On 21 February 1920, Hayden Church, a special London correspondent for *The Desert News* of Salt Lake City, reported to his newspaper that

Sir James Barrie, renowned as he is for springing surprises on readers and playgoers, seldom has got his admirers more excited than they are at present over the news that he has broken what for him is new and strange ground by writing a one-act play for Mlle. Karsavina, the famous Russian ballet dancer. It is probable that Karsavina herself will present Sir James's little piece, and appear in the leading part, which is a non-speaking one, at a London theatre early in the spring. Barrie was not particularly attracted by the dancing of the Russian ballet. But during the memorable season at the Alhambra last summer he paid occasional visits and grew more and more enthusiastic. Eventually he decided to write a play about the dancers which should be a tribute and a mark of his appreciation. When it was completed some weeks ago, he presented it to Mlle. Karsavina.¹

Barrie was absolutely furious when he learned that a garbled account of his play had appeared in the papers. According to Karsavina, the dedicatee of this new theatrical piece, the playwright could not stand his projects being given away in advance. He blamed everything on the prima ballerina’s alleged indiscretion and sent her a telegram to the effect that he wanted to have nothing more to do with the play. ‘His telegram,’ Karsavina maintains, exploded at me like a bomb. On Benjie’s [Karsavina’s husband²] advice I wrote to Barrie that if there had been an indiscretion it was not mine and that even if he

---

2 Henry James Bruce was a British diplomat, who married Karsavina in 1915.
Barrie’s concern was indeed hardly justified on this occasion: throughout her career as a prima ballerina of the Diaghilev Ballets, Karsavina had never been noted for self-publicity, unscrupulousness, or any kind of indiscretion. Even after the premiere of *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*, when all the newspapers were full of accolades and laudatory reviews, she tried to refrain from any specific comments on the performance, stressing her inability to give an impartial account of a play that according to many was ‘one of the season’s most important theatrical events.’ Regarding the comments, far more puzzling in this respect seems to be the almost unanimous ‘discretion’ of Barrie’s scholars, who scarcely mention *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* in their biographies and critical works. The notable exceptions to the generality of these studies are Janet Dunbar’s *J. M. Barrie*, which quotes some of Karsavina’s recollections on the production; Denis Mackail’s *The Story of J. M. B.*, which presents the sketch as aesthetically ‘delicious’ and sees in it nothing but a parody of ‘the consistent, preposterous and unearthly’ world of ballet dancers; and the memoirs of Cynthia Asquith, who observes that this charming ‘trifle [...] was written in a day or two, then worked on, altered and polished with infinite care’, so that years later she ‘found ten different typescript versions of this one little play.’

*The Truth about the Russian Dancers*, the number of existing draft manuscripts of which had now augmented to fourteen, remained unpublished

---

4 Ibid. p. 5.
5 See, for instance, most recent studies such as Valentina Bold and Andrew Nash, eds, *Gateway to the Modern: Resituating J. M. Barrie* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2014); or R. D. C. Jack, *The Road to the Never Land: A Reassessment of J M Barrie’s Dramatic Art* (Glasgow: Humming Earth, 2010).
till 1962, when it appeared in the art magazine *Dance Perspectives* with Karsavina’s illuminating introduction and a discerning comparison of textual variants, produced by Selma Jeanne Cohen. In this context, Cynthia Asquith’s comment is most telling and revealing, for it draws attention to the fact that Barrie’s work was slightly more than a skilful parody of or a tribute to the unrelenting Russian craze, induced by a series of Diaghilev seasons in Paris and London. The thoroughness and infinite care with which Barrie worked on the playlet (the idea of which could have been easily nipped in the bud) lends it significance as an artistic statement – a perceptive reflection on cultural dialogism and a searching piece of dramatic criticism, which, it will be shown, suggests a modernist rather than Edwardian outlook on the interaction of the traditional and the exotic and thus puts into new perspective certain aspects of the British perception of what was notoriously categorised as the Russian myth.

*The Truth about the Russian Dancers* (with an intriguing subtitle ‘Showing how they love, how they marry, how they are made, with how they die and live happily ever afterwards’) was premiered on 15 March 1920 at the London Coliseum. Set to Arnold Bax’s allusively witty music, half

---

9 J. M. Barrie, ‘The Truth of the Russian Dancers’, in A. J. Pischl and Selma Jeanne Cohen, eds, *Dance Perspectives* 14 (1962), 12–30. In 1987 the play was reprinted as a paperback by Johnson Reprint Corporation. The published text is based on meticulous analysis and compilation of two holographs and twelve typescripts, produced by Selma Jeanne Cohen, who gives the following description of the source: ‘In January 1958, the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library acquired from a London dealer two holographs and eleven typescripts of *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*. The catalogues of the Collection classified and described the material as follows: Holograph 1. Incomplete, unsigned and undated; 5 pages, numbered [1] – 6, page 4 missing. Marked “Scene 1,” and with the initials E. C. H. [the initials remain unidentified] at the top of the first page. Holograph 2. Signed and dated September 26, 1919, 32 pages. All the typescripts, which fall into five groups – A–E – bear the above date, with the exception of D, which is undated. E 3 is dated also July 1926. No typescript is signed [...] In addition to these, the editors have also examined the script belonging to Madame Karsavina. Typescript K. This is uncorrected and is the copy she actually used’ (Selma Jeanne Cohen, ‘The Text of “The Truth about the Russian Dancers”’, *Dance Perspectives* 14 (1962), pp. 31–4 (pp. 31–2)).
dance-half play, all mockery and all magic – the playlet was framed within the eye-catching ‘Anglo-Bakst-ish’ designs by Paul Nash, and directed by Gerald du Maurier – a great connoisseur and enthusiast of Barrie’s theatre (which brought him to fame), who, according to the reviewer, had a keen ‘appreciation of the bizarre in this production.’

The curtain rises at Vere Castle, the peace and quiet of which is queerly disrupted when Karissima – a Russian Ballerina (performed by Karsavina) pays a visit to this ancient stronghold of the conventionally correct. The charming guest can talk with nothing but her toes, and all way through the action Karissima expresses herself exclusively in dance. Naturally, Lady Vere and Bill, her elderly brother-in-law (a passionate golf player and a villain), are utterly dismayed:

Lady Vere can’t get used to being kissed by Karissima, who will stand upon her lightly with one foot, oddly waving the other meanwhile in the air. Besides it takes too long and is rather too demonstrative. And couldn’t Karissima dear just try to walk with her soles really flat on the ground in the solid English county way? Certainly Karissima will try, to please.

Meanwhile, young Lord Vere loses his heart and almost immediately marries the irresistible dancer, to the great shock of the dowager duchess – the bride dances ‘I will’ with a corps de ballet of bridesmaids. The child is to be born to a happy couple, but according to the weird and powerful Maestro, who ultimately runs the entire show, Karissima should now sacrifice her life for her little child, for the world of the Russian Dancers is a closed one; and someone must leave this world to make place for a newcomer. Karissima agrees to the horrid condition, and the next moment she is brought out as a corpse on her bier by the maids, who dance their grief. Surprisingly, the corpse rises and dances too. ‘But the dead don’t dance!’ cries in bewilderment the young husband. ‘Dead Russian dancers do’ answers the Maestro, but his heart is deeply touched. He takes the sacrifice upon himself, lying

12 Ibid. p. 236.
down in Karissima’s stead on the bier, and allowing her and her child to live happily ever after in the gloomy luxury of the Vere Castle.

The play became a sell-out for the entire stage-run (about a month), and almost every paper had at least half a column dedicated to the production. *Punch* magazine wrote about the ultimate triumph of the author, who had never done anything better – ‘more ambitious things, yes, but nothing so free from flaw’; *The Tatler* described it as ‘the most delightful affair imaginable’; while A. B. Walkley from *The Times* thought that words

13 The play was revived on 28 July 1926 at the Savoy Theatre with Karsavina in the leading role (reviewed in ‘Savoy Theatre’, *The Times*, 29 July 1926, p. 10).
14 ‘T’, p. 236.
simply could not do justice ‘to such a blend of fantasy, irony, and humour’. ‘To try to put so light and whimsical a thing as this on paper’, he maintained, is only to spoil it. Such a blend of fantasy, irony, and humour is, one need hardly say, only to be had from one man. And not for the first time that delightful man has had the happy thought of linking his peculiar charm with another charm not so rare, but equally potent, the charm of the eternal feminine eternally on toe-tip. The appropriate (but fortunately impossible) thing would be to dance one’s criticism of Karsavina – who not only dances with the perfection we all know so well, but acts and collaborates in the irony and fun of the thing, with the sympathetic intelligence of the true artist.\textsuperscript{16}

Arnold Bax’s music (‘a separate ecstasy’ worth enjoying ‘for its own independent sake’\textsuperscript{17}) and the directorial mastery of Gerald du Maurier also received a series of fulsome comments; the latter was portrayed as the one who ‘brought to triumphant achievement a task, which must have bristled with difficult problems.’\textsuperscript{18}

Ironically, the note on ‘the problems’ (the full spectrum of which was hardly known to the reviewer) turns out to be more telling than a sheer rhetorical trope; and the whole question of Barrie’s interest in the Russian dancers deserves closer and more in-depth consideration: firstly, because by the time the play was completed the fame of the Ballets Russes in England had already passed its peak; and secondly, because Barrie had never been a fan of this type of performance.

To give some background on the first point, the peak of the Ballets Russes’ fame fell largely in the pre-World War I years, when in 1911 London saw the premiere of the Diaghilev seasons after their unparalleled triumph at the Parisian Théâtre du Châtelet. The audience was completely mesmerised by the performance, for everything in these productions was scandalous, innovative and ambivalently subversive: the ambiguous sexuality of Nijinsky, wearing pearls around his long and muscular neck; the swivelling and stomping of the \textit{Polovtsian Dances}; the gaudy colours of Bakst’s

\textsuperscript{17} ‘Karsavina and Barrie’, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{18} A. E. Johnson, ‘The Truth about Karsavina’, \textit{Eve}, 1 April 1920, pp. 112–13 (p. 113).
costumes, which dazzled the Western eye like a glimpse of an Oriental market at noon. It was a bittersweet success from scandal, which burst open the confines of the nineteenth-century theatre and embraced both artistic and social spheres. As Green and Swan describe it in their study, upholstery, furnishings, and dress patterns all were affected within the season:

Fashionable ladies began to wear jupe-culottes, turbans and bandeaux with single peacock feathers affixed – anything that could be called ‘Persian’ Designers in all sorts of materials matted blue with green and red with orange for the first time. Rooms were furnished with divans, alcoves, censers and gaudy striped cushions on black or purple floor [...] Strong exotic perfumes, like sandalwood and patchouli, which had been the mark of the cocotte, were now bought by women of fashion.\(^{19}\)

‘Announce unparalleled triumph’, Diaghilev cabled from London to Astruc, the impresario of the Ballets Russes in Paris, ‘Audience indescribably smart.’\(^{20}\)

The atmosphere became different in less than ten years’ time. In 1918 Russia was deserting her former allies on World War I’s Eastern Fronts. The Bolshevik government negotiated a separate peace with the Germans under the Brest-Litovsk treaty; as a result, the latter were able to move forces away from Eastern battlefields to the French borders, thus strengthening their hand. This placed additional pressure on the allied troops fighting on the Western frontiers. The common opinion was expressed by *The Times*, which stated that the new Russian government ‘has set the seal to their ignominy.’\(^{21}\)

Russia was now turned into some kind of a public bogy, casting a spell on everything remotely associated with its name. Sergei Lifar, the successor to Nijinsky’s primacy in the Russian Ballets, commented on the aura of hostility and tension that surrounded his compatriots in Europe during these post-revolutionary war years. ‘All sufferings endured by the Russian troops at the time of their advance to Eastern Prussia,’ he wrote,

\(^{19}\) Green and Swan, p. 65.

\(^{20}\) Alexandre Astruc, telegram from Diaghilev to Astruc, 23 June 1911, Astruc Papers, Lincoln Centre; quoted in Buckle, p. 205.

\(^{21}\) ‘Our New War’, *The Times*, 21 February 1918, p. 7.
‘were instantaneously forgotten, and even the Russian officers, who had been selflessly fighting on the French battlefields, were not spared from the risk of being spit in the face.’

Things were equally difficult for the Russian dancers. In spring 1918 the company found itself stuck in Lisbon and then subsequently in Spain, being completely bankrupted by the political unrest of the Portugal revolution. Coming back to Paris was no longer an option; for even Diaghilev, a firm favourite of the French stage in the pre-War years, ‘felt moral qualms about rendering himself to the city’ that suddenly had become so ostentatiously anti-Russian. The London Coliseum did offer Diaghilev a contract for the autumn season of 1918, but the terms were abusively poor and restrictive, something that in earlier years would have been rejected on the spot; as Diaghilev wrote in his recollections,

The War terminated these wonderful seasons, and after the separate Brest-Litovsk treaty, we – the Russians – became so unwelcome that we found ourselves locked in Spain for almost a year. The King of Spain – a godfather of the Russian ballet, as he called himself, made a special effort for us to get permission for travelling to England. One had to secure contacts in London […] I, then, accepted an invitation from Sir Edward Stoll [should read Sir Oswald Stoll]; and although no theatres other than Music Halls have ever favoured our productions, I am grateful to Sir Edward [Oswald] for his kind assistance in these difficult times, when politics has erected hard-hitting obstacles in the way of such an apolitical venture as a troupe of ballet artists.

As regards Barrie’s sketch on the Russian Dancers, it was conceived precisely at this stage when the eminence of all things Russian was largely in decline. Diaghilev’s company stayed in England for a major part of 1919; the troupe performed in Manchester and in London; it received a fair degree of enthusiasm and public acclaim, but it was a moderate, lukewarm reception, not remotely comparable to the triumph and accolade of the first seasons. Did the playwright make an attempt to capture the glittering twilight of the fading fashion – to portray something that he felt was

22 Sergei Lifar, Diaghilev i s Diaghilevym (Moscow: Vargius, 2005), p. 356.
23 Ibid. p. 357.
24 Ibid. p. 360.
disappearing and that was so dear to his memories or to his heart? This, arguably, was hardly in line with the author’s initial intentions, for Barrie had never been a great enthusiast of the Russian ballet; moreover, on the whole, he was not particularly fond of the art of music and dance. Peter Davies, one of the Llewelyn Davies brothers, befriended and then informally adopted by Barrie, mentions in his diaries how frustrated he was with Barrie’s caustic references to his ‘callow enthusiasm for opera’ and ‘a calf-love for the Russian ballet, then an exciting novelty [...] that was still more emphatically frowned on and ridiculed.’

Barrie’s own interview (early 1920) on the background of *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* project displays a minimal, on the border of perfunctory politeness, degree of interest in the ballet performance, mentioning an ‘occasional visit’ to the show for which he ‘grew more and more enthusiastic.’ These ‘occasional visits’, however, happened to be not so ‘memorable’ after all, because no mention of these occasions can be found in Barrie’s personal correspondence of the time, apart from a letter to one of his oldest friends Mrs Lucas, dated 19 May 1920 (already after the premiere of *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*), in which he cursorily notes the fact of his attendance at the production: ‘Audrey, as I daresay you know, I see sometimes, and tomorrow I’m taking her to the Russian ballet with my sister.’

Barrie was certainly aware of the new run of Diaghilev’s seasons in London, but its appeal for him stemmed from the perspective of a professional writer rather than that of a ballet aficionado – a fresh source of plots for story-telling, which had always been his interest, his forte, and, according to many, the very essence of his art. Cynthia Asquith refers to this in a diary entry from February 1919:

---

25 Diaries of Peter Davies, quoted in Dunbar, p. 205.
26 Church, ‘Barrie Writes Play for Russian Ballet Dancer’.
27 Mrs Lucas was in charge of Chateau Bettencourt (near Révigny) where Barrie set up a hospital for the war-victim children of Rheims and its neighbourhood (Viola Meynell, comments to J. M. Barrie, *Letters of J. M. Barrie*, ed. Viola Meynell (London: Peter Davies, 1942), p. 87). Audrey, mentioned in the letter below, was her daughter.
Barrie, encouraged by Whibley’s ready laugh, told several stories, two of which have stayed in my sieve. A London hostess wrote to a Russian dancer to ask what her fee would be for dancing at an evening party. The dancer said she would come for a hundred pounds. The hostess, writing back to agree to this figure, added, ‘I think, perhaps, I had better tell you now that I don’t introduce the artiste to my guests.’ To this the dancer replied, ‘In that case my fee will be only fifty pounds.’

It is noteworthy that this very story was later on transferred directly to Barrie’s *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*; and in her recollections of the rehearsals Karsavina comments on her difficulties in miming the specific details of its plot:

such lines as Karissima’s telling the wicked uncle that her fee for a private appearance is three hundred guineas but only one hundred if she is not asked to mix with the guests [...] Three fingers stuck out? No! No! Three pointedly emphasised ronds de jambe and an arrogant toss of the head must make my meaning clear. That ‘line’ never failed to raise a laugh.

Generally speaking, Barrie was not a musical person. Peter Davies drew attention to the fact that ‘music and painting and poetry, and the part that they may be supposed to play in making a civilised being, had a curiously small place in J. M. B.’s view of things [...] Being himself totally unmusical’, Peter notes, Barrie ‘not only did not encourage such leanings, but in one way and another could not help discouraging them.’

He found it stressful when, reportedly, he was ‘forced’ to go to opera evenings, to which a good cricket game would be undoubtedly preferred. In July 1914, for instance, he wrote to George Davies that in the ‘stress of going to the opera’ with Peter they had forgotten to wire him the results of the Eton and Harrow cricket match. He insisted that Peter had dragged him to the opera two nights running, and as a result ‘neither he nor Michael patronised the match.’ And despite the fact that music interludes, as well

---

30 Asquith, p. 15.
32 Diaries of Peter Davies, quoted in Dunbar, p. 205.
33 Barrie, letter to George Davies, 13 July 1914, *Letters of J. M. Barrie*, p. 77. ‘The operas were Khovantchina and [...] Boris Godunov, with Chaliapin singing’ (Diaries of Peter Davies, quoted in Dunbar, p. 205).
as specially designed dances constituted an important part of his 1904 Peter Pan production (for which he took meticulous care in the rehearsals\textsuperscript{34}), it was the lighter side of life – ‘games and fishing, as well as of course being thoroughly good mens sana in corpore sano specimens’ that, in the words of the Davies brothers, he painstakingly catered for.\textsuperscript{35}

One, of course, may surmise that such an aversion arose from his early and profoundly negative experience as a librettist, when he and Arthur Conan Doyle together produced a script for Richard D’Oyly Carte’s new Savoy opera, pretentiously entitled Jane Annie or the Good Conduct Prize. Premiered in May 1893 with the music of Ernest Ford, it was closed as a complete flop after a small run of approximately fifty evenings. And although the subsequent tour of the production (in Bradford, Newcastle, Manchester, and Birmingham) was more successful than the original London show, the Academy still called it ‘one of the weakest librettos ever written and the number of weak librettos has been large’; and Bernard Shaw, when reviewing the opera for the World, presented it as ‘the most unblushing piece of tomfoolery that two respectable citizens could conceivably indulge in publicly.’\textsuperscript{36} It is difficult to judge as to the degree of trauma left by this infamous venture on Barrie’s aesthetic preferences and future intentions (his second attempt at producing a musical, Rosy Rapture (1915) was


\textsuperscript{35} Diaries of Peter Davies, quoted in Dunbar, p. 205.


It was Barrie who brought his idea for Jane Annie to D’Oyly Carte, but having been delayed by a severe illness, he had to resort to his friend, Conan Doyle’s assistance in order to complete the commissioned work in time (Barrie’s telegram read, ‘Come at once if convenient – if not convenient, come all the same’). Although regarding the plotline Doyle did not have much room for manoeuvre, he stepped in and did his best. Afterwards he would say, ‘The only literary gift which Barrie has not got is the sense of poetic rhythm, and the instinct for what is permissible in verse’ (Chaney, p. 115).
equally disastrous\textsuperscript{37}), but throughout his life he always categorised himself as musically unreceptive. With some wonderfully light-hearted irony he commented on this subject in a letter to Cynthia Asquith (1 April 1921): ‘Nicolas has arrived, and they have at once purchased gramophone records that roar and hiss louder than they ever roared and hissed before. I don’t see how I can help becoming musical in the end.’\textsuperscript{38}

As regards the Russian theme in Barrie’s artistic worldview, this too had never been the centre of his fundamental interests and literary pursuits. In spring 1917, when many of the British intellectuals (and his close friends such as, for instance, Shaw and H. G. Wells) were signing open telegrams in support of the Russian anti-monarchist revolution,\textsuperscript{39} Barrie’s name did not appear in these lists. Given that, like many others, he was swayed by the burgeoning patriotism at the start of World War I (conveyed in the pages of \textit{The Times} in a special interview to the American correspondent\textsuperscript{40}), he must have been appalled by the Bolsheviks’ separate Brest-Litovsk treaty (for that was precisely the time, winter 1918, when Barrie actively chaired a number of Red Cross auctions, collecting money for the war cause\textsuperscript{41}), but he never made any public assertion in this regard.

Notwithstanding his later interest in Russian authors, he was far too young to make personal acquaintance with Turgenev, who arrived in

\textsuperscript{38} Barrie, letter to Cynthia Asquith, 1 April 1921, \textit{Letters of J. M. Barrie}, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{39} Shaw, ‘Assure New Russia of British Regard’.
\textsuperscript{40} The interview was given in February 1917, when the US joined the Allied forces; it read: ‘The other night he [Isaac F. Marcosson, a United States journalist and a contributor to the \textit{Saturday Evening Post} and \textit{Everybody’s Magazine}] was sitting by a fire smoking and discussing the war with a man who by his genius, fancy, imagination, and heart had bound all the English-reading peoples of the world into a common friendship – the man who wrote Peter Pan. (Loud cheers,) “My friend,” said J. M. Barrie to him, “I have been stirred and thrilled by these recent events more than I have ever been in my life. Have you stopped to think what it means to have the two great English-speaking communities at last fighting together for a common cause, linked together in a great crusade of humanity against inhumanity? Why, it is greater than the war itself”’ (‘U. S. and the War. New York Journalist on National Awakening’\textsuperscript{41}, \textit{The Times}, 10 February 1917, p. 5).
\textsuperscript{41} Mackail, p. 516.
London for a winter’s stay in November 1870. As a widely educated and cultured person, he certainly read the writings of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: in the first decades of the twentieth century everyone was enthralled by the newly published translations of their works. This was reflected in one of his letters to Mrs Lucas, where Barrie mentions *War and Peace* as his bedtime reading. And although he does not go into any further comments regarding his impressions of the novel, he was known to have joined the group of British intellectuals, who, in an open statement to *The Times*, expressed their gratitude to the Russian men of letters for their contribution to the progress of the world’s literary thought. ‘It was a strange world that opened before us’, they wrote,

a world full of foreign names which we could neither pronounce nor remember, of foreign customs and articles of daily life which we could not understand. Yet beneath all the strangeness there was a deep sense of having discovered a new home, of meeting our unknown kindred, of finding expressed a great burden of thought which had lain unspoken and half-realised at the depth of our own minds. The books were very different one from another, sometimes they were mutually hostile; yet we found in all some quality which made them one, and made us all one with them. We will not attempt to analyse that quality.

Written in December 1914, and signed by thirty-four illustrious British authors (including Arnold Bennett, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy, John Galsworthy, Henry James, and H. G. Wells), the letter was obviously ‘heated’ by the allied spirit of World War I; but apart from that instance of congenial fervour, Barrie did not seem to be particularly moved by Russophilia, which captured quite a few among his literary circle. Unlike the Garnetts and Ford Madox Ford’s family, he did not become a member of the Free Russian Library in London. Unlike Bernard Shaw, he never

42 ‘Now I am off to read *War and Peace* in bed’ (Barrie, letter to Mrs E. V. Lucas, 3 July 1918, *Letters of J. M. Barrie*, p. 92).


joined the Friends of Russian Freedom association, at the time when the prominent Russian anarchists – Prince Kropotkin, Volkhovsky and Stepniak-Kravchinsky – started to promote Russian literature as a part of their activities in London at the end of the 1880s and in the 90s. And, unlike Galsworthy, he was never involved in entertaining the Russian authors at the dinners of the newly established P. E. N. Club, attended by the Soviet envoy Boris Pilniak (1923) and by the future Nobel Prize laureate Ivan Bunin (1925). Generally speaking, Barrie was a rare guest at this kind of important social occasion, to the extent that at times people failed to recognise who he was. Marjory Watts, one of the organisers of the club meetings and the daughter of Amy Dawson Scott – a co-founder of P. E. N., notes an embarrassing episode during the First International P. E. N. Congress dinner in May 1923:

One small incident at that banquet has stayed with me: as I walked among the guests, with my sitting list, a very small man with a moustache smiled at me and asked, ‘And where do I sit?’ ‘Well, who are you?’ I asked, and he said gently, ‘My name is Barrie.’

It is not incidental therefore, that Barrie’s idea to write a play about the Russian dancers came from a purely personal perspective. In autumn 1918, after her spectacular success with the London public, Lydia Lopokova, a prima ballerina of Diaghilev’s troupe, sent a letter to Barrie suggesting he write a play for her. She had just returned from a tour in the United States, where she had not only been thrilled by Maude Adams (in the Broadway production of Peter Pan), but developed a great fascination for Barrie’s books. They met and became friends, retaining deep fondness for each other to the end of their lives, when Lopokova, now Lady Keynes (she married the British economist John Maynard Keynes) used to spend her time with Barrie chatting and sitting comfortably on his knee – they were both

46 Ibid. p. 25.
47 Mackail, p. 536.
comparable in height: both about five feet tall. Lydia must have made quite an impression on Barrie, for almost immediately he thought of a sketch, inspired by the vivacious ‘Russianness’ of his charming acquaintance (he could not have got to know at the time that this ‘vivaciousness’ would go far beyond the limits of anything one could possibly imagine).

By 1918, the twenty-seven-year-old Lydia Lopokova (born Lopukhova), had already become an uncontested prima of the Russian Ballet. A pupil of Mikhail Fokine and Karsavina’s younger tutee at the Russian Imperial Ballet School, her star chance came when she was invited to join the Diaghilev Ballets on their European tour of 1910 (Fokine, her teacher, was then the leading choreographer of the troupe). Always avid for sensation, and capitalising on Lopokova’s miniature figure and striking complexion, Diaghilev knocked a year off her age and promoted her as a teenage prodigy, starring in Fokine’s Carnival, Stravinsky’s Petrushka and even in L’Oiseau de feu – effectively in all Karsavina’s leading roles, although, unlike Karsavina, she was never compared to the iconic type of a flaming princess – only ‘to a sparrow, a canary, or at best to a humming bird.’ Her appearance was not remotely close to that of a ballerina of the classic formation. At just five feet, she was too short, with round, fairly plump shoulders. Her ports de bras were not perfect and neither were her tours, but she responded instinctively to Mikhail Fokine’s expressive choreography and his rebellion against the stiff academicism of the classical style. Swift, tiny and light as a feather, with a springing leap almost comparable to that of Nijinsky, her running on points, according to her brother, a prominent dancer and choreographer Fedor Lopukhov, was

50 Mackrell, p. xix.
infectiously gay and light, as if she were tripping on air [...] Her leg muscles were
remarkable and she could achieve an incredibly big leap, almost masculine in its power,
yet, at the same time, her flight through the air was as delicate, as was her landing.
Whereas [Nijinsky’s] leap reminded one of the jump and flight of a grasshopper,
Lydia’s resembled the [...] descent of dandelion down, like little angels portrayed in
the masterpieces of the quattrocento artists. 51

At nineteen she was the latest sensation of Diaghilev’s seasons; praised
by Jean Louis Vaudoyer (in the Variations on the Russian Ballet) for her
‘ingenious virtuosity, tempered’, in his words, ‘by the imperceptible awk-
wardness of youth.’ 52

It was indeed this astonishing combination of Lydia’s captivating
expressiveness, her Imperial grace and childlike enthusiasm 53 that the public
invariably took to their hearts. ‘Bewitching and piquant’ a critic for The
Globe called her; 54 and the New York Times stated that ‘Lopokova’s dancing
was thoroughly charming and of the kind to make the audience hang on
every gesture and change of expression.’ 55 Being somewhat the wrong shape
and size for a ballet-prima, she was, nonetheless, very pretty and was blessed
with natural vivacity and a sense of drama and rhythm. Cyril Beaumont,
who wrote at length about Lopokova, testifies that being accustomed ‘to
the sweet sadness of Karsavina’s intensely poetic style of dancing’, he was
struck by Lopokova’s personality, as much as by her ballet performance.
‘She never put on ballerina’s airs’, he notes,

As soon as she had taken leave of those who came to pay her homage, she would wipe
off her make-up – she never put on very much – and change into a simple short skirt,

---

(p. 52).
53 Thus, when listing to the journalists all things she favoured in the US, she was reported
to say ‘Of all the things which I like here most in America, the very most is the short
cake strawberry’ (New York Review, 12 August 1911, also quoted in Mackrell, p. 63).
54 The Globe, 20 January 1916; quoted in Nesta Macdonald, Diaghilev Observed by Critics
woolly jumper, and tam-o’-shanter, skipping home, like a schoolgirl let out of school. She had an ingenuous manner of talking, but she was very intelligent and witty, and, unlike some dancers, her conversation was not limited to herself and the Ballet.  

Unsurprisingly, Picasso, with whom Lopokova struck up a friendship while she was starring as a female acrobat in *Parade*, for which the artist designed the setting, found her irresistibly expressive (Lydia was also close friends with Olga Khokhlova – Picasso’s then wife and a former Diaghilev ballerina). He was very keen on sketching Lydia dancing; there remain several of his drawings of Lopokova, including a number of sketches of her performing the can-can in *La Boutique fantasque*, and the one (in green ink), where she is depicted alongside Diaghilev and Massine, as well as a pencil drawing of the ballerina as a sitter. It is also known that on his later visits to England in the 1950s, Picasso mentioned Lydia, as the first, and perhaps the only one, among his former acquaintances, whom he wished to talk to.  

Picasso, of course, was not alone among the men falling for the charms of the fascinating Russian. Lovers were played off against one another, even though Lydia had very little in her presence of what is commonly attributed to the seductively glossy type of *femme fatale*. In the words of Lydia Sokolova, one of Diaghilev’s ballet dancers: ‘She was sweet to everybody, never jealous and never coveting another dancer’s roles; but she always seems to be hopping off somewhere, and obviously valued her private life more than her life in a ballet troupe.’ She left her fiancé, the American journalist Heywood Broun, and instead married Randolfo Barocci (in 1916), the current business manager of the Ballets Russes – a smooth-talking cosmopolitan, who one day stole all her jewellery, and whom she eventually (1925) managed to divorce on the grounds of his bigamy, which he had difficulties to conceal. In the midst of the wartime European tour, she had an on-off fling with Stravinsky, who was still married to Ekaterina

---

57. Surits, p. 374.
Nosenko at the time, but already attracted to the Parisian actress Vera Sudeikina (who eventually became his second wife).  

When the Ballets Russes arrived in London in 1918, all men were quickly at her feet. Lopokova took part in practically every ballet performed during the season, and had a stunning success with both the public and the critics. She danced witty and coquettish Mariuccia in *The Good-Humoured Ladies* (based on Goldoni’s *Le Donne di buon umore*, music by Domenico Scarlatti), a Snowmaiden in Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Le Soleil de nuit*, a bacchante in *Cleopatra* (with new stage designs by Robert Delauney), and a doll in Rossini’s *La Boutique fantasque* (premiered on 5 June 1919) – the story of two mischievous dolls, who elope from a Victorian toyshop. This ballet, produced by Leonide Massine, Diaghilev’s latest choreographer – far more daring than all his predecessors, was a highlight of the 1919 London season. It provided a satirical outlook on nineteenth-century mores: with its caricatural human characters, and its dancing toys (Lopokova and Massine) strangely incongruous, as well as oddly touching. Roger Fry claimed that André Derain’s post-impressionist recreation of the ballet’s Victorian setting had refracted ‘the artistic impression of the past’ into a strikingly contemporary aesthetics.

Everyone loved it, including the most sceptical and the most demanding. The crowd filled every seat and every inch of the standing space in the Alhambra Theatre; and when Massine and Lydia danced their frenzied

59 Mackrell, p. 155.
60 In 1917 Massine collaborated with Satie, Picasso and Cocteau on *Parade* – the most overtly avant-garde, and outrightly ‘cubist’ creation of the Ballets Russes (premiered on 18 May 1917 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris). As regards his *Boutique fantasque*, Ezra Pound, writing under a pseudonym for the *New Age*, commented: ‘The costumes and staging give more of the spirit and “message” (or whatever they call it) of modern (very modern) art than all the dozen shows of greenery-yallery that a contemporary art-critic is called upon to see in a year […] Rossini fitted in perfectly, but was given new life, and the dancing exposed a new emotional violence […] The Boutique seems to me worthy of a permanent place in the art of the ballet’ (William Atheling [Ezra Pound], ‘At the Ballet’, *New Age*, 16 October 1919, p. 412).
can-can, which transformed her from an indolent porcelain doll into a bacchanate, ‘the audience began screaming and chanting their names’.

Cyril Beaumont leaves the following recollection of his impressions:

> Her body bends and sways as though fashioned of India rubber, her foot leaps above her head, wrists twist, turns revolve amidst a sea of foaming lace and ribbons [...] it is a thing of delirious joy leaving not a trace of the vulgarity that it might obtain were it performed by a lesser artist.

Barrie must have been aware of the stunning success of the performance: in March 1919 the revival of his one-act play *Half an Hour* at the London Coliseum was placed in a double bill with the Diaghilev Ballets. The run lasted for a couple of weeks, and the playwright, who had always been sceptical regarding the worthiness of the art of ballet, had an opportunity to get to know it at closer quarters. He, perhaps, became slightly more persuaded by *The Boutique* production, as a reference to it can be found in his sketch on the Russian dancers, the stage directions to which read: ‘The procession should be impressive – something like the carrying in the Boutique ballet.’

He started working on *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* in spring 1919. The new project was a full length fantasy play, featuring a Russian ballerina called Uvula – a ‘little grape’ (from Latin), which, as it seemed, was a telling emblem of Barrie’s petite, but extremely lively new friend. Uvula’s ‘bird-like motions’ and ‘hesitant English’ suggested further allusions to Lopokova, who was meant to take the lead in the play at the Haymarket in the autumn.

---

62 Mackrell, p. 146.
65 Lopokova’s idiosyncratic use of English was notoriously termed ‘Lydian English’ by Maynard Keynes (Mackrell, p. 198).
66 Mackail, p. 537.
The existing holograph contains only the opening scene of the original project, but the framework of the love story between Uvula and the English aristocrat Lord Vere becomes evident from the start. The scene is laid at the Veres’ private golf links with a distant view of the ancient house on a sunny summer morning. The Countess of Vere and her unmarried brother Bill (described as a ‘dark, designing villain’) are going to play against young Lord Vere and Mlle Uvula:

Lord Vere appears with Uvula, who makes ‘bird-like motions.’ Her English is somewhat hesitant, and when she is offered a putter, she stretches out her arms to Lord Vere, intimating that he should explain for her, and he interprets, saying that she wants to play her own games. The little golf dance follows [...] Uvula then goes off proudly on her toes – with Lord Vere, leaving Bill to tell Lady Vere that this is cheating. The latter protests the dancer’s innocence, but adds: ‘All the same one never knows.’

Two things are particularly notable about Barrie’s fantasy playlet. Its plot-line turned out to be surprisingly prophetic: Lopokova did become the wife of an English aristocrat. In 1925 she married an illustrious economist John Maynard Keynes (to the utter dismay of his Bloomsbury circle, who were very disdainful of Lydia’s origin and manners), and duly acquired the title of Lady Keynes, when her husband was ennobled (1942) as Lord Keynes, Baron of Tilton.

67 Cohen, pp. 31–2.
68 On 4 November 1923, Virginia Woolf wrote to Jacques Reverat: ‘On Sep 7th we went to stay with them at Studland – a ducal home, in which they fared rather uneasily, I thought, because the duke’s servants were in the pantry; and Lydia’s habits, of course, are not ducal [...] I assure you it’s tragic to see her sitting down to King Lear. Nobody can take her seriously: every nice young man kisses her. Then she flies into a rage and says she is like Vanessa, like Virginia [...] – a serious woman.’ And on 8 June of the same year: ‘Maynard is passionately and pathetically in love, because he sees very well that he’s dished if he marries her, and she has him by the snout. You can’t argue solidly when Lydia’s there, and as we set now to the decline, and prefer reason to any amount of high spirits, Lydia’s pranks put us all on edge’ (Milo Keynes, ‘Lydia Lopokova’, in Lydia Lopokova, ed. Milo Keynes (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), pp. 1–38 (pp. 19–20)).
As regards the staging, ironically, the project has never been put into being (at least in its original version), for in July 1919, when *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* was nearly half-written, Lopokova suddenly vanished, giving nobody any warning and abruptly breaking all her obligations to Diaghilev’s troupe. ‘There is some stir tonight about the absence of Mlle. Lydia Lopokova from the Russian Ballet at the Alhambra,’ wrote The Manchester Guardian, ‘Everyone was more or less mystified concerning her non-appearance, and no one seemed to know where she was. The stage manager wore a harassed, anxious look, and Mlle. Nemchinova, her understudy, wandered restlessly about the stage in nervous excitement.’ In a note left to the company manager Sergei Grigoriev, she pleaded ill health, exhaustion and a nervous breakdown and for a couple of months nobody had any idea of what had become of her. She broke her absence in February 1921 in New York, where she performed in Mikhail Fokine’s production (rather poor) of *The Rose Girl*, and in spring despite all odds, she was dancing again with the Diaghilev Ballets, first in Madrid, then in Paris and finally in London. Diaghilev, known for his intolerance of any kind of disciplinary matters, seemed to have a soft spot for his little prima: ‘Will you have Lopokova back?’, Lopokova’s manager cabled to him in Paris, ‘Yes, if it is the same Lopokova I knew’ – followed the reply. Meanwhile, Barrie had difficulties in proceeding with the play. He was distinctly annoyed by the ballerina, on whom he counted for the entire venture; hence a menacing subtitle that he added to the subsequent draft of *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* (dated September 1920), which was

71 Surits, p. 375. An attempt to account for these months of Lopokova’s life can be found in Mackrell, pp. 158–60).
72 Quoted in Keynes, p. 6. According to the other members of the troupe, Lopokova had a unique ability to stand up to the anger of the ‘Big Serge’: ‘When she stood looking up at Big Serge (which was what she called Diaghilev) with her screwed-up little bun of hair, the tip of her nose quivering, and an expression between laughter and tears, I defy anybody to say she wasn’t worth her weight in gold’ (Sokolova, p. 74).
now to be called ‘A Warning in One Act’. And although this ‘warning’
was eventually effaced from the final version of the playlet, it shows how
deply Barrie was affected by the events. Moreover, one can say that Mary
Rose, one of Barrie’s major plays completed precisely during these summer
months of 1919, also bears some features of the disturbing Lopokova affair.
The female protagonist of Mary Rose keeps vanishing without any trace
each time she sets foot on a particularly remote Scottish Island: firstly for
weeks and then for decades, turning eventually into a ghost. When she is
found again, she is not a single day older and has no awareness of the pas-
sage of time. While completing Mary Rose, Barrie of course could not have
known of Lopokova’s miraculous reappearance in Diaghilev’s ballets, but
the parallel between her desertion and an odd habit of evaporation of the
main character in Mary Rose should not be overlooked.

Given the difficulty of the situation, it is not clear why the story of the
Russian dancers had not been dropped altogether and forgotten. In a few
months, however, it was successfully reconfigured into a one-act extravaga-
anz and targeted at another uncontested prima of the Diaghilev Ballets.
Tamara Karsavina was living in London at the time. Barrie happened to
know her through the family of his godson Peter Scott, the son of Captain
Robert Scott, who led two expeditions to the Antarctic regions. This is
how Karsavina describes it in her recollections:

At the end of 1919 [20 October] Kathleen Scott [widow of the Antarctic explorer]
had told me that Sir James Barrie had been working on a play for me. I could not
however bring myself to believe my luck until one day Kathleen took me to see Barrie

73 Cohen, p. 32.
74 The widow of the explorer, Kathleen Scott, née Edith Agnes Kathleen Bruce, was
related to Karsavina’s husband Henry James Bruce (‘Benjie’) – an English diplomat
who married the ballerina in 1915 in St Petersburg (Benjie’s father, Sir Hervey Juckes
Lloyd Bruce, was Kathleen’s first cousin).
75 The date is given in the diaries of Kathleen Scott, who presents a very similar descrip-
tion of this episode: ‘I took Karsavina to see Barrie. When she said “How do you
do?” , he said “Oh, you can talk! I didn’t know you could talk,” She faltered something
about her accent. He replied, “No, but it’s so disappointing. I thought you couldn’t
talk, except with your feet.” Poor Tamara was beginning to think I had brought her
'I have written a play for you,' he (Barrie) said in his peculiar rasping voice, and had a fit of coughing.
'I speak English with a Russian accent,' I replied.
'Oh, can you speak at all? I didn't know.'
He then read the play. His strong Scotch accent, his cough, and to tell the truth, the play itself, rather overwhelmed me. I even thought at times that he was pulling my leg. After the reading he told me that he first intended the name Uvula for me, but it occurred to him that it might be taken as an allusion to the part of the palate so-called, and he changed it into Karissima, which should be spelt with a K so as to resemble my own name.  

One of the most obvious themes of Barrie’s sketch on the Russian dancers is that of cultural dialogue and communication, which can be read as a playful double-edged parody directed evenly and neutrally at both sides. On the one hand, the Russian dancers clearly stand out from everything associated with the acceptable norm. They are called into being by a mysterious master-spirit – something of a Diaghilev or, perhaps of the magician in *Petrushka* – and can only express themselves through their own medium (‘they find it so much jollier to talk with their toes’), which remains incomprehensible to the respectable traditionalists, like the elderly Veres:

**Lady Vere**

Whatever I say to Karissima she dances the reply, and I must admit that keeping up a conversation with her is rather a strain. Roger tells me that the clever London audiences understand at once what she is saying to them with her toes, but I am too stupid.

In brief, their origin is hazy – an inauspicious sign for respectable society, and their language is improper – the parallel with Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1914) to see a madman, but presently discovered what he meant, and all went well. He read an entertaining play, in which everyone else talks and she dances. She is made love to, gets married, has a baby, and dies, all dancing – very beautiful and Barrie’ (Kathleen Scott [Lady], *Self-Portrait of an Artist* (London: John Murray, 1949), p. 178).  

---

springs to mind. Nonetheless, within the medium of their communicative habits, the Russian Dancers seem to be inherently more creative and possess a greater degree of freedom of expression than that allocated to their English counterpart by the prescriptiveness of their lines. Karissima’s unspoken part (as well as those of her maids) is presented exclusively by way of stage directions; and it is effectively for the performer to translate this outline into her own version of dramatic gestures and dance. Here are but a few examples: ‘KARISSIMA makes some steps [...] of an excited, endearing character’; ‘KARISSIMA is eager’; ‘KARISSIMA makes movements which mean all this is Greek to her’; ‘KARISSIMA approaches her in movements that are an appeal for love’; ‘KARISSIMA droops pathetically.’

Such a distinct difference in the mode of communication has a clear symbolic meaning on the compositional level of Barrie’s playlet: the element of fantasy and beauty associated with the ‘Russianness’ of the Dancers is pitted against the unimaginative rigidity and conventionality of the English life (‘there is no feeling for art in this country’).

In this context, it is worth pointing out that the figure of the Maestro is liminal with regard to this symbolic separation. Strictly speaking the Maestro should also express himself through the language of mime; for who is more a member of the world of the Russian dancers than their master himself? This apparent inconsistency was noted by certain critics, who pointed out that ‘the author commits the mistake of giving him [the Maestro] a speaking part.’ And indeed, the division between two worlds, ‘the conventional’ and ‘the exotically Russian’, would have been more pronounced, given that the ballet master had also expressed himself by way of gestures and dance (though the directions assert that ‘he should probably be a dancer and have ballet movements of a restrained order’).

---

79 Ibid. pp. 18–19.
80 Ibid. p. 29.
81 Johnson, p. 113.
82 Barrie, p. 22.
in which according to *The Times*, the Maestro was ‘blessed neither with speech nor dancing’, and yet expressed ‘himself to every one’s satisfaction.’

Judging from the number of amendments in the earlier versions of the playlet, Barrie had certain difficulties (or hesitations) in conveying the ‘Russianness’ of his Maestro. Initially (in the draft) the latter was associated with Diaghilev in a much clearer and more straightforward manner (thus being perceived as unequivocally Russian); and two names of the well-known patrons of the Diaghilev Ballets, Edward Marsh and Lady Edwards, were conspicuously mentioned in relation to Maestro’s identity and his past:

| Lord Vere  | Uncle, in confidence, what do they say about him in London? |
| Bill      | Wonderful – colossal! |
| Lord Vere | But what do those in the know say about him? What does Eddie Marsh say – or Lady Edwards? |

Sir Edward Marsh or Eddie, as he is called in the draft, was private secretary to Winston Churchill and a great patron of avant-garde art. He famously called Diaghilev’s *Jeux* a ‘Post-Impressionist picture put in motion’, and made a lot of positive comments on the Ballets Russes in his correspondence, as well as in contemporary publications such as *The English Review*, *The New Statesman*, *The Nation*, and *Rhythm*. As regards Lady Edwards, although Selma Jeanne Cohen describes her as a fictitious character in her notes to Barrie’s playlet, one can argue that the name suggests a clear reference to Misia Sert (Edwards), who was known for her long-lasting association with Diaghilev, her involvement in all creative aspects of the Ballets Russes,

84 Cohen, p. 32.
85 Garafola, p. 475; see also Susan Jones, ‘Knowing the Dancer: Modernism, Choreography, and the Question of Authority’, in *Authority Matters: Rethinking the Theory and Practice of Authorship*, ed. Stephen Donovan, Danuta Zadworna-Fjellestad and Rolf Lundén (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 193–222 (p. 198). It is in his letter to Edward Marsh that Rupert Brooke expressed his wish to become a ballet-designer, like Diaghilev: ‘They, if anything, can redeem our civilisation, I’ll give everything to be a ballet-designer’ (Marsh, p. lxxvii, also quoted in Buckle, p. 236).
86 Cohen, p. 34.
and for her friendship with its major dancers. Throughout the years Misia was the monetary ballast for the often financially ruined Maestro. It was she who rescued the opening night of Petrushka, when it was delayed twenty minutes because the creditors refused to release the costumes without a payment: ‘pale and agitated he [Diaghilev] asked if she could give him four thousand francs to pay for the costumes. “In those happy days,” Misia said, “one’s chauffeur was always waiting.” In ten minutes she was back with money.’ Misia became the wife of José Maria Sert in August 1920, and was still known as Misia Edwards when Barrie was working on The Truth about the Russian Dancers. At that time she was married (unhappily) to Alfred Edwards, the newspaper magnate and the founder of Le Matin, a French adaptation of the British daily newspaper The Morning News.

These associations were effaced from the later versions of the script, and instead, the Russianness of the Maestro was affirmed by giving him a miming part – the same mode of expression as the Russian ballerinas. The stage directions of this draft manuscript say that ‘he can only express himself in dancing and dramatic look and actions’. For instance, when Lord Vere comments on his wife’s beauty, ‘Maestro indicates how glorious he thinks her. Indicates her figure better made’; and when Karissima dies, Maestro’s actions are interpreted by Lord Vere in words his mother can understand; in this case, Barrie remarks, Maestro is to ‘say his lines, not with dramatic gestures, but with movements of his feet’.

Maestro’s speech is retained in the final version of the text, and he is not given any more specific features relating him to the celebrated Russian ballet-master (Diaghilev). For reasons unknown, Barrie decided to play down the Russian overtones of his whimsical lot, associating it more with the notion of ‘the bizarre’ (the scene ‘must have a look of the bizarre, as in the Russian ballet’) rather than with the specific markers of the Russian tradition. Towards the end, he even began to have certain doubts about

88 Mackrell, p. 160.
89 Cohen, p. 33.
90 Barrie, p. 13.
the Russian affiliation in the title, for in one of the later versions of the manuscript ‘he crossed out “The Truth about the Russian Dancers”, calling it simply a “Ballet-Play”’.91

It would be sheer speculation to discuss why Barrie came up with such a decision. Most of the time he was driven by intuition rather than by any kind of rational concerns: ‘Don’t ask me what I mean, I don’t know myself’, he used to respond to Karsavina’s questions.92 His play unreservedly charmed everyone who came to see it; even the ballet connoisseurs fell under its spell, for, as Denis Mackail put it in his biography of Barrie,

his words and story were in entire and flattering sympathy with the most mysterious of the arts. [...] and no one had a keener eye for absurdity, but he had seen and made others see the Russian Ballet [...] leading a consistent, preposterous, and unearthly life of their own.93

It is difficult to disagree with Mackail’s perceptive comment, which leads to some further inferences to be discussed. With his keen sense of irony and his feel for the unreal, Barrie managed to see through the icon that for years was associated with the notion of echt-Russian, and conventionally taken as an embodiment of what was then characterised as the Russian myth. As it happens, there was not much ‘Russianness’ in Barrie’s Dancers (concerning the text, as well as the production), which effectively put under question the emblematic authenticity of the reference source.

As regards the decorative aspect of the performance, although Paul Nash’s costumes and designs were labelled by the papers as being appropriately ‘Anglo-Bakst-ish’,94 put together in such an imaginative way that they received ‘the Diaghileff blessing’,95 the play’s scenery and decorations

91 Cohen, p. 33.
93 Mackail, p. 545.
94 ‘Karsavina and Barrie’, p. 14. The colours of the original were: walls, a wide range of gray; balcony, doors and staircase, pink; stair carpet and candles, Indian red; window curtains, dark blue (illustration in Theatre Arts Magazine 6 (1920), p. 188).
bore hardly any resemblance to Bakst’s characteristically brazen, exuberant and gaudy settings (not to mention any specific Russian references and overtones).

Figure 6. Original design: *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* by Paul Nash. Victoria and Albert Museum.

In the early post-World War I years, Paul Nash was working in a semi-abstract Cubist-influenced style – hence his fascination with theatre as a particular form of abstraction of the real. Early in 1919 Nash was engaged on paintings commissioned by the Department of Information for the newly established Imperial War Museum. ‘His poetic imagination’, writes Myfanwy Piper, ‘instead of being crushed by the terrible circumstances of war, had expanded to produce terrible images – terrible because of their combination of detached, almost abstract, appreciation and their truth to appearance.’

His paintings of the time, for instance *The Menin Road* (1919),

look almost like deserted theatre sets with side screens and backdrops, revealing his interest in this stage-like style of interpretative generalisation.\footnote{His paintings of this period, for instance \textit{The Menin Road} (1919), are almost like deserted stage sets with side screens and backdrops, revealing his interest in the theatre (see David Boyd Haycock, \textit{Paul Nash} (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), p. 45).}

It was at the time of Nash’s experimentation with abstract techniques that he created the settings for \textit{The Truth of about the Russian Dancers}, which certainly bore witness to this type of formal explorations, and which, as Henry James Bruce (Karsavina’s husband) pointed out, came as a bit of a shock for the unsuspecting author:

[Paul Nash] had designed a set for the stately Scottish home where the action of the play was to take place which gave Barrie, when he saw it, a gasping shock. He had no doubt, bless his heart, visualized a nice ‘straight’ set with lots of old oak and antlers. What he got was something very different. He could only hastily write a line into somebody’s speech about the stately home having ‘gone a little queer’ owing to the presence of a Russian dancer and let it go at that.\footnote{Henry James Bruce, \textit{Thirty Dozen Moons} (London: Constable, 1949), p. 45.}

Barrie’s added line (‘the scene […] must have a touch of the bizarre as in the Russian ballet’\footnote{Barrie, p. 13.}) has never been written into the characters’ speeches. The phrase occurs only in the author’s stage directions, but what is more important in this context is the promptness with which a link was created between the Russianness and ‘the bizarre’, and the readiness to read the former as an emblem of ‘the weird’ rather than in line with its proper cultural connotation.
Figure 7. Costume design by Paul Nash (for Tamara Karsavina). Victoria and Albert Museum.
The allegedly Russian tone of the show (if one has to find any) floated up exclusively through Arnold Bax’s ‘allusively witty’\textsuperscript{100} music. Out of

\textsuperscript{100} ‘T’, p. 236.
the three main ‘authors’ of the production, which was at once decorative, musical and dramatic, he was the only one familiar with Russian culture, to which he did make some impressionistic allusions in the incidental score he composed for the play. In 1910 Bax spent almost a year travelling around Russia and Ukraine in vain pursuit of a faithless Ukrainian beauty, Natalia Skarginska. His travels brought him to St Petersburg, Moscow and Lubny (near Kiev), and provoked a life-long fascination with the Russian theme. And although his relationship with Skarginska resulted in an emotional agony, from which he never recovered, the Russian theme inspired his first and second piano sonatas (composed respectively in 1910 and 1919 they were notably influenced by Liadov and Glazunov\(^{101}\)), as well as a series of shorter piano pieces such as *Nocturne–May Night in the Ukraine* and *Gopak (Russian dance)* of 1912, and *In a Vodka Shop* of 1915.

Like many lovers of theatre and performance arts, he was infatuated by the first series of Diaghilev’s seasons, to the extent that in 1911 he produced *Tamara* – a little Russian fairy tale in action and dance, dedicated to Tamara Karsavina. Unfortunately, by the time he had completed the composition, the title happened to have been used in another Karsavina-related ballet, *Thamar*, set to the music of Mily Balakirev and premiered on 20 May 1912. To avoid confusion, Bax changed the title to *King Kojata* (after a relatively minor character) before abandoning it altogether. Karsavina knew nothing about the ballet until after Bax’s death and despite her friendship with the composer in connection with Barrie’s playlet. Bax also wrote few pieces for Diaghilev Ballets. In 1919–20 he was one of the four British composers to be commissioned to write an orchestral interlude for the Ballets Russes London season (for the commission, he incorporated the three above-mentioned piano works into the *Russian Suite* for orchestra); and subsequently Diaghilev asked him to orchestrate two short movements by Liadov (*Prelude* and *Lament*) for the 1919 revival of *Les Contes Russes*. It would certainly appear that Bax and Harriet Cohen, a famous pianist and Bax’s mistress, became well known among Diaghilev’s circle. Cohen wrote how

at the Savoy grill after rehearsals or performance, we would all sup gaily enough and sit later in Diaghilev’s suite until all hours making plans and discussing decors. It was through these discussions that I was fired with love of impressionistic and contemporary art. It was here that incredible drolleries about music were said, especially when Prokovieff was around. I shall ever remember the two Sergeis on the one hand, vying with Evans and Bax in their iconoclasms, on the other. ‘Sewing-machine music’, said Arnold of Bach’s Suites (he did not object to the later Preludes and Fugues, it seemed); but Diaghilev rather shocked the others in his denunciation of Beethoven, whom he described as a ‘mummy, a corpse’, dismissing the whole of the Violin Concerto, which he said was ‘music from the morgue’, whereas they said it was only the ‘Rondo’ they could not stand – ‘turning and spinning like some horrible top.’ Stravinsky of course, was frequently at hand with wonderful ideas.\textsuperscript{102}

Initially, Bax was introduced to Diaghilev by Edwin Evans, a well known contemporary music critic and a great champion of the Russian composers associated with the Russian Ballets. Later on, Evans became Karsavina’s music adviser,\textsuperscript{103} and it is not coincidental therefore that it was he who suggested Bax should write the music for Barrie’s playlet.\textsuperscript{104} Bax wrote the score very quickly, using parts of his earlier (1911–12) unpublished \textit{Tamara} ballet, which belonged to the time when his compositional ideas were considerably influenced by the Russian theme. The Russian references are conspicuously enhanced in the finale, through a direct quotation from Balakirev’s \textit{Thamar}, which always remained one of Bax’s favourite pieces.\textsuperscript{105} In the words of Bax’s biographer (Lewis Foreman), however, the music he composed for \textit{The Truth about the Russian Dancers} gained its Russian overtones not through the direct citations \textit{per se}, but through ‘rather clever suggestions of the characteristics of the music played for the Russian Ballet’.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{102} Harriet Cohen, \textit{A Bundle of Time} (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 46.
\textsuperscript{103} As a result, Bax was commissioned to write a solo piece for the ballerina (the \textit{Slave-Girl} for piano), which she performed during a fortnight’s season at the Coliseum with Harriet Cohen at the piano (Cohen, p. 48).
\textsuperscript{104} Foreman, p. 173. The movements from the ballet were all broadcast during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a part of a suite from the whole work, though in no case were more than five movements (out of eight) done at any one time (Foreman, pp. 174–5).
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. p. 175.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. p. 175.
Being deeply interested in Diaghilev’s style, Bax developed a keen sense of the theatrical and the parodic, and it was these essentially modernist overtones that he highlighted in his work.

The same can be said about Barrie’s own projection of the Russian dancers. Within the framework of the playlet, they were presented as different, innovative, aesthetically pleasing, mesmerising and exotic, but hardly representative of their own country, of its native idiom, of its tradition and its cause. Their world constituted an expressive medium of its own; and their Russianness was employed not for highlighting the folkloric, but in a typically modernist way of challenging and defamiliarising the norm. Furthermore, it is acutely uncanny how in this insightful observation Barrie managed to encapsulate the very essence of Diaghilev’s project, with regard to both its aesthetic platform and its social status in the early 20s, when the dramatist was working on his play.

Concerning its aesthetic features, according to the majority of scholars, it was largely this modernist, and essentially cosmopolitan, idea of ‘the evocative’ and ‘the expressive’, to which Diaghilev responded in his ballets. Simon Karlinsky, for instance pointed out that

> In Petrouchka Stravinsky turned his back on both the ethnographic approach and the Western-style sugarcoating of folklore that were implicit in the nineteenth-century Russian musical aesthetic, this process was deepened in The Rite, where [...] Stravinsky deformed both Lithuanian and Slavic materials with a sovereign freedom in a manner that may be termed cubistic. ¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Ramsay Burt argued that it was not the authenticity of the folk material *per se* that was important for Nijinsky and Stravinsky, ‘but the meaning that, in its fragmented form, it evoked in a dislocated, modern

---

context, and the affective impact they could achieve through its use. Diaghilev believed that the artist’s role was not to reflect or interpret the idiom of the native culture, but to create a new one of its own; and in this reality of imagination, art should be the means of unlocking experience. Moreover, although in the West the innovative qualities of the Russian Ballets were linked, at least at the beginning, to the ‘otherness’ of the Russian cultural tradition, Prince Lieven (one of the first historians of the Ballets Russes) maintained that it all seemed as provocative and new to the Russians, as to anyone else. In this context, it is also worth quoting Alexander Benois’ revealing comment. As one of Diaghilev’s most influential stage designers and an instrumental figure in the formation of his aesthetic imagination and taste, he drew attention to the fact that the very idea behind the project could not be further removed from that of a ‘Russian export campaign’: ‘the point was that we showed to Europe the European, though miraculously preserved, invigorated and transformed; this lent special significance to our performance and facilitated our noteworthy success.’

In the same vein, concerning its social and cultural affiliation, there was fairly little Russianness left in the company by the early 20s. Could Diaghilev and his dancers be regarded as the representatives of the Imperial Russian tradition? This was hardly the case, for the great Maestro was known for his low opinion of the latter. His company was founded as a rebellion against the Russian Imperial Ballet, which Diaghilev persistently dismissed as monotonously obsolete and devoid of perspective. (The Imperial Court, in its turn, affirmed separation by instructing the Embassies not to lend countenance to the Ballets Russes). Even less, however, could Diaghilev be equated with the notion of the contemporary Russian socialist agenda. By 1918 Diaghilev, his choreographers and his dancers were stateless exiles

111 Green and Swan, p. 63.
from a Bolshevik country wracked by the rampages of the Civil War. In the past Diaghilev had regarded Russia’s aristocrats with a mixture of diffidence and disdain. Now he had no choice other than to rally the troupe’s prestige in the eyes of London highborn émigré circles, by organising charity galas in aid of the Russian Relief Fund and others, and conspicuously identifying himself with their cause.\footnote{Garafola, p. 333.} Thus, for instance, when declining an invitation to attend a public banquet honouring the Russian ballet, he asserted, While our country is in its present tragic condition, we Russians naturally feel [...] unable to accept the offer of a public festivity, even on artistic grounds. Especially now, when the Dowager Empress has arrived in England a fugitive, and when we hear daily that people are dying of hunger in Petrograd, we feel it behoves us to abstain from public functions of this kind.\footnote{‘The Russian Ballet. No Public Festivity’, \textit{The Times}, 14 May 1919, p. 14; also quoted in Garafola, p. 333.}

As a person with a considerable social and artistic sensibility Diaghilev could not but feel that the belle époque that had seen the birth of the Ballets Russes had been shattered forever. All references that supported the notable strand of the so-called Russian style, which he forged, nourished and developed, were irrevocably effaced; it was time to move on. Subsequently, Diaghilev’s great themes – Russia, the classical world and the Orient – became treated in the contemporary context, acquiring some distinctly international tones and reflecting such topical interests as beach culture, cinema and sport. By 1920 the company underwent a considerable revision of its repertoire, to which new ballets were added each year. French avant-garde artists such as Matisse, Derain and Braque designed productions, which were no longer dominated by Russian music, and Leonide Massine emerged as a talented new choreographer, drawing on influences from the countries of his travels, notably Italy (\textit{The Good-Humoured Ladies}, 1917, music by Scarlatti; \textit{La Boutique fantasque}, 1919, music by Rossini) and Spain (\textit{Le Tricorne} or \textit{El sombrero de tres picos}, 1919, music by Manuel de Falla).
Both socially and artistically the Ballets Russes were no longer representative of all things Russian: the company became an artificially maintained artistic project, which relied largely on Diaghilev’s personal charisma and led a fairly detached life of its own.

All these overtones were keenly conveyed in Barrie’s *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*, though in his characteristically subtle, symbolist meta-theatrical way. Moreover, in Barrie’s playlet one can also pick up the reference concerning the end of the Russian Ballets. Regardless of the play’s joyful gaiety and happy resolution, the closing scene suggests that the world of the Russian dancers is doomed to perish; and in this respect, it is not coincidental that the motif of dying was highlighted in the playbill, announcing that *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* would be ‘showing how they love […] how they are made with how they die.’

According to the script, Karissima’s life is miraculously spared. However, it is the death of Maestro (‘*lord vere (examines him and indicates that life is extinct)*’) that signifies the ultimate end of the world of the Russian dancers, for there will be no one ‘to mend’ and ‘fix’ his precious ballerinas or produce a replacement for those who are ‘broken’ beyond repair. Remarkable as it may seem, Barrie’s flow of fantasy, or maybe a premonition, does bring to mind the real end of the Russian Ballets (for which Diaghilev had always been a pivotal driving force and *raison d’être*). Not unlike the death of the almighty Maestro in Barrie’s playlet, Diaghilev’s death in Venice almost a decade later in 1929, resulted in the definitive end of the Ballets Russes project, and the company was virtually instantaneously dispersed.

It is highly ironic, in this context, that it may well be Diaghilev himself who should be credited for the play’s ending. The first version of the manuscript did not end on a positive note; and a happy resolution turned out to be a relatively late addition to the script. Lady Kathleen Scott mentions in her diaries that on 1 November 1919 (in three months’ time after Barrie introduced the play to Karsavina) she went to the ballet. ‘Diaghilev came and talked to me,’ she maintains, ‘and said he liked Barrie’s play for

---

115 Barrie, p. 30.
Karsavina, but disliked the end. She ought at least to come to life again.” It would be sheer speculation to assume that Lady Scott passed Diaghilev’s idea to Barrie, but as it happens, the playwright did change the ending along his lines.

Barrie has rarely been regarded as an overt social commentator. He did not belong to the so-called contemporary New Drama movement searching to revise both the Edwardian theatrical conventions and the conservative consumerist ideology promoted by the bourgeois Society drama. Unlike some of his fellow playwrights (Shaw, Galsworthy and to a certain extent Granville-Barker), he was firmly associated with the West End commercial stage. His plays were frequently revived and produced by the most successful administrators (such as, for instance, Charles Frohman); and ‘in a time in which revolt had become something of a convention, Barrie had been distinguished by standing apart from the protestants.”

Nonetheless, this should not be taken as meaning that Barrie used to remain deaf to the artistic polemics and theatrical controversies of his time. Critics often saw his works as pamphlets or an ‘ironical treatise’, and William Archer ‘solemnly expressed his doubts whether the dramatist had the smallest idea of the immensity of his attack upon the constituted social order of the country.’ As Jean Chothia pointed out, Barrie somehow ‘stands between the Society dramatists and the writers of minority drama, whose themes he often absorbed into lighter, less testing, plotting and characterisation.’ And indeed, Barrie frequently resorted to theatrical form itself to expose the limitations of the conventional drama and theatre practice. Alice-Sit-By-The-Fire (1905), for instance, underscores the contrived nature of the ‘well-made play’. William Archer called it ‘an effective

116 Scott, p. 178.
119 Ibid. p. 73.
piece of dramatic criticism’, which, he maintained, is ‘like a commentary-in-action upon [his] article of last week; but it will do more [...] to render impossible the play of artificial situation and mendacious self-sacrifice.’[^121] ‘A Slice of Life’ (1910), Barrie’s pointed satire of the ‘discussion play’, was read by the *Times* reviewer as ‘a picture of the absurdities and self-conscious tricks of the modern play, which is a masterpiece of most delicate and searching dramatic criticism.’[^122] The same can be said about his *Rosy Rapture* (1915) – a lighthearted parody of a musical with ‘its incompetent chorus [and] the grotesqueness of melodrama’;[^123] and his *Punch: A Toy Tragedy* (1906), which places ‘conventional theatre’ next to the ‘new drama’ in the same way as the dated and worn out puppets are juxtaposed to the cheerful and energetic ‘Superpunch’ (a witty reference to Shaw’s *Man and Superman*[^124]).

One can see that Barrie never stopped participating in the debates on contemporary theatre and its problems, although employing to this effect his own critical methods and representation techniques. His mode and his language were more akin to those of Symbolist drama. It is not coincidental that Maurice Maeterlinck once declared that *Peter Pan* was the father

[^123]: *Graphic*, 27 March 1915, p. 412.
[^124]: The reference is conspicuously highlighted in the stage directions, when Barrie mentions that his character should look ‘not like Mr Shaw, but like the man who played Superman’. Barrie’s precision in this comment was bluntly teasing and ironic, for Mr Granville-Barker, who played John Tanner in *Man and Superman* at the Court Theatre in 1905, was made up so that he had a distinctly Shavian look. (See Leon H. Hugo, ‘Punch: J. M. Barrie’s Gentle Swipe at “Supershaw”’, *Shaw: Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 10 (1990), pp. 60–72 (p. 62); Jan McDonald, ‘Barrie and the New Dramatists’, *Gateway to the Modern: Resituating J. M. Barrie*, ed. Valentine Bold and Andrew Nash (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2014), pp. 1–16 (p. 6).) Shaw did not miss the joke, and when his own play, *Press Cuttings* (1909), was refused a licence because living characters (allegedly Lord Roberts) were presented on stage, he protested claiming that he himself had been thus “represented on the stage” [...] in a little fantasy by no less well-known an author than [his] friend Mr J. M. Barrie’ (G. B. Shaw, ‘The Censor’s Revenge’, *The Times*, 26 June 1909, p. 10).
of the *Blue Bird*, and it is within the framework of this notion that one has to look for interpretation in Barrie’s works.

In *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*, the idea of the alienated, self-contained and self-referential world of Diaghilev’s Ballets finds its symbolic manifestation in the claustrophobic group of Russian ballerinas, which, similar to an exclusive club, has a strictly fixed number of lifetime members, and someone has to drop out (die) in order to make a space for the newcomers. As the Maestro put it, ‘a dancer, past her best, can always be found to give her life for a newcomer’ to enable the eminence of Russian ballet to live on. Curious as it may seem, by highlighting these notions of auto-referentiality and exclusive focus on the medium Barrie touched upon something (albeit inadvertently) that in several decades would be foregrounded by modern theorists of culture as the major characteristic traits of modernist works. In his *Politics of Modernism*, for instance, Raymond Williams maintains that it was the experience of exile, of uprooting and migrating to a foreign metropolis that was central to the creation of the formal innovation made by the early modernists in their art:

Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices.

Similarly, when analysing the sense of ‘the new’ in Diaghilev’s ballets, Ramsay Burt sees it in their exclusive focus on and exploration of the medium, as well as in the fact that they effectively ‘purged the ballet vocabulary of outmoded representational forms and conventions.

In this sense, Barrie’s imaginary world of the Russian dancers can be regarded as an interpretative abstraction. On a mythopoetic level, the notion of its auto-referentiality, or using Burt’s wording ‘the exclusive focus

---

125 Ormond, p. 151.
126 Barrie, p. 29.
128 Burt, p. 75.
on the medium’, is inferred by the fact that all these ballerinas are ‘crafted’ out of nowhere with a chisel and putty.

**Bill**

Hold my hand, Jane, something awful is coming. It is said that he [Maestro] makes them.

**Lady Vere**

Made Karissima?

**Bill**

Made all of the Russian Dancers!

**Lady Vere**

Are you going crazy! How can he make them?

**Bill**

I don’t know yet. That is what I have to find out – But he makes them somehow – with chisels and putty, I daresay.

**Lady Vere**

That sweet girl! I have always found her so truthful, Bill. I am sure if she was made with chisel and putty she would have told me so.

**Bill**

I don’t suppose she knows – I daresay none of them know. That man keeps a lot of things up his sleeve.\(^{129}\)

This idea is persistently reiterated in various forms throughout the playlet, including, for instance, the episode when Maestro practically manufactures Lord Vere and Karissima’s child in the likeness of his father’s portrait:

**Maestro** returns carrying a bag and an easel [...] The canvas is an incomplete picture of a baby which must be very like **Lord Vere**. He compares the two pictures thoughtfully, then out of bag takes a wax arm of a child and puts it against child picture. Evidently he is making a child to pass off as Lord Vere’s. He produces a chisel and putty;\(^{130}\)

or the midnight conversation between Lord Vere and Maestro:

**Lord Vere**

She is exquisite, Maestro! [...] All women are so inferior.

**Maestro**

She is so much better made.\(^{131}\)

One can say that at times the text effectively lends itself to the notion of ekphrasis, praising Karissima as an exquisite object of art:

---

\(^{129}\) Barrie, p. 15.

\(^{130}\) Ibid. p. 25.

\(^{131}\) For instance, in the midnight conversation between Maestro and Lord Vere: ‘**Lord Vere**: She is exquisite, Maestro! [...] All women are so inferior. **Maestro**: She is so much better made’ (Ibid. p. 24).
It was I who made her – fashioned her so exquisitely. Made her? That strange tale is true? Just as I made the child – just as I made them all. But there was none so wonderful as Karissima.\(^{132}\)

In connection to this, the reference to Pygmalion (this time to the myth) is brought to mind by these lines. Akin to Galatea, the world of the Russian dancers is an admirable icon of perfection – an Apollonian source of creativity, which dazzles and enchants everyone who happens to step into its light.

The marriage of the young couple, Karissima and Lord Vere, is shown, symbolically, as a positive way forward; hence the child – a symbol of the future, who in no time acquires the language ‘spoken’ by his Russian side, and chases butterflies specifically on his toes:

She is glad that he is chasing butterflies. Does he chase them on his toes? Yes. Then all is well.\(^{133}\)

Not unlike the marriage of Pygmalion and Galatea, blessed with their son Paphos, the future is bestowed upon the offspring of ‘the traditional’ and ‘the exotic’, who, according to the Maestro, is ‘by far more beautiful than those who come in the common English way’.\(^{134}\) Even the most conservative seemed to be persuaded by the union, expressing their readiness to start the conversation \textit{à-la-Russe} with their toes: ‘They all join in the dance on their toes. Even LORD VERE, LADY VERE and BILL are on their toes. It should be wildly gay.’\(^{135}\)

Further to the point, it is worth looking deeper into Barrie’s interpretation of this dialogue with the ‘other’, for at the beginning of the 1920s a simple reference to ‘the wonderfully exotic’ was hardly seen as an original stance. Since the years of the industrial revolution, the arts of the East have

\(^{132}\) Ibid. p. 29.
\(^{133}\) Ibid. p. 29.
\(^{134}\) Ibid. p. 29.
\(^{135}\) Ibid. p. 30.
been regarded as an antidote to the rationalism of European civilisation; and it is along these lines that the emotionally charged Russian tradition (Karissima) is juxtaposed to the rigid conservatism of English life. Moreover, not only were non-Western societies thought of as being untainted by the perilous effects of industrialisation, they were also perceived as morally superior in terms of being sincerer and in a certain sense more devout than their metropolitan counterparts. Owen Jones draws attention to this interesting connection between ethics and aesthetics describing objects from India that were considered exemplars of good design as in

\[\text{the works of a people who are still faithful to their art as to their religion, habits and modes of thought which inspired it. [...] we find no struggle after an effect; every ornament arises quietly and naturally from the object decorated, inspired by some true feeling, or embellishing some real want.}^{136}\]

The trend drew further upon elements of Japanese art (‘japonisme’), which flooded Western markets, mainly in the form of prints, after trading rights were established with Japan in the 1860s, becoming one of the key elements of the avant-garde style that may be loosely defined as Art Nouveau. By the end of the century, however, the myth of the exotic had already been fully appropriated, not to say commodified, by Western culture. Oriental images were used to sell everything from cigarettes to candy, and the exoticism in interior design became associated with fantasies of glamour, opulence and barbaric splendour.

In the generation that came of age after 1918, this notion extended its authority but became more complex. Western civilisation failed to prevent the horrors of World War I. As Green and Swan put it: ‘The material aesthetic grandeur glowed more richly, but its justifying moral righteousness faded. The crown jewels looked like loot.’\(^{137}\) To be affiliated with such loot induced a sense of moral unease, for which the aesthetical ‘otherness’ provided the natural mode of representation. The examples are manifold and can be found in the characters of Aldous Huxley’s novels, and in the


\(^{137}\) Green and Swan, p. xv.
theatricality of the Bloomsbury group’s lifestyle, as well as in the gaudy gatherings at the salons of Ottoline Morrell. As regards Barrie’s playlet, a similar comment on moral credibility is provided by Karissima’s effort to ‘dance’ or to mime the highbrow rhetoric of her wedding vows. The effect is comparable to that achieved through post-modernist deconstruction, when a conventional idiom (or a so-called frozen metaphor) is turned into parody by way of underscoring its ‘other’ (literal), non-canonical sense:

CLERGYMAN And keep him in sickness and in health?

She shows this by giving him medicine.

And forsaking all others keep thou only unto him as long as ye both shall live?

She kisses LORD VERE and BILL, then runs to LORD VERE to indicate she’s done with all but him forever.\(^{138}\)

The ‘otherness’, in this context, represented not only a recoil from dominant and respected values, but also an attack on them by aesthetic and ethical means. And it is exactly in this sense that the Russianness was employed in Barrie’s humorous playlet.

Through a straightforward juxtaposition of the ‘the conventional’ and ‘the other’ one’s sense of decorum was considerably disturbed; one’s self-respect as an aesthete fell into question, undermining the entire notion of traditionalism and the norm. True, the Russianness in his sketch was largely taken as ‘otherness’ rather than in its specific cultural context, but it worked as a lens for casting light on the idea of ‘authenticity’ and ‘the real’. It did indeed have the effect of alienating the audience from the object of its humour, challenging the conservative forms and conventions, and producing this unique type of cultural critique, which was at once original and witty, thought-provoking and playfully engaging.

\(^{138}\) Barrie, p. 21.