin Zane Dance Company.

PAUL B. GOODE

BOGART, JONES and TWIST revisit a legendary *succès de scandale* 100 years later

BY MATTHEW SIGMAN

IT WAS THE "C" HEARD ROUND THE WORLD: A plaintive cry high in the bassoon's register, a sound as primitive in its timbre as the spectacle about to unfold. The murmuring had already begun in the boxes and balconies of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, where opposing factions of Parisian society—*artistes* and aristocrats—had been stoked toward cultural conflagration by a sensationalist impresario whose carefully placed advance press promised a groundbreaking new collaboration between a celebrated young composer, a dashing dancer-choreographer and a radical philosopher-poet artist. It was May 29, 1913, and the work was *The Rite of Spring*.

The curtain rose on a tableau equally discordant to eye and ear: wide-eyed youths in cockeyed hats stomping and flailing to the fractured rhythms of a gathering storm of woodwinds and thunderous blasts of brass. The cacophony onstage met an equally cacophonous response from the audience, who hurled insults at each other and at the performers. The resulting "riot," as it has traditionally been described, became history, which is to say a soupçon of fact and a bouillabaisse of lore. Multiple accounts, including his own, verify that the composer, Igor Stravinsky, fled his seat in a rage, only to find himself in the wings holding the coattails of the choreographer, Vaslav Nijinsky, who stood

on a chair shouting out the beats for the dancers, who could barely hear their cues above the din.

Beyond that, much is legend. The police were summoned and protesters evicted. Perhaps. No reliable eyewitness corroborates gendarmes rushing in to restore order. The impresario, Sergei Diaghilev, flashed the houselights to restore order. Or was it the theatre manager, Gabriel Astruc? Not clear. Gertrude Stein complained she couldn't hear the music for the ruckus, but she attended the second performance, which was greeted with quiet admiration. Hmmm. Critical disdain was supposedly unanimous, but the dress rehearsal, to which the critics were invited, was a peaceable affair. Most important, despite the brouhaha, the premiere continued uninterrupted: the Young Maidens celebrated the arrival of spring, the holy procession proceeded, the Sage blessed the Earth, and the Chosen One danced herself to an ecstatic death. Not a lot of laughs, but when the curtain came down the creative team was lauded.

Jean Cocteau, who was present at the premiere, suggested the hullabaloo was a set-up engineered by the collaborators. "The audience played the role that was written for it," he wrote. Indeed, at a celebratory supper after the premiere, Diaghilev reportedly said of the

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anarchy: “Exactly what I wanted.” *Succès de scandale* had already become a necessary imprimatur for modernism, particularly when it involved an assault on the ears: Debussy, Strauss, Varèse and Webern were regularly attacked by audiences and critics. Schoenberg was pilloried even before he went down the atonal path. That Stravinsky’s music was deemed dissonant, Nijinsky’s choreography vulgar, and the sets and costumes comical might actually have been construed as compliments by the avant-garde.

he says. In a bold move, Kang offered commissions and engaged artists before raising the \$3 million needed to execute the plan. “As a presenter, we commit to an idea, and there is always inherent risk—artistic, logistical, financial,” he says, “but for me the idea of creating new work is at the heart of what we do.”

Despite the 2008 economic downturn, which occurred just after commitments were made and fundraising launched, Kang was able to



CRAG SCHWARTZ

Bogart



CHRISTINA LANE

Jones



Twist

So why is it that the first night of *The Rite of Spring* became the touchstone for more than a century of conversation, the *ne plus ultra* symbol of the triumph of genius in the face of philistinism? That is precisely the question that Carolina Performing Arts (CPA) and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill set out to ask—and perhaps answer—with a nine-month centennial celebration entitled “The Rite of Spring at 100,” featuring artist residencies, master classes, multidisciplinary collaborations, academic colloquia, commissions and numerous world and U.S. premieres. Among the distinguished choreographers, composers, directors and ensembles asked to revisit, re-examine and respond to the work were three eminent theatre figures—experimental director Anne Bogart with choreographer Bill T. Jones and his company; and puppet-meister Basil Twist—as well as celebrity cellist Yo-Yo Ma and his Silk Road Ensemble, Compagnie Marie Chouinard, Valery Gergiev and the Mariinsky Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Joffrey Ballet, Vijay Iyer and the International Contemporary Ensemble, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Brooklyn Rider, Magdalena Kožená and Yefim Bronfman. Upcoming performances include the Nederlands Dans Theater I (April 3–5), Twist (April 12–13) and the Martha Graham Dance Company (April 26–27).

Emil J. Kang, executive director of Carolina Performing Arts, has been the Diaghilev of “Rite at 100,” tirelessly presiding over five years of planning and implementation of the festivities, cajoling amalgamating talents from every continent and raising the necessary funds. For the concept itself, he credits UNC professor Severine Neff, who had originally proposed a celebration of the centennial of Schoenberg’s 1912 *Pierrot Lunaire*. But filling seats was as important as celebrating a centenary, and Kang was uncertain as to the palatability of Schoenberg as a main course for such a festival. When Neff mentioned the imminent anniversary of *Rite*, Kang lit right up. He reached out to nearly 200 leaders in the arts around the world to validate the concept, most of whom were thrilled. But not all: “Anyone who thinks they can reinterpret that masterpiece is an arrogant fool,” was a theme he heard in many variations.

Kang says what CPA most definitely did not seek was anything resembling a conventional ballet. “We wanted a response to the work,”

secure the necessary funds without compromising the program. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust provided significant support, with the balance contributed by CPA’s national advisory board, a collection of influential alumni and arts supporters, many of whom wrote six-figure checks. They shared Kang’s vision that the *Rite* celebration should be an investment in the university, as well as the regional and national community. “We wanted it to be as relevant to a student from Raleigh as to the wealthy patron from Manhattan,” he says.

WHAT BECAME A LEGEND MOST FROM *RITE* WAS STRAVINSKY’S score, but in his early years, Stravinsky was fundamentally a collaborative artist. He drew inspiration from the folktales of his native Russia, but expressed them—courtesy of Diaghilev’s generous commissions for his Ballets Russes—in concert with a distinguished coterie of intellectuals and artists. In addition to Diaghilev, Nijinsky and Roerich, there were Cocteau, Picasso, Balanchine. (In his private life, he “collaborated” with Coco Chanel.) That several of the CPA commissions became collaborative endeavors among artists was a tribute to *The Rite of Spring*’s legacy. Though their “Rite at 100” commissions were separate, and they had never previously collaborated, director Bogart and choreographer Jones were longstanding acquaintances. Fusing their companies for the occasion—the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and SIT1, co-founded by Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki—seemed like an idea at once fresh and inevitable.

Jones and his company’s associate artistic director, Janet Wong, concentrated on movement while Bogart and her team developed the narrative. “As Anne and her group were trying to figure out what the text would be, we were figuring out the music movement by movement,” says Jones, “all of which was being guided by a desire to have a work that was reflecting something about the structure of Stravinsky’s music and the way he made the piece.” Both of them knew from the beginning that this would be a deconstruction of the music and a reimagining of the story. “Bill and I both knew we didn’t want to sacrifice a virgin,” says Bogart, who felt no compunction in tinkering with a masterpiece. On the contrary: “I don’t think we tinkered enough,” she muses. ►

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Over 18 months, the two companies and their leaders carved out days and weeks for workshops, rehearsals and study. “A lot of the work was problem-solving,” says Jones. “Bill approached it emotionally, from moment to moment,” says Bogart, who focused on “an overall structure, the development of the dramaturgy.” What began as a 50-page libretto culled from numerous sources (including interviews with Neff) resulted in a 75-minute dance-theatre piece, which premiered at UNC’s Memorial Hall in January, with a two-performance reprise in February at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland.

The anticipation was palpable at the first performance at the Smith Center. The audience was diverse, something of a microcosmic replication of the audience that first greeted *Rite* in Paris, only this time there was no riot: The spectators remained enthralled from the first moment, when a bare lightbulb faded to reveal the combined companies, their original affiliations virtually indistinguishable. Gone were the bright backdrops and garish costumes of Roerich. Instead there were 15 performers in soft, muted fabrics, “primitive” only in the sense of a certain naturalism expressed in form and function.

What followed was indeed a deconstructed *Rite*, a postmodern collage of text, music and dance that narrated a century of angst. A shell-shocked soldier on a battlefield of his imagination howls rat-at-tat and then leaps on the backs of two others, forming a howitzer that symbolizes that other shot heard round the world, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, a year after the *Rite* premiere, which launched the Great War. A narrator perched on a stool offers up the plot of *The Rite of Spring*, and relates its storied premiere. Throughout the work, the rhythms of Stravinsky’s score return, now in frenetic dance steps, now in rhythmic clapping, now in a dazzling multipart chorus. A composition once considered barely playable is now, stripped to its bare essentials, sung as soothingly as a lullaby.

The experience, say the creators, proved transformational for both companies. “They showed my dancers something about their physical discipline,” says Jones. Bogart expands on that, saying the SITI actors are stronger physically and mentally as a result of the experience. “It definitely stretched them and pushed them and they are better actors for it,” she says. The 15 performers—nine from the Jones/Zane company, six from the SITI company—become one, their talents indistinguishable except to the most discerning eye.

IN DESCRIBING THE VARIOUS OFFERINGS OF THE “RITE at 100” celebration, CPAs Emil Kang treads a diplomatic path, touting the participation of the august Cleveland Orchestra in the same breath as the cutting-edge Brooklyn Rider string quartet. But there is no mistaking his particular enthusiasm for puppeteer Basil Twist. “He



The Rite of Spring's choreographer, Vaslav Nijinsky, left, and composer Igor Stravinsky.



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really is, to be quite frank, the most exciting, thrilling and frightening artist,” says Kang.

A San Francisco native trained at France’s École Supérieure Nationale des Arts de la Marionnette, Twist made a splash on the New York scene in 1998 with a visual accompaniment to Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* using multiple media—fabric, feathers, bits of this and that—manipulated in a massive tank of water. Its kaleidoscopic abstractions won critical raves, and Twist has gone on to design, direct and create groundbreaking works

ranging from figurative puppetry for ballet (Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*) and opera (Humperdick’s *Hansel and Gretel*) to abstract collaborations with artists such as Lee Breuer and Mabou Mines.

For his commission, to be performed April 12–13 in North Carolina, Twist has once again eschewed the anthropomorphic in favor of the abstract, creating a feature-length work to the

full score of *Rite*—performed live by the Orchestra of Saint Luke’s—that merges enormous vertical fabrics with shifting horizontal panels that define and redefine the stage in a series of tableaux. The technique Twist has developed for this commission is, he says, “a concept that had been floating around for me as an artist waiting for a project to land it on.” When Kang called with the Carolina commission, Twist thought, “Here’s an opportunity for me to really push myself and do something outrageous and new.”

Visions enter Twist’s imagination while rollerblading around New York or Paris, but execution requires painstaking craftsmanship. The limitations to collaboration are not just spatial, but logistical and artistic: “You work in the rehearsal room with a piano but there is very little time with an orchestra. The orchestra is in the pit, and they do their part, and I’m onstage and I do my part.”

Much of his rehearsal time has been in a church in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, but the Carolina commission also enabled Twist the opportunity to experiment *in situ* at UNC’s Memorial Hall. “It’s like a great instrument that I get to play,” he says, and he plans to use every inch of the theatre “from catwalks to klieg.” His original “research,” as he calls it, involved the placement of electric fans to simulate the shifting air currents he expects to achieve in performance through human manipulation. Twelve puppeteers on Twist’s crew have each been paired with an assistant from the UNC community. Twist will bookend his performance of *Rite* with two other Stravinsky works in his repertoire: *Fireworks*, the piece that originally caught the ear of Diaghilev and launched their 20-year Ballets Russes association; and *Pulcinella*, a Ballets Russes commission from 1920, originally choreographed by Leonide Massine with sets and costumes by Picasso.

“THE STORY WE TELL OURSELVES NOW ABOUT WHAT happened [in 1913] has played into the lexicon of the image of innovative work—that it has to have a genesis that is contentious,” says Jones. It is a notion he eschews. That a work isn’t modern unless it empties the hall, he believes, is a fallacy harmful to art and hurtful to artists.

So why then do we so cherish the myth of the riot at *The Rite of Spring*? For the same reason we cherish so many other tragic narratives

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A scene from *A Rite*.

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in the life of art and artists: The phoenix rising from philistinism gives us hope that as artists our failures will be vindicated, and as audience members our tastes will be validated.

We must also accept the possibility—*gasp*—that *The Rite of Spring* as premiered was flawed, and that an audience still being weaned from the gentle notes and steps of Tchaikovsky and Petipa may have been somewhat justified in its hostile response. Nijinsky was the greatest dancer of his time, but not a particularly accomplished choreographer. Like his choreography for *Rite*, Nijinsky's choreography for Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* was jettisoned from the repertoire and lay dormant for seven decades until it was re-constructed by Millicent Hodson and her husband Kenneth Archer in 1987 for the Joffrey Ballet. For those of us who cannot attend the Joffrey Ballet's national tour this season (including a stop in Chapel Hill), the miracles of modern technology enable us to watch its authentic performance of *The Rite of Spring* on YouTube. Allowing for the advances in technique for dancers and musicians over the century, it is completely understandable that even the most tolerant aesthete might have sniggered at the absurdity of Nijinsky's pigeon-toed leaps, Roerich's psychedelic cloaks and goofy wigs, and Stravinsky's sonic booms, the musical equivalent of shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theatre. Let us not kid ourselves: We might have booed too.

Alas, where are the boos of yesteryear? Ovations are ubiquitous and opprobrium is rare, and, just as with *Rite*, huzzahs and heckles are more likely to be hurled at the scenery and the direction than the composer. And one must remember that Diaghilev, Nijinsky and Stravinsky were not bohemian artists starving in a Paris garret. They led elegant, expensive lives, with one eye on the score and the other on the box office. Few innovative artists working in the commercial arena today are capable of generating cash and controversy with equal integrity (Julie Taymor is an exception that comes to mind). And when the occasional breakout *enfant terrible* comes along, the results are often, well, infantile and terrible.

That the music gets the blame for the "riot" at 1913's *Rite*—or the credit, depending on how one sees it—does, in fairness, speak to Stravinsky's special genius. To hear it performed with the light touch of Maurice Béjart's choreography, the burning intensity of Pina Bausch's

staging, or even Disney's primordial leaping lizards in *Fantasia*, is to experience a visceral reaction that conjures the primitive emotions within us all. That its narrative qualities translated into a wildly popular symphonic tone poem is further testament that Stravinsky's score, far from becoming anodyne with the passage of time, remains transcendent.

Which is not to say that the three centuries of polyphony that preceded Stravinsky were moribund. Every generation has experienced an original genius who writes such music as has never been heard (for timeless shock and awe, there will always be the late Beethoven quartets) or a synthetic genius who raises existing forms to their highest expression (nobody raised the bar on classicism higher than Mozart). Stravinsky just happened to be both.

He was also a tireless promoter of his own work, composing suites of his ballets and taking up conducting to ensure future performances (and continuing income). Despite its incendiary premiere, *The Rite of Spring* had numerous follow-on performances from Paris and London to Boston and Philadelphia. It also found its place in the literature of criticism, musicology, scholarship and journalism: To write about the *Rite* is a rite of passage.

Sadly, most bold commissions today—even those of the Carolina celebration—will have illustrious premieres and then struggle to be heard or seen again. A tour for the Jones/Bogart *Rite* is in process, but a life beyond this celebratory year is conjecture. "I imagine we will tour it, videotape it and then retire it," says Jones. "We are very much in the moment on this one."

Twist commends CPA not only for its financial and technical support but for "an enormous amount of goodwill." There are, however, no co-commissioners on his project and no follow-on performances planned. "I would love it if the show had a future life," he says, but concedes that his genre-bending work does not quite conform to traditional presenters of dance, opera or theatre. "You'd need a very adventurous programmer," he says.

Let us hope there is another Diaghilev waiting in the wings. ▣

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