

# REVIEW

## Ballet's founder is back

By Lisa Dupuy

“Charlatan” at the Sidewalk Studio Theatre in Burbank is a perfect example of simple theater at its captivating best.

It is the story of a compelling figure in Europe’s cultural history. Sergei Diaghilev, patron of the arts and founder of the Ballets Russes, the Russian Ballet company that took Paris by storm in 1909, was a passionate and emotionally driven man, fascinated by fame and beauty, sex and youth.

Director, writer and veteran actor Tony Tanner brings Diaghilev to life with brilliant artistry. There is only one set piece — a plastic chair covered by a sheet, only one row of harsh lights, and only one costume on one actor.

Yet a fascinating, colorful world is revealed. From the first moment, when the lights come up and Diaghilev opens his eyes, we are spellbound.



The way he speaks is entrancing. The things he says are compelling. The

situations he describes are real and colorful. I had no idea my imagination could be so active. Tanner is a master of words both written and spoken. I was transported to the Parisian stage described by Diaghilev.

I could see dancer Vaslav Nijinsky’s astounding leaps. I felt his anger when Nijinsky rejected him for that trampy “South American flapper.” (Diaghilev declared his homosexuality at a young age, having passionate affairs throughout his life that both inspired and tormented him, most notably with the man he helped make famous, Nijinsky.)

Diaghilev talks a great deal about his relationship with Nijinsky, whom he considered a consummate artist. It affords the writer the opportunity to examine what it is to be an artist and what drives one to chase creative perfection, not to mention fame.

Both are elusive and fleeting, maddeningly so. In fact, Nijinsky started

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Director, writer and veteran actor Tony Tanner brings Sergei Diaghilev to life in “Charlatan” at the Sidewalk Studio Theatre in Burbank.

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A8 Wednesday, August 5, 2009

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## LIFE & LEISURE

### THEATER

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to go mad not long after his 29th birthday.

This is one complaint I have about the play. Tanner teases us before intermission into thinking the second half will elaborate on Nijinsky’s descent into madness. But it’s only touched upon. And, in fact, details about his relationship with Nijinsky, which were such an intriguing part of the first half, are lost in a mire of less-important information in the second half. I laughed when Diaghilev worries that, in his later years, he is becoming “fatter, older and less interesting.” Was Tanner mimicking this idea in his writing?

Much as Diaghilev probably did, Tanner delights in dropping names throughout the show to keep theatergoers

#### FYI

**WHAT:** “Charlatan” written and performed by Tony Tanner

**WHERE:** Sidewalk Studio Theatre, 4150 Riverside Drive, Toluca Lake

**WHEN:** 8 p.m. Saturday and Aug. 22, and 2 p.m. Sunday and Aug. 23

**TICKETS:** \$20

**PHONE:** (818) 558-5702

interested, especially the People magazine-reading ones like me. Diaghilev rubbed elbows with Isadora Duncan, Henri Matisse and Auguste Rodin. He collaborated with Sergei Prokofiev, Anna Pavlova, Igor Stravinsky and Jean Cocteau.

He led the way for future ballet greats like George Balanchine and Rudolf Nureyev. The artistry of his productions influenced artistic movements such as Fauvism and Cubism.

He was interested in design, music, dance, all aspects of human culture. Diaghilev was a true Renaissance man or as he says, “an artist of the stuff of life... a charlatan.”

Sidewalk Studio Theatre’s “Charlatan” is theater at its simplest and best — a chair, a great actor and some choice words. One doesn’t need to know a thing about the Ballets Russes to go.

The only thing I knew about it was that, along with a minute and Crepes Suzette, Cathy, the look-alike cousin on the 1960s “The Patty Duke Show,” loved it.

But I learned a great deal about the cultural excitement happening in St. Petersburg, Paris, America and Spain in the early part of the 20th century. I also fell in love with the spirit, the life force, of the extraordinary character, Sergei Diaghilev, as brilliantly conveyed by Tanner.