

Meghan: Hello, welcome to this brand new, slightly rough around the edges podcast called An Incomplete History of Dance. I'm Meghan, this is [crosstalk] Murlin -

Murlin: [crosstalk] And I'm not.

Meghan: Very helpful.

Murlin: You're welcome.

Meghan: [laughs] I am Meghan Varner. This is my co-host, my father Murlin, and... yeah. [laughs] So maybe the intro will just be me talking about how I don't have an intro, because you know what. You know what. [crosstalk] this is -

Murlin: [like a radio announcer] Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to... the Meghan podcast. [quietly] I don't know.

Meghan: This is a podcast where I talk about dance history, so I'm just gonna jump into that and get past all of the me waffling about how to start it. This first episode is about one of the more famous moments in ballet history, but as we go through different episodes, I want to branch out of ballet... We'll see how it goes. It's fun. It's an adventure.

As I said, famous moment in ballet history. We're starting off looking at the premiere of Vaslav Nijinsky's Rite of Spring. Or... the French name which I can't pronounce, but which is something like *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

Murlin: That's famous?

Meghan: [sarcastically] Thank you. Great. Yep.

Murlin: Ok.

Meghan: [crosstalk] Some - some people who aren't...

Murlin: [crosstalk] I didn't know.

Meghan: ...dancers know about it.

Murlin: Hm.

Meghan: Yeah. That's about... the highest level of fame for most of ballet history, honestly. Like if a musician knows about it and they don't play in a ballet orchestra or something, you're like "ok, that's famous then." Let's just start with what the dance is. Rite of Spring.

Murlin: It was about... spring.

Meghan: Yes.

Murlin: I fig- I figure that the long-lost companion piece, you know, the - the left of spring should - should be found somewhere.

Meghan: That was such a good dad joke and I hated it so much. Thank you.

Murlin: You're welcome.

Meghan: [laughs] So, um. The piece is actually... When we say "Rite" it's R-I-T-E, and I know you know that, but I have to say that, because inevitably somebody out there is gonna be like, "wait a minute. It's R-I-G-H-T? Really?" Um. So, it is a piece centred around this concept of ritual sacrifice, to

make sure spring comes. Um, like that's the whole idea, they're choosing this sacrificial maiden, and then she dances to death?

Murlin: Hm.

Meghan: Uh, Nijinsky choreographed the dance, but he didn't come up with the whole idea of it. Um, it was actually the brainchild of [phone alert noise] three other men – I hear your computer in the background. [crosstalk] Or your phone -

Murlin: [crosstalk] I'm sorry

Meghan: [crosstalk] that's your phone.

Murlin: [crosstalk] I have to throw my phone out the window.

Meghan: [laughs] You have, what, fantasy football picks or something?

Murlin: [crosstalk] Well, sports. It's not -

Meghan: [crosstalk] that sounds like a – yeah, that sounds like a sports noise.

Murlin: It's a sports noise.

Meghan: I don't know anything about sports. Fantasy football is the only thing I know exists.

Murlin: Well. Ok.

Meghan: Also, I guess real football can be extrapolated from there. [crosstalk] That was a weird sentence that I just said.

Murlin: [crosstalk] Yeah, it is. Yeah.

Meghan: I didn't say who the three men were. Dad's phone interrupted me. The ballet was the brainchild of Sergei Diaghilev, Igor Stravinsky, and Nicholas Roerich. So, Sergei Diaghilev – also famous in ballet. Let me guess, Dad, you also don't know that name?

Murlin: Ballets Russes. [mispronounced Balays Roos-is]

Meghan: [gasps] You knew a thing! You actually knew a thing I did not know about until after I took dance history class!

Murlin: See that?

Meghan: Now I just – how did – how did – please, tell me how you knew about this.

Murlin: Jeopardy.

[long silence]

Meghan: Ok actually that tracks. Yeah, ok.

Murlin & Meghan: [laughs]

Meghan: Um. So, um yeah. Like Dad said, Sergei Diaghilev was the man in charge of a very famous ballet company called the Ballets Russes, um. Which is French. It is spelled "Roos-es".

Murlin: Hey, I didn't know how to spell – how to say it.

Meghan: I mean, yeah.

Murlin: You just read it.

Meghan: The name just means Russian Ballet, but in French because... they were in France –

Murlin: [crosstalk] Which –

Meghan: What?

Murlin: Well, I was gonna say, I think they – it means Russian Ballet, but they never actually performed in Russia.

Meghan: I don't believe they did as far as I know. Um, most of them were –

Murlin: More Jeopardy trivia.

Meghan: Yeah, most of the dancers, um, the – Diaghilev himself, they were... Oh, god, what's the word?

Murlin: Exiles? Expatriate?

Meghan: Expatriate! There we go.

Murlin: There you go.

Meghan: [laughs] I – I'm so good at words, oh my god. Uh, Diaghilev wasn't a dancer, he was what we call an impresario, which is this weird combo of artistic director and talent scout. Basically, he saw somebody dance, or choreograph, or whatever, and he was like "You! I want you! In my thing! Come work for me" and they were like "Ok, sure, because you're famous and you will give me exposure and money and a career." You know. All those things you need, as an artist, in order to not die of starvation and undervaluation. Is that a word?

Murlin: I don't think so.

Meghan: Well, it is now. 'Cause I said so. Under – undervaluation? De – devaluation, there we go. Good at this.

Murlin: Undervaluation-nessness?

Meghan: Something like that, yeah. Uh, Stravinsky was the next guy who was, you know, the creator of the Rite of Spring, and you've probably heard of Stravinsky, because he's a pretty famous composer. I mean, I know you've heard of Stravinsky, Dad, 'cause...

Murlin: I may –

Meghan: Yeah.

Murlin: - have that cd.

Meghan: Yeah. Yeah. There's...

Murlin: Or – or maybe it's – actually I think it's vinyl.

Meghan: [crosstalk] I think it's a record. Yeah.

Murlin: [crosstalk] I have it on vinyl. Yeah.

Meghan: Don't you have that, like, whole collection of all the different classical composers?

Murlin: Oh, yeah.

Meghan: Uh, he had composed for Ballets Russes before, with *Firebird* and *Petrushka*. Both pretty famous names, *Firebird* definitely more so? Um, on Rite of Spring he worked with an artist, and this is the third dude, Nicholas Roerich. Also, Russian. Everybody's Russian so far. And they were interested in this idea of exploring early Russia? Um, I've heard it referred to in sources as Pagan Russia, and I think at one point somebody said Ur-Russia. Um, just like – essentially, primitive is the word that gets used most often. Super early, um, pre-what we think of now as being Russia? That kind of culture. Um, Roerich did a lot of archaeological research into that era, and he designed costumes and sets that were inspired by what he found in said early culture. Remember how I said that everybody so far was Russian?

Murlin: Yeah, yeah.

Meghan: Yeah. Yeah, that's gonna come back later. 'Cause, uh –

Murlin: Oh, will there be a test?

Meghan: This – Nope.

Murlin: [crosstalk] Oh, good.

Meghan: But there will be angry Parisians. Um.

Murlin: Oh!

Meghan: You know.

Murlin: Aren't they – aren't they all.

Meghan: I would – I don't know, I've never met any, but. I would say they're worse than tests, probably. Nijinsky came into this 'cause he was Diaghilev's favourite, and by favourite, I mean they were sleeping together, I'm not sure how well-compensated Nijinsky was for most of his work at this time, because he was basically Diaghilev's kept man for a while, while he was the star choreographer. Yeah. It's a mess. Diaghilev was not great to his boyfriends. Bleh.

Anyway, when they made Rite of Spring, Nijinsky's the favourite, he jumps into this whole concept of primitive Russia like "oh, yes, this is what I want!" He'd already been pulling away from classical ballet with previous stuff he did, and he was extremely controversial after his prior work, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, because it did end with Nijinsky, playing the faun, masturbating onstage.

[pause]

I – I don't – I don't know...

Murlin: Think I'm glad I missed that one.

Meghan: [laughs] Yeah! Um... Yeah. I don't know how literal the masturbation was. If it was just kind of a jack-off gesture, or... like... metaphorical, dancey masturbation, but it was literal enough that the French audience completely got it, and was not terribly pleased by this. Because that's kind of a messed-up thing to just see at the end of a dance with no warning. [laughs] Ooh. Um. Nijinsky was a polarising figure in early 20th century dance, and that's about the politest way I can think of to say that. Um, when it comes to Rite of Spring, he was actively trying to make a completely new movement language, which was meant to be the opposite of everything ballet is supposed to be. So, ballerinas turn out. Therefore, his dancers in Rite of Spring turned in. Uh, reviewers described the

show as having been shuffling, jerky, angular. They say dancers hunched over and stamped on the ground and shook. Um. Circles featured heavily, which is actually a point in Nijinsky's favour, um, when it comes to like accuracy of primitive dancing, 'cause circles are hugely... They're – they're like one of the first dance elements any folk dance comes up with, any culture. 'Cause you're all together and you're all organised around a central point.

Murlin: Like a fire.

Meghan: Yeah, like a fire. And it's community building and you can see everybody and basically if you dance in a circle, I feel like the general vibe is you're probably less likely to kill the people who stand in the circle next to you so it helps building a society you know? Like you're like, "oh we danced together, you're chill, I can hang with you." Um. That's my very, very not academic explanation of that concept but it is a real thing, um – most early folk-dance styles are gonna have a circle element in it, most community-based dance styles, even more modern ones are gonna have a circle element. You see it in like, hip hop ciphers, and in improv circles in tap. It's – it's very much a thing. Circles. Unifying experience. Great. Community building.

Rite of Spring was not that. Dancers didn't really like doing Nijinsky's choreography in this. It was really unlike anything they'd ever trained for, like I said, super not balletic, right? Um Nijinsky was also struggling with Stravinsky's music and I hate that their names rhyme. This gets me every time.

Murlin: They don't really rhyme but you know.

Meghan: I mean. Enough that it's weird to say them one right after the other.

Murlin: Ok.

Meghan: I don't know, my mouth gets stuck on it. Anyway, it was super unusual at the time, Stravinsky's music I mean, and Nijinsky was not exactly a musical genius. Um, even the rehearsal pianist they were working with was struggling. Um, there's a story that goes around that at one rehearsal Stravinsky actually took over playing and he played twice as fast as the rehearsal pianist, banged his feet, and shouted counts out to try and actually tell the dancers what was going on in the sic which would be very stressful if I was dancing in that show. Especially if I was also trying to learn somebody's brand new movement language they were coming up with as they were choreographing. Like oof. Don't envy the Ballets Russes cast at all.

So, lots of tension; lots of fun, innovative, oh-my-god-what-is-happening kinda stuff going on behind the scenes but all of that pretty much pales in comparison to the night of the premiere. I called this episode the riot of spring. Hey Dad, do you wanna guess why?

Murlin: No.

Meghan: No?

Murlin: No idea.

Meghan: No. You – it's – it's – ok. [crosstalk] Really?

Murlin: [crosstalk] You got me there.

Meghan: I -

Murlin: I don't know why.

Meghan: Ok. Well. A lot of people like to say there was a riot at the premiere. Pause for laughter -

Murlin: Ah.

Meghan: - for my highly intelligent pun.

Murlin: Ha. [sarcastic short laugh]

Meghan: Thanks. [laughs]

Murlin: Ha.

Meghan: Oh please, you would have come up with that pun, too. It is low hanging fruit I will admit. So, there wasn't an actual riot as far as most credible sources actually say. It's mostly something that's gotten passed down into legend because you know what, performers – sometimes we're sitting around backstage and we got nothing better to do than gossip about stuff that happened a long time ago. So mostly what happened was people were shouting and insulting other people. There might've been some shoving, um, a few sources say the police came, some say the police were called for but didn't come. Some say the police never got involved at all, like nobody was even like "hey can we have some... whatever the French word for police is over here." That would've been cooler if I knew what the French word for police was. Anyway, we don't know if the police were involved but there's enough people who say that at least some people thought it might have been necessary that you know it got pretty rowdy.

Murlin: Is this before or after?

Meghan: Uh, during.

Murlin: During.

Meghan: Yes.

Murlin: They're right there in the seats, huh.

Meghan: Yeah, yeah it – the – the crowd got rowdy as the show was happening.

Murlin: Mm-hm.

Meghan: Yeah. Nobody really knows what caused it. When I say nobody knows people are pretty darn sure but there's a lot of different rumours floating around and legends people like to spread so we're gonna break 'em all down because I think that's fun and that's why we're here.

In musical circles there are more than a few who like to claim that the riot was started by Stravinsky's music but most scholars who've put actual effort into this agree it was more to do with the politics of the time and a little bit with the context of the choreography and how the dance was publicised.

Um, some people suggest that Diaghilev actually engineered the whole thing like he was like I want this to turn into a fight, I want people to be talking about it forever. So. What's the truth? Let's start with that first legend about the music being the cause.

Uh Stravinsky used a lot of dissonance in his work and if you aren't also a music nerd that just means any notes that sound disconcerting to the ear when paired together. For Western music listeners those tend to be notes that are really close together, like...

Murlin: And I don't have a piano.

Meghan: yeah. Yeah, wait, no. You sing and I'll sing. Go! Ahhh... [squawking]

Murlin: No, that's not happening.

Meghan: [Laughs]

[C major chord on piano]

Meghan: this is actually a really useful tool to create tension in a piece especially when you resolve it.

[discordant chord resolved to C major on piano]

Murlin: Ah-ha.

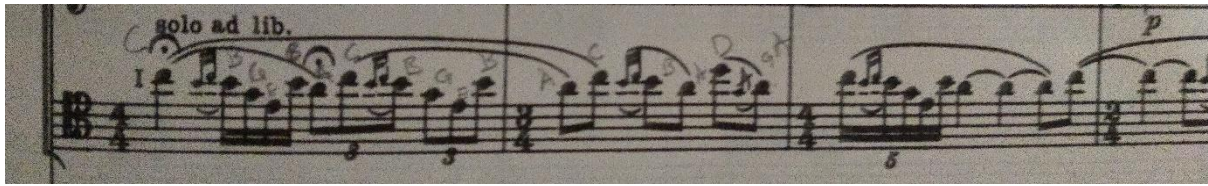
Meghan: Stravinsky is considered [laughs] Stravinsky is considered a master of using dissonance which is super present in Rite of Spring but at the time of the premiere nobody was terribly accustomed to hearing that... Uh Stravinsky probably wasn't the only one doing this. I very rarely believe that anybody considered like, the pioneer was just working on their own, but it wasn't as easy to get a hold of a wide variety of music as it is nowadays. You know, no 1913 Spotify. Uh, nobody in Paris where the Ballets Russes were performing had heard much outside of their comfortable little bubble. And at the time they were accustomed to people like Debussy, who was innovative and who, to modern ears, probably wouldn't sound super different from Stravinsky, but he is fundamentally a very different composer from Stravinsky and to their ears especially far more palatable.

So, the thing with Debussy [pronounced Deb-YOU-see] or Debussy [pronounced Debu-SEE] – sudden moment of silence for my complete inability to pronounce anything from Fren- from France, even French names. Um, but the thing about this guy was his music didn't change time signatures nearly as much as Rite of Spring did, key signatures would stay standard – he was all about finding that, like, image or feeling he wanted to evoke and sort of getting to you through that, whereas Stravinsky, with Rite of Spring, seemed to constantly want to surprise people and challenge them, so the pieces just have a – the pieces. Um, there's just a very different approach to what music means and what music should do between the two composers.

Rite of Spring worked in multiple keys at the same time. It was metrically complicated which means it was very, very hard to count and it kept switching between different time signatures which are just the number of beats you have in a measure. Instruments kept playing in unusual ranges, and the orchestra was so unusually large they had trouble fitting into the pit at the premiere. It was a 99-piece orchestra or something, like, it was big. Uh, Stravinsky seemed to pride himself on not building on any prior musical evolution? Though also many musicologists have noted similarities between themes from Rite of Spring and Russian folk tunes so like. Stravinsky what is the truth? He probably was heavily influenced by folk tunes he just didn't admit it 'cause he's cool like that. Dude, we are all heavily influenced by folk tunes. Come on, calm down, you're not special. Uh. That was the problem. He wanted to be special. Anyway, even if he had just written out a bunch of old Russian folk tunes, flat out admitted it, did not change anything, it still would have been uncomfortable for French audiences because they were French and not Russian. And if you're not used to somebody else's cultural music, it's gonna sound weird and uncomfortable. So. This is what Rite of Spring sounded like.

So, this is the bassoon solo that opens Rite of Spring. It's one of the most famous sections in it, as far as my experience goes, and I will be playing it on the flute because I cannot play the bassoon to save my life and my piano is terribly out of tune, so.

[solo flute plays slow, syncopated theme in minor key, repeating the same few notes with varying rhythms; the theme's effect is sorrowful or haunting]



The bassoon solo, it is useful to note, is one of those things that was very ridiculously out of the bassoon range. Super high pitched for them. Not great. Lotta bassoons have killed it over the years, but like. You get that music and you look at it and you're like "mmm I don't know, this seems like a bad plan". So. Fun times.

So, I'm not going to play a selection from the second movement of Rite of Spring, specifically because I have very small hands, those are very big chords and again my piano: terribly out of tune. Can't really play chords on a flute. So, gonna clap a bunch of rhythms. This isn't gonna give you an idea of the actual notes played but it will tell you how complicated the time was. Which, as I said, was a big part of it.

Yeah, so we've got a... 5/8 and then it switches to 12/8 so [counts in steady beat] 1 2 3 4 5; 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12; 1 2 3 4; 1 2 3 4 5; 1 2 3 4 5; 1 2 3 4; 1 2 3 4 5 6; 1 2 3 4 5 6. It goes back into 6/8 against 2/4 because Stravinsky apparently did not want you to ever stop thinking numbers in your head. That is a very small sample of this piece, like, just a small chunk of one song out of Rite of Spring but it's all like that, and honestly, like, even just clapping out that little bit made my little musician heart go "ahhhhh". Time signatures.

Murlin: I remember a jazz composition of Norwegian wood that did that, every measure was a different time signature.

Meghan: Oh gosh. I mean that –

Murlin: And one of them – one of them was 7/4.

Meghan: [sarcastically] Ah, yes, everyone loves a good 7/4. Who doesn't love counting in seven?

By the time the almost-riot actually got going, half the people shouting couldn't even hear the music because of the noise and the acoustics of the space, so. We looked at the music, it's not gonna be the music alone, at the very least. Anyway. Let's take a look at the dancing.

So, Nijinsky wanted to avoid typical balletic conventions, like I said. Probably, no matter how, like, used to dance you are, if you've seen contemporary dance at some point you've seen a show that made you stop and go, "they're calling that dance?" Like I once saw somebody who just wrapped themselves in paper and then, like, slowly turned around in a circle and I think there was a video playing behind them, and I was like 'I don't – I don't know if that's dance anymore.' And you know what? They said it was dance so it kinda has to be dance, 'cause we're all just making it up as we go. But that – Rite of Spring was like Paris, France of 1913's person-in-paper-with-a-video moment. Like they really just watched it and they were like, "that's not dance."

Also, Dad now I'm really curious. Do you have a moment where you were like "wait that's dance?"

Murlin: No. Sorry.

Meghan: [sighs] [sarcastically] I guess that means I'm just too good of a dancer. You saw all my shows –

Murlin: No.

Meghan: Like yes that's wonderful.

Murlin: It's – it's – it's more like, uh, when I was a teen in 60s and 70s it would be my parents looking at us saying "is that dance?"

Meghan: That is a –

Murlin: "They're not even touching each other!" But then again actually that'd be my grandparents.

Meghan: That is a fair point. Huh. So, like I said, shaking, jerping – jerping? That's not a word. Jerking and stamping motions. Um, the only sources that I've found that talk about the emotional content of the piece insist that there was almost nothing. Like, you would think – this piece is trembling and stamping, it is centred around a ritual sacrifice, maybe it's an exploration of how this like sacrificial maiden feels about things. Nope. Nope. Nijinsky's piece was largely perceived as being impersonal, cold, bleak. Instead of a celebration of life they tended to interpret it as a nihilistic look as the ultimate destruction of life and of modern western culture. Now, you will notice if you delve into any kind of art history, doesn't have to be dance, just anything at all, new styles are often perceived as threatening the destruction of modern culture. Especially modern western culture. Um. [laughs] Anyway.

It's difficult to say how pleasing to a modern viewer the dance would've been since most of the records we have are super, super affected by perceptions of the time and everybody was so horrified by this [sarcastically] perversion of ballet! Um...

Murlin: And there were no cell phones.

Meghan: Yeah. That's – that – that's the other drawback. They – nobody was sitting there going "ooh let me bootleg this and post it on YouTube." Damn, that would be like a really, really enterprising time traveller right there. Hey, hey enterprising time traveller if you're out there, hit me up, I want that video. Um. So, it's – um we can imagine how the dancers felt about it a little better, um, because ballet dancers are still heavily influenced by the same ball- balletic concerns? Aesthetic concerns. I can't read my own writing now. Oof. The same aesthetic concerns as the Ballets Russes dancers would have been because for all that we've, like, changed a little bit – you know, lines are sharper and more like. Leg up really super ridiculous high now, it's still very much the same basic idea behind ballet? So, if you look at like. Somebody who's a complete bunhead never done any other type of dance and you give them something where they're turned in and they're stamping and they're shuffling around, you can probably imagine they might not enjoy that so much, and so we can extrapolate from there how the dancers of the time period might have felt about it.

Um, they really didn't work well with the music. Uh, it was super counterintuitive to their ears, you know we're very used to 1 2 3 4, 5 6 7 8, 1 2 3 4, 5 6 7 8 or 1 2 3, 1 2 3, 1 2 3, which we still usually end up counting in eight because we're dancers and we're stubborn like that. Um, they brought in a woman Marie Rambert [pronounced Ram-bear-t]? Rambert [pronounced Ram-bear]? I don't know if I'm supposed to pronounce the t or not. Um, she was a dancer who'd studied this thing called Eurhythmics, which is a technique of moving that's meant to help people truly understand and internalise rhythms. Created by a musician, largely meant for musicians, but dancers – you know, study it too 'cause that's useful. We like music, music's important. And even this woman who is

trained to understand dance and music as being one complete thing, could not help the performers, like, bridge the gap between what they had already learned and what they were supposed to be doing onstage. They were like, “we don’t get it. I – I appreciate all the stuff you’re trying to do, Marie, but [laughs] Nijinsky and Stravinsky are on some shit.” [laughs]

There wasn’t really storytelling, it was just a bunch of vignettes. Like a movie montage but less cohesive, I guess? Like it wasn’t, you know, your training thing where you have a character arc, it’s just like. You dance. And then you do a dance, and then you do a dance, and then a woman’s on her own and then she dies.

Nijinsky wanted to kind of shove ppl into these uncomfortable places and, like, force them to do things their bodies and minds didn’t want to do. Um, the dancers wanted to be artists and be like “ok we’re living in this this is right, I am inhabiting this character” but Nijinsky was like “no do this mechanically, you just do the steps, you don’t inhabit the character, you don’t connect with them, it just is what it is,” which is very hard for dancers to do especially when it’s ballet and they’re very used to being their Claras and their Odettes and all the pretty things and like they’re telling their stories! And they can’t do that here. ‘Cause Nijinsky said so. Fun times for all of the dancers. Which, you know, is great when you get onstage. Have you ever seen a dancer try to do something onstage that they do not like?

Murlin: Can’t say that I have.

Meghan: it’s – it does not go well. They – they get onst-

Murlin: I do rememb-

Meghan: Hm?

Murlin: I do remember one of your performances where afterward Adam was telling us how he put all sorts of things into it because he’d never seen a ballet dancer do that before.

Meghan: [laughs] yeah. Yeah, I mean I think there’s a difference between having ballet dancers who are like oh I want to try new things and like, feeling ready to do that, and ballet dancers who consistently get told “you can only do what I want not what you want,” like... I feel like there’s a difference between being a dancer who feels like they’re in a conversation with the choreographer to make new things and a dancer who just gets, like – Psht. Plopped down in a spot and told to do it, you know. Um. I – There was a lot of frustration onstage.

Personally, I think that even if Nijinsky’s choreography had been a big hit with the audience, because the dancers didn’t enjoy it, it wouldn’t really have made – you know, the effect he wanted anyway? Because they weren’t – they didn’t get what he wanted and they didn’t want to – they didn’t want to get it. Um. Maybe I’m projecting. Maybe not all dancers are as stubborn as me, but I – I do think lots of dancers are stubborn. Otherwise, we would not do pointe. Nobody would do pointe if we weren’t just... ridiculous people.

All right, as far as the dance on the riot... Basically, like I said, people were afraid it was a destruction of everything ballet, and Western art in general, had built over time. Um, they didn’t like the fact that nobody seemed to be emoting in the piece, they didn’t like the fact that there was no story, they didn’t like the fact that people weren’t turned out because that is like, the core of ballet, and honestly what is a – what is ballet? If you don’t turn out? Say all the French people ever. Um. Answer, contemporary ballet. You’re welcome.

That seems like a decent reason for a riot on its own, like, [sarcastically] “oh my god! Ballet’s gonna end! It’s awful!” But. That fear of destruction doesn’t just come from, like, some sort of artistic fear. You know? Uh, it had to come from somewhere else, and a lot of my sources are pretty sure that the somewhere is politics in Paris at the time. So. On an artistic level alone, Parisians saw what Nijinsky was doing with his choreography and they were like “how dare you betray us like this”. Um. Because the Ballets Russes came to France marketed as this exotic, sensual Russian group that would revitalise French art, like they literally were looking at these people like, “oh you’re gonna make us look better.” Wasn’t about Russia. They don’t care that this is a Russian ballet, except to say “oh look how cool these cute Russians are that we have, like pat them on the head, look at them, they’re so good. They’re ours. They belong to France.” Um. You know, it was about the furtherment of French artistic impulses above all else. It was just a means to an end, there. Um, pretty common, using other ethnic or racial groups as commodities to prop up your own sense of superiority.

Uh, Nijinsky’s dancing was known for being, like, beautiful and sexy and ethereal. So, when Nijinsky comes out with a bunch of choreography that just gets progressively more earthbound and emotionally disconnected and flat out weird, audiences were incredibly uncomfortable. You know, fans like their artists in neat little boxes, they don’t like people to step out of what they’re used to. Anyway, uh the French also had this idea that Russian ballet was supposed to be temporary, but um, even years after the Ballets Russes first came they were still performing, and assimilating more and more into French life, and challenging French ideas of their own artistic superiority. And the French were like “wait a minute you’re supposed to be here for like. Five minutes. You do – you do some art, and you look all cool and Russian, we say ‘hey look we got some cool Russians’ and then you leave. So we can make some stuff that’s supposed to be better than you, that totally probably steals off your stuff because that’s why we wanted you in the first place, to, you know ‘revitalise’ French art.” But that didn’t happen. They were like “this is weird. We’re not supposed to have Russians in France. This is France for the French people.” And if that sounds like some bullshit, yeah. Yeah, it is some nationalistic bullshit, that people continue to spout. All the time.

There was a lot of anti-Russian sentiment in France at this time. It’s not just, like, the art world in particular is mad about the Ballets Russes, it is the French don’t want other cultures there, other groups of people. Um. Europe just came out of the Balkan Wars, um, politics on the continent were full of treaties and alliances.

Murlin: When is this, again? The time?

Meghan: 1913.

Murlin: Oh.

Meghan: Yeah. Yeah. In times of war, which people were just coming out of and just about to go into because it’s 1913 and they’re about to go into 1914 which was World War One – Um. Like, in times of war, nationalism goes up, ‘cause that’s how you make sure people aren’t like “Wait. Wait, why are we at war? Why are people dying for this?” Like, [uncomfortably] you gotta have some nationalism to justify all of your killing. Which explains a lot about America. For the past, I don’t know... over a hundred years? Probably? [clears throat]

I’m being snarky, but I’m right. So, I’m not gonna get into all of the stuff about the Balkan Wars because I don’t think that’s super relevant – I have a whole, like, thing in my notes but the fact is the most that you really need to know is the French just had to get involved in a fight between a whole bunch of other ppl that didn’t really affect them? But they had a bunch of alliances and things. Um. Kind of... created some resentment. You know. That’s my theory. Anyway, like I said, also creeping

close to the start of World War One, super pointless war, right? Everybody's allies with everybody else so we all gotta go to war now! And... there's just this general feeling of "yeah we gotta participate on a global level but that doesn't mean I gotta be happy about it." Like... "fine we can have these Russians here but I'm not gonna be nice to them." You will also note that I am a dance historian, not a military historian, which is why I'm glossing over a lot of this war stuff because I don't know enough about it. If you have any corrections for me, or insight, please do feel free to share. I'll have contact information at the end. I love learning things! And then getting to talk about them, nonstop. I don't even care if you're listening. I – [crosstalk] I would like it if –

Murlin: [crosstalk] What?

Meghan: Thanks. [sarcastically] Thanks. I –

Murlin: You're welcome.

Meghan: [crosstalk] I would like it if you list-

Murlin: [crosstalk] Timing was perfect.

Meghan: [laughs] On the bright side, when you say 'what' right after I make a comment about listening, I know that you were listening to – just to make that joke. So. Ha. I've seen through your clever ruse. Not to be confused [crosstalk] with your –

Murlin: [crosstalk] Would that be my Ballets Ruse?

Meghan: [sarcastically] Yeah... We were gonna make the same joke. Ok.

Murlin: [laughs]

Meghan: [false laughter] I learned my sense of humour from you, and that says a lot about me as a person, I think. All right.

Murlin: I'm so sorry.

Meghan: [laughs] [sarcastically] I know, it's terrible.

One last note about Russia. Uh, not that I know that much about European politics, but there's a divide between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, in terms of... I mean, obviously, you know, we had a literal divide for a long time and that certainly, um, affected things, but just in terms of culture, even pre-Cold War, um... I mean the vast majority of Russia, in particular, is literally in Asia. There are so many ethnic groups to be found in Russia that go beyond the, like, "blond-haired, stiff, um... Illya from Man from UNCLE" vibe, you know – that's such a random pull that I just picked, but that was my first pop culture Russian that popped into my head, so. You know. Um.

Murlin: What? No Boris and Natasha?

Meghan: That, too, yeah. Uh, or – frickin'... Natasha Romanov, I guess, is another one. Like, there's... Russia is not the cut and dry picture of whiteness with a weird accent that we think of in America. Um, it's a huge place, obviously [laughs] it's a very simple way of putting it. Russia is vast, and complicated, and... when we think of Russia, we need to understand that it occupies a very unique place in terms of culture and where it falls, if it's European or Asian or whatever, like it's just – it's - it's Russian. It's its own thing. Which would be very uncomfortable for the French, because the French... Not so much into that. You know, the French are one of these unambiguously white, Western European colonising forces, um... like. They're not about that "I can't put you in a box" vibe.

So. Class warfare. Racial and political tension. Rival artistic factions. I mean, you know – maybe – maybe if you're being really snarky about Paris or something you could assume that this is a normal evening out in the city at the time, but uh. It's really not? Like that's not a thing that you just have happen to you. There weren't riots all over the place at every premiere. Hey, Dad.

Murlin: Yeah.

Meghan: Hey, Dad.

Murlin: What?

Meghan: Guess what.

Murlin: What.

Meghan: Diaghilev? He loved a good scandal. It is incredibly likely, and by likely, I mean that every source I've found that actually acknowledged it sounded absolutely certain that this was the case, that he purposefully engineered a conflict rife audience. He knew Nijinsky was a polarising figure because of *Afternoon of a Faun*. He and the theatre manager invited people to come and they chose a variety of figures who, if you look at the list, all might easily have lended themselves to a controversy. People may well have come to the show looking for a fight, given everything else that was going on in the artistic world, and like, the political sphere. Like... People –

Murlin: Ah.

Meghan: people came to this knowing. [crosstalk] That there was –

Murlin: [crosstalk] Like people coming to the last temptation of Christ, ok.

Meghan: Like – like they knew something was gonna go down. At the very least there was gonna be a fistfight in the parking lot, you know. I don't know if it counts as a parking lot if everybody's in like – no, it's 1913, there were cars.

Murlin: Yes, yes there were.

Meghan: Ha. There were cars. I – That's not important, I just remembered that. Um. You know what Diaghilev said after this premiere happened and everybody, like shouted and shoved, and they couldn't even hear the music over the noise?

Murlin: Nuh-uh.

Meghan: He called it "exactly what I wanted."

Murlin: There you go.

Meghan: Mm-hmm! I'm like... I mean, if he didn't purposefully "ooh let's make a rioty-type thing" he definitely went "I want a fistfight in the parking lot. And I don't wanna be involved but I wanna watch." You know? He wanted to be – he wanted to be famous for having caused that fistfight in the parking lot, that's what he wanted.

So. Lots of reasons. Uh, no matter how much musicians want it to be the music alone or the dancers want it to be the choreography, it was really, really complicated. Um. Nijinsky's choreography was performed a few more times after that, but, um. After the last showing, it was – the choreography was completely lost, and the next time *Rite of Spring* was performed it was a reproduction of it, choreographed by a man named Leonide Massine. Uh, this version was a lot more palatable to the

French, because he was a far more balletic choreographer than Nijinsky had been. Also, I feel the need to point out that he did replace Nijinsky in Diaghilev's affections as well as his position in the company. Make of that what you will, kind of a different can of worms, but like. That's the kind of guy that Diaghilev was. Oof.

Anyway, Rite of Spring, at this point – I'm just gonna go over some, like, "where is it now?" stuff, 'cause we talked about the riot. We're wrapping this up. Um.

Murlin: Ok.

Meghan: It's [laughs] You're so thrilled. Uh. At this point, it's basically a choreographer's rite of passage. Uh, Pina Bausch, Martha Graham, [laughs] yeah, Disney's Fantasia, have all tried to, like, set something to Stravinsky's music. Uh, there was this guy Kenneth MacMillan, who was a British choreographer. In 1962, he did a version that drew from Australian Aboriginal dance and art to create his quote unquote "primitive aesthetic". Um. I do not think much of him for that one, because that sounds kind of like a colonialist, racist nightmare, because... he... wasn't an Australian Aboriginal? And he kept referring to – like, he and other people involved in the production would talk about the, um, aspects they were drawing in from Aboriginal art as being things that made it nightmarish, and it's like. Ok, I'm sorry you're really British, but calm down? Don't be so racist while making your famous piece, please? I have – I have dreams. Ugh. Anyway, I personally never wanna see Kenneth Macmillan's version of Rite of Spring, please don't be like him... There's plenty that's primitive to be found in your own culture's history, if you wanna make a Rite of Spring. That's... kind of what makes it history. You know, we all have a place that we came from, so you can just go back to your sort of... history and draw from that. And it'll be more authentic that way, too, 'cause it's... like, you have this – that like seed of culture in you. That's how you were raised.

Anyway, if you're sitting there thinking, "But Meghan! I have seen with my own eyes Nijinsky's Rite of Spring!" Which I know Dad isn't, but I'm being dramatic. [laughs]

Murlin: Yeah, I wasn't thinking it.

Meghan: Yeah. I didn't think so. Um. But, if you, the audience, is out there thinking that, you've probably seen the reproduction, made by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer – Wow there's a lot of Kenneths in dance. I didn't put that together until right now. Kenneth Archer not to be confused with Kenneth MacMillan, who did do the racist thing I was complaining about a lot. Uh, they drew from reviews and other first-hand written accounts, as well as illustrations that were made from publicity, annotated scores, stuff like that – basically whatever they could find that actually talked about the steps. Nobody can actually say whether or not it's accurate because this was over a hundred years ago that this piece premiered and I don't – I don't think anybody's alive who was alive then, let alone who would've seen it and remembered it, but! If you want an idea of what that was like, it's an excellent place to start.

I'd like to thank my teachers, express my gratitude for my teachers, really, um, from Woodinville Dance Academy, Spectrum Dance Theatre, Cornish College of the Arts – they are the people who gave me –

Murlin: Don't forget Duke!

Meghan: That is true! Yes. Um, American Dance Festival. Hosted at Duke University – is that it?

Murlin: That's the one.

Meghan: That – yep. Um. That was also a huge moment for me in my dance education, thank you, Dad. Um – those – those are the places that gave me the insight into dance that I have and the interest in dance history that I have. As well as, you know, a lot of my foundational knowledge of it. I'd especially like to thank, in particular, Laura Ann Smyth from Cornish, and Donald Byrd and Eva Stone from Spectrum, because they are the ones who gave me specific dance history stuff and they are the ones who made me want to look at it as something that more – more than just something that happened, but something that continues to affect what is happening. Um. They didn't just teach me what history was. They taught me the fact that I want to look at how to think about history. So. Teachers are important, everybody, credit them! Um.

If you want a list of my actual sources, links to videos and things, you can visit my website, which is... Varner-arts, that's v-a-r-n-e-r, hyphen, a-r-t-s dot com, uh. There'll be a special little page up for the podcast, you can find a link to all my different sources and things on there, all episodes will be listed under that section as we, you know, continue to post them. And if you're curious about what else I do you can feel free to poke around the site. I have an email address listed on there as well. All sorts of things for if you want to get in touch with me and be like "hey, you don't know what you're talking about" or "hey, you do know what you're talking about" I welcome either because I am always learning! Um... Yeah. And thank you, Dad. For being here, and sitting through me infodumping at you. And also having some very bad puns for me. I –

Murlin: Oh, well, yeah. Anytime.

Meghan: Um. Yeah. [crosstalk] I should come up with –

Murlin: [crosstalk] Not really anytime.

Meghan: Wait, what? [laughs]

Murlin: Not really.

Meghan: [crosstalk] Yeah, we'll –

Murlin: [crosstalk] Not really anytime.

Meghan: We'll – we'll schedule it.

Murlin: Yeah.

Meghan: I won't make you do this at like, one am. [laughs]

Murlin: [sarcastically] Oh, thank god.

Meghan: [sarcastically] Calls you up, right before I have to go to my super early job, like "hey, Dad, just let me talk at you about dance real quick."

Murlin: No, no, I'll be on my way to work, when...

Meghan: Yep. All right. I don't have a cool sign-off, because I've never done anything cool in my life, so... Until next time. And enjoy making your own dance history, maybe. Hopefully. Some of you are doing that out there.

Murlin: Not me.

Meghan: Yeah, well. I – I figured that much. [laughs]

Murlin: [singing] Sweet dreams are made of these...

Meghan: [laughs]

Murlin: [singing] Who am I to disagree... [spoken] You know why I'm doing this one, right?

Meghan: Uh...

Murlin: It's by the...Eurythmics!

Meghan: Oohhhh... No...

Murlin: Travel the world and the seven seas, everybody's lookin' ... [fades out singing]