



ON STAGE

CHARLATAN: A Memoir Of Serge Diaghilev *** 1/2

(Play written, directed & performed by Tony Tanner) Tanner displays an effective and probably accurate take on the late Russian entrepreneur, Serge Diaghilev. Arguably the greatest impresario of the

20th century, Diaghilev, creator of the famed Ballets Russes, commissioned works by composers including Maurice Ravel, Richard Strauss, Prokofiev and Stravinsky, choreographers Michel Fokine, Leonide Massine and Vaslav Nijinsky, and artists Picasso, Chanel, and Jean Cocteau. Tanner, who wears a tuxedo with velvet tie, draws brilliant verbal sketches of many of the greats mentioned above. Particularly compelling are his descriptions of the great dancer Nijinsky, with whom Diaghilev had a complex and intimate relationship. *Charlatan* is replete with Tanner's vivid characterizations of Diaghilev's appreciation, petulance, jealousy and sarcasm. Blocking is simple and effective; musical themes from ballets discussed gently permeate the background. Tanner's background, as actor, writer and director, going back many years in both England and the U.S., stands him in good stead in this very personal, deeply felt memoir.

~Rev 8/97~ Op: 8/13/97 Ended 8/22/97

—CAST: Tony Tanner. Presented by NY International Fringe Festival.

(\$12) (Tenement Museum: 97 Orchard Street) <BARTH>

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The truth behind the beauty

CHARLATAN: A MEMOIR OF SERGEI DIAGHILEV

Written and performed by Tony Tanner
The New York International Fringe Festival
Lower East Side Tenement Museum
Non-union production (closed)

Review by Scott Vogel

Asked why he had never penned an autobiography, Sergei Diaghilev is said to have given the following — typically snooty — reply: "Memoirs? It is a commonplace thing to write memoirs." Commonplace or not, Mr. D apparently had a postmortem change of heart, or such is the conceit of Tony Tanner's intriguing one-man effort, *Charlatan*. With the flimsiest motivation imaginable ("I need to not be forgotten"), this Diaghilev departed on an intense evening of retrospection, from his early days in St. Petersburg, to the triumphant siege of Paris by his Ballets Russes, and beyond.

"One thing I can assure you," the impresario begins, "you will not be bored."

This prediction proved accurate, mostly, as accurate as Mr. Tanner's fastidious attention to physical detail. Tuxedo-clad, sporting the same close-clipped moustache and shock of white hair seen in most photos of Diaghilev, the actor's appearance was mesmerizing, even if it did suggest Rupert Pupkin in *The King of Comedy* (no less a *charlatan* himself).

Diaghilev is dead, but he won't lie down. The endlessly fascinating impresario, who introduced the Ballets Russes to the West with such dancers as Nijinsky and Pavlova and drew upon such revolutionary creators as Stravinsky, and Picasso, is still very much among us almost sixty-nine years after his death in Venice. He and his commissions are constantly being recalled in ways theatrical, ranging from the remarkable to the bizarre.

Last summer, for example, Diaghilev was reincarnated by Tony Tanner, an English actor-writer now living and working in the U.S. Tucked away in a storefront theater on New York City's Orchard Street, Tanner, in a short but telling monologue, *Charlatan: A Memoir of Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, was able to conjure up the Russian impresario's complex personality in a spirited, succinct performance. He touched on important moments in Diaghilev's life—from childhood through his boyhood days in Perm and, later, in St. Petersburg, to his celebrated years in Europe, particularly Paris and London. Although Tanner is no Diaghilev look-alike, he uncannily summoned the man's style with a dead-on Russian accent, silver-streaked hair, pencil moustache, and hallmark monocle (he chose not to use padding, however). Occasionally he stepped out of the role for a moment to suggest Nijinsky, Diaghilev's protégé and lover, in *Petrouchka*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*, and *Schéhérazade*.

Where Mr. Tanner succeeded most, however, was in the use of his voice, a polished and dazzling instrument that could, say, blare when announcing the secret of the Ballets Russes' success: "Two words. Sex and violence." Alternatively, when speaking of Nijinsky, it shrank to a confidential whisper: "He was cheeky, like those elevator boys that offer themselves to you between the fourth and fifth floors."

If Diaghilev had one passion greater than artistic/financial success, it was for Nijinsky, that revolutionary artist whose "androgynous quality would fill stadiums today." Diaghilev, a career homosexual since becoming infected with an STD during his one and only encounter with a woman, was loved and then abandoned by the hobbyist Nijinsky, who later married.

Some of Tanner's funniest and most vitriolic moments come at the expense of Nijinsky's wife, as Diaghilev tries to "work through" one of the worst recorded cases of rejection anger.

But Nijinsky was of course more than an object of romantic unrequite; he was the preeminent dancer of the 20th Century. And Mr. Tanner's descriptions of the premieres of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and *Petrushka* were utterly captivating. They aroused a longing ache for the bygone era.

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the off-off-broadway review