

Reading The Riot Act

The Ups & Downs of a TV Docudrama on *The Rite of Spring*

By Kenneth Archer and Millicent Hodson

Thursday, 23 June, 2005. A beautiful day. Outside the aircraft-hanger of a studio where we are filming at legendary Pinewood, the sun is shining. The James Bond set is next door. All along the corridors outside the studio are posters from films beloved to cinemagoers across the globe—*Brief Encounter*, *The Red Shoes*, *Superman*, *Batman*. But we are working in the soft focus world of a simulated Parisian theatre just before World War I. It is the first night of *The Rite of Spring*, the earth-shaking ballet that caused a riot at its premiere.

David Snodin, the producer, sits back in his canvas chair and sighs. “There are moments,” he murmurs—and yet we all hear him above the ambient sound of cameras, fans, intercoms and mobile phones—“of perfect happiness, when you would not be anywhere else, with anyone else, doing anything else.” Everyone pauses, turns to him, and smiles. “I look around,” he continues, “and I see these beautiful young women, all dressed in red, laughing and flirting with our assistant director, twice their size.” Dancers of the Finnish National Ballet, the BBC film crew, some stellar members of the cast and the two of us are crowded around the monitors, viewing the last take. The charismatic director Andy Wilson, taller even than his assistant, calls us all back to work with his booming voice: “The party doesn’t start until the end of today’s shoot!” It was almost over—the remarkable process that had run a precarious course for

more than two years.

Alex Jennings and Christian McKay, elegant in evening dress, have spent the last few weeks as the unique impresario Sergei Diaghilev and the conductor Pierre Monteux. Adam Garcia, letting go of his tense persona, is relaxed in his backstage dressing gown as the 24-year-old megastar Vaslav Nijinsky, choreographer of *The Rite*. Rachel Stirling, in the role of Nijinsky's assistant Marie Rambert, has studiously picked our brains to turn herself into a Ballets Russes dancer.

Pierce Quigly as Nicholas Roerich has been characterized more like the English bohemian artist Augustus John than the dignified Petersburg intellectual who designed the ballet. Sergei Grigoriev, the magisterial Russian ballet master, is played by Richard Hope who, like Rachel, keeps coming back to us for tips on how to manage the dancers. The part of Vassili, Nijinsky's valet and Diaghilev's spy, is taken by George Antoni who uses his instinct for ensemble acting to fuse the cast into a believable band of emigre artists at large in 1913 Paris.

The Hungarian socialite Romola da Pulska, who turns Diaghilev's affair with Nijinsky into a triangle, is acted by Emma Pierson. When the character of Gabriel Astruc, director of the Theatre des Champs-Elysees, comes onto the set, the dancers raise a cheer--Griff Rhys Jones is as much a television celebrity in Finland as England. Roaming among the actors with his camera is Aidan McArdle, dapper as the young Igor Stravinsky on the crest of his fame. A photo enthusiast like the composer himself, Aidan provided all the shots for this article.

Thousands of video minutes shot now make redundant the questions that had once loomed so ominously for all involved. Would the higher echelons of the BBC give the project their go-ahead? Could the biggest budget dance film since the 1950's really get the money required? Was there a director who would inspire actors and dancers alike? The schedules of ballet companies and television teams are planets apart—could they be coordinated, especially with a troupe of some fifty dancers needed? Where to find the actors to portray, not just credibly but vitally, the larger-than-life characters in this legendary tale and the whole colourful caravan in and around the Ballets Russes. It was, above all, Ross MacGibbon, the BBC's dance man in the classical music department, who had to square the circle, getting answers to these questions amid artistic temperaments, bureaucratic delays, conflicting priorities and unexpected turns of event. With him, to be sure, was an enormous team, only a percentage of whom will scroll past on the credits of the film, soon to be broadcast prime time on BBC2.

Starting Points: St Petersburg and the Mariinsky

Our role in all this started in March 2003 while we were staging *The Rite* at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. One morning at breakfast we received a fax from Ross at the BBC, enthusing about the project and proposing to use our reconstruction as the centre of the film. He asked us to recommend a company from among the ten on whom we have set *The Rite*—one based in Europe in order to minimize travel costs and English-speaking, if possible, in view of the UK crew. The dancers would not only have to perform the

reconstruction but also look and act convincingly like members of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. A feature film would put any company under a different kind of pressure than the "live from" format of opera house broadcasts. All the elements of the production, all the personnel and performers would be at the disposal of the BBC for a long time--an unfamiliar kind of stress and strain. We read the fax again over another glass of Russian tea and pondered the problem.

St Petersburg, of course, was the point of origin for *The Rite of Spring*. Roerich conceived the idea there and announced it as early as August 1910 in the *Petersburg Gazette*. It was this city and its imperial Mariinsky Theatre that also nurtured the talents of Diaghilev, Stravinsky and Nijinsky. In the summer of 1911 Stravinsky went to a Slavic arts colony near Smolensk to augment with Roerich the scenario the designer had written. The first *Rite* was created in a variety of European locales—most of the music was written in Switzerland and the choreography was crafted on tour from Berlin to Budapest, London, Lyons and Monte-Carlo. The decor was painted in Paris. But the costumes, with their modernized motifs from archaic Rus, were hand-painted in St Petersburg where Roerich's studio understood that the ritual patterns and colours may have derived from the pagan era but the style was post-Gauguin and part of the Russian primitivism his work had inspired. The seismic innovations of *The Rite's* music and dance are rooted in the phenomenon of Petersburg before World War I, where rhythmic formalism marked experiments in all the arts. Stravinsky's score and Nijinsky's movement were extreme examples. Their classical rigour but anticlassical forms unleashed a savage energy which unsettles audiences.

Just before the premiere of our reconstruction at the Mariinsky, Ross--and what seemed like most of the BBC--arrived in Petersburg to televise the gala celebration of the city's 300th anniversary. The security net was so intense to protect Putin, Bush, Blair and forty some other heads of state invited to the gala that the BBC and anyone else trying to work at the theatre suffered terminal frustration. The only hope was the Café Idiot where all and sundry gathered near midnight to de-stress over vodka. Under these conditions we had our first and very convivial introduction to the head of BBC classical music, Peter Maniura.

Thursday, 29 May, 2003. It was (we realized the morning after) the 90th anniversary of the riot at *The Rite*. How appropriate to celebrate with the BBC, or, to be more precise, to commiserate. The prevailing view was that if they managed to survive the anniversary gala and we to weather the premiere of the Kirov *Rite*, then surely we could get this film off the ground.

Points of Departure: Which Company? What Theatre?

And indeed within a few months the BBC had acted on our recommendation of the Finnish National Ballet and had begun negotiations. Our first task—and a hard one—had been to make it clear to the company at the outset that the BBC wanted to cast a Chosen One from a UK company. The Finns currently had three fine soloists trained in the role. So it was difficult all round but understood in the end as a condition of the contract. Had the Birmingham Royal Ballet been ready with its *Rite*, no doubt the BBC would have given

them priority for this big British dance slot. BRB director David Bintley had just initiated talks with us, but the film was meant to be broadcast before our rehearsals in Birmingham would even begin. The Finns took pride of place for many reasons—they looked Slavic, they were multilingual, and for more than a decade they had impressed us with their consistently high production standards for *The Rite*.

Artistic director of the Finnish National Ballet, Dinna Bjorn, and planning manager, Eila Larmo, came to Covent Garden with their conductor Muhai Tang in July 2003 to see the Kirov dance our reconstruction. It was an apt moment to pursue discussions with the BBC. There was some hard bargaining ahead. But it looked like all parties could schedule the film shoot at the end of the 2004 season, agreement of terms pending. Fortuitously, in September 2003, we were due to revive *The Rite* in Helsinki, where we had first staged it in 1994 and had visited the company to keep it in repertoire throughout the nineties.

Nonetheless, the 2003 revival seemed like a premiere, partly because Kenneth had to supervise the painting of new decor, replacing the curtains that had mysteriously disappeared during recent renovations at the Helsinki opera house. Also, as both of us in the intervening years had published books related to *The Rite*, the company organized signings, lectures, and a lobby exhibition of Millicent's drawings to celebrate the revival. Ross and his colleague Ben Weston took this opportunity to visit Finland and immerse themselves in the production, to see it performed live and to meet the dancers and staff.

The next challenge, after deciding which company would

dance in the docudrama (contracts still pending), was to find the best location for the stage shoot of the ballet. Helsinki would be convenient, but its opera house was not an option. A geometrical iceberg on the Gulf of Finland, it is an exquisite example of 1990's architecture, pristine, white and minimalist—a late 20th century parallel to the novelties of the Theatre des Champs-Elysees where *The Rite of Spring* had premiered in 1913. What the film needed, however, was some kind of replica. Things would have been easier had the Champs-Elysees been available. But that was not the case. So the search began for a space that evoked the chic lines and Greek amphitheatre feeling of its auditorium and the spacious studios with their vast stylish windows.

Tuesday, 23 September, 2003. The autumn in Finland was cold but bright. Kenneth suggested the Swedish Theatre in downtown Helsinki as a viable location and went there with Dinna, Eila, Ross and Ben to have a good look. The Swedish Theatre is a round structure, inside and out, with the same Greek aspiration as the auditorium of the Champs-Elysees. Also, like that Parisian theatre, it is late and linear Art Nouveau. Both buildings are precursors of Art Deco. Ross thought the film's carpenters would have little trouble dressing parts of the Swedish Theatre to create the illusion of the Champs-Elysees, convincing audiences that the location filmed was the cradle of new music and dance in the 20th century.

The question remained whether the Swedish Theatre would be available and affordable. Some of us meanwhile had gone to investigate another option, the ornate Alexander Theatre, home to the Finnish National Ballet before its new house was built. But all our inquiries were predicated on the

idea that the Finns would agree contracts with the BBC so that Helsinki could be the locus of the film. As it happened, many months were to pass before any of these decisions were finalized.

Sticking Points: No Script and No Contracts

Back in London in October 2003 we met with Ross and Ben at the Russell Hotel in Bloomsbury to discuss the terms of our involvement. We were to be technical advisors for the film and serve in our standard roles as choreographer and scenic consultant for the broadcast performance of *The Rite*. When we agreed to grant the BBC the rights to use the reconstruction, we were assured that our knowledge of the period would be central to the film. That promise gave us the confidence to put the ballet in the middle of a dramatized story.

One of our earliest responsibilities was to be on call for the screenwriter. We were to share the results of our research, only some of which was accessible in our books and articles. In 1991 we had prepared the first draft of a still unfinished book for a Parisian art publisher. It was to correlate the reconstructed scenes of the ballet with reports of the audience reaction. We shelved that project in favour of production deadlines but still had the manuscript to hand. Our title for this book-in-progress was *Riot at the Rite*, which the BBC film—with our blessing—appropriated. The only condition was that we would still use it ourselves. Meanwhile, we have agreed to do the volume, featuring photographs of the Finnish National Ballet by Laura Larmo, with Pendragon Press in New York, publisher of the

reconstruction scores Millicent made for Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* and *Jeux*.

So the challenge for the BBC now was to find a screenwriter who could deliver in time for the projected shoot in June 2004. No luck. Little news. Through the rest of the autumn 2003, during our work on ballets in Europe and a lecture-tour in the US, we heard periodically from Ross--signals like "The wheels grind very slowly here but things **are** moving forward."

Tuesday, 6 January, 2004. Russian Christmas. London was damp and bitter. We got warm greetings from icy St Petersburg and also a letter from Ross, still in recovery from his big holiday shoot of *Cinderella* at Covent Garden. He wrote to say that Kevin Elyot, known for his screenplay *My Night With Reg*, had been contracted but could not begin straightaway. The project went into time warp. Ross and Eila had to start all over again to coordinate the BBC and the Finnish National Ballet.

But by May 2004, three things ensued that secured the fate of the film: first, BBC Drama contributed substantially to the funding; second, a definite slot was rescheduled with the Finns for June 2005; and third, as Ross wrote, "Kevin Elyot is just starting to write his script and was wondering if he could come and see you." Although we had no contract yet, a partial agreement was made with the BBC so that this important interaction on the script could go ahead without delay. So far so good.

Weeks went by with no word from the screenwriter. Summer holidays, we thought. Competing commitments,

maybe. Warning bells began to ring, but we were busy with other projects. Suddenly it was October and an urgent request came from the BBC for Millicent to go to Helsinki with Ross and others to finalize the dance arrangements. There she met David Snodin, who had been hired as producer, and learned that a first draft of the screenplay had been done without our input. David, and particularly Ross with his knowledge of dance, said that many revisions were on the horizon. So they preferred not to show us the script at this juncture. The warning bells got louder.

However, Millicent offered to use the time in Helsinki to discuss any historical issues that had arisen thusfar. A case in point was a scene in the script which David described and which Millicent queried. It portrayed Isadora Duncan enthusing with Nijinsky about his new ballet just before its premiere. In real life both her children had drowned in the Seine the month before. So great was her despair that her hair had turned white overnight and she was wandering like a lost soul in Italy. Some viewers of the prospective film would know this chronology. Many would not. But in 1913 the cultural world of Paris was still reeling from the shock.

Warning bells rang ever louder. Our agreement to grant rights and to supervise the reconstruction was based on a simple understanding--we would help shape the context of how *The Rite* and the riot were depicted. We brought archival material out of storage for the purpose. In good faith we went ahead with all the tasks the BBC had requested, even though its bureaucratic grindings meant we were working without contracts. Our commitment had been to bring as much accuracy as possible to this film about a monumental moment in cultural history. But the salient

question remains: What exactly is a docudrama? The degree of fiction appropriate to the film became a debate from now to the end of the shoot.

That autumn 2004 trip to Finland posed more immediate problems than the script, mainly intense negotiations between the ballet company and the BBC—work conditions, protection of the dancers, not to mention time and money. Locations still loomed as an unresolved question. Kenneth had serious doubts about the decor fitting in the small Alexander Theatre. Would the budget cover painting a smaller set? Kate Dudley, David's associate producer, now took on the location challenge for the BBC team. By mutual accord, the old Alexander was out, but the Swedish Theatre was still an option and Kate arranged reconnaissance for us. The group then left Helsinki believing the film would be shot there.

So the key challenge now was to get the dancers signed. Many had conflicting opportunities—an outdoor *Aida* and various dance festivals not to mention family holidays which had to be booked now or never. Preparation of contracts was the sticking point between the BBC and the company. The BBC was loathe to handle a myriad of Finnish contracts and wanted a block agreement. The dancers and all the back-up staff wanted individual contracts. To do that for such an army of Finns was a massive task to which the opera house could not dedicate its legal department. The pressure was on Dinna and Eila to get things settled with the BBC. In the midst of this tussle the two of us carried on with the project, trusting our own contracts would materialize.

On return to London Ross wanted David and Kenneth to

meet and so the four of us gathered at the Russell Hotel. We had to face the prospect of once again starting all over if the Finnish situation did not resolve. Meanwhile, the BBC decided to put out feelers. What about Birmingham, now that the schedule had shifted? As regards other European companies, the Kirov and the Rome Opera had danced the ballet recently. Paris, Portugal and Zurich had not. Kate at the BBC began to think laterally about venues, gathering data on theatres in Prague, Edinburgh and London.

Points of Contention: Fact and Fiction in the Script

From November 2004 to January 2005 our other work demanded total focus—recreating Balanchine’s *Le Bal* and *La Chatte* in Rome, presenting an anniversary performance of *Jeux* at Bloomsbury’s October Gallery, and going back and forth to Birmingham for rehearsals of *The Rite*. We were still waiting to see a script.

Toward the end of January we worked with the Joffrey Ballet at the Diaghilev Festival in Holland, mindful that—in spite of exorbitant travel costs—the company might yet have to be invited by the BBC. *The Rite* as the Joffrey performed it in Groningen was in perfect order, a reassurance in an uncertain period. Between the return from Holland and departure to the US for several months of work at Princeton—a hectic 24 hours--Millicent phoned David to inquire about the script. A motorcycle messenger arrived with the second amended draft, a copy for each of us, which we then read on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Distance notwithstanding, we both had the same response.

From the outset we had feared that any writer who was neither a specialist in ballet nor the period of the Ballets Russes would struggle to produce a credible image of life in Diaghilev's company, especially the studio scenes. On reading the script, our fears were confirmed. The screenplay had definite strengths, however, and had nothing been at stake about the history of *The Rite* and its creation, we might have just let the inaccuracies pass. Some artistic license was inevitable in a feature film that telescoped months of complex reality into an hour and a half, including long excerpts of the ballet. But the true story of what happened in 1913 was so dramatic that we were surprised at the degree of fiction introduced.

Much of our work on *The Rite* had required that we deconstruct the myths about its creators as we reconstructed the ballet itself. These myths were partly responsible for the original *Rite* being consigned to oblivion. Even though the script is called a docudrama, which allows for some measure of make-believe, its narrative will for many viewers stand as documented truth. After more than two decades of work on the reconstruction, we could hardly fathom the predicament we faced. Had we not been hired to protect the project from exactly the pitfalls into which it had fallen? How could these fundamental mistruths have resurfaced and—dreadful to think—be presented as the authentic context for what we had fought to preserve? Was it not our responsibility to confront these myths again?

Let us mention a few of the myths. Nijinsky in the script acts ill tempered and belligerent. These traits seem like symptoms of the illness he developed much later. Nijinsky was not mad in 1913, far from it. Accounts of Ballets Russes

rehearsals include only one major outburst by him--at Karsavina during preparation of *Jeux*--never animosity toward the other dancers. Toward Maria Piltz, his good friend who danced the Chosen One in *The Rite*, he apparently showed impatience. Nijinsky was intense and introverted. Rambert portrayed him as persistent in defense of his art but not in a state of constant rage.

Similarly, the script's portrayal of Roerich as an oddity, dreamy and detached, was pure caricature. In 1913 he was a widely respected artist and scholar, erudite and sophisticated, director of an imperial school and chairman of the World of Art, the society from which the Ballets Russes evolved. A scene in the script shows Roerich at a fitting with dancers who rudely complain about their garments and accessories. Such disrespect would have been unthinkable at that time. It belongs to late 20th century bratpack behaviour. The formality of relations in Diaghilev's company never lost the sense of protocol that came from Russia under the tsars. In this same scene, even the costumiere patronizes Roerich, an impossibility. His designs for *Prince Igor*, as well as *The Rite*, were critically acclaimed and highly valued by Diaghilev's circle, as the memoirs of Rambert and others testify.

The script also mythologizes relationships among characters. In the period of the premiere the collaborators engaged in no conflict except the famous disagreements about tempi between composer and choreographer. The script, however, features a power struggle over authorship as the climax of the creative process. Years later Stravinsky appropriated the royalties of the other two collaborators and spoke ill of them in their absence when he wrote his

autobiography in the mid 1930's. Though he retracted some of those statements at the end of his life, the myth of his sole authorship of *The Rite* was launched. But Stravinsky in 1913, though he mentioned dreaming about the idea, did not dispute the fact that the ballet was conceived by Roerich. Musicologists in subsequent decades were keen to make the case for Stravinsky. Nijinsky, contrary to the script, never made claims of authorship. Younger, less experienced and last to join the team, he saw himself as the novice, although arguably his contribution was the most revolutionary.

Myths about the characters in the film were problematic but could be countered by documentary proof. More difficult to address was the distortion of history that came from giving well-known quotes from one personage of the era to another, such as statements from the famous review by Jacques Riviere becoming a studio speech by Marie Rambert. In the event we made sure Rachel Stirling saw archival footage of Rambert speaking about *The Rite*. And ultimately, Rachel made the speech work by such research on her character. The script was full of transpositions of this nature, another instance being Jean Cocteau holding forth about Gauguin's influence on Stravinsky, whereas it was Nijinsky and Roerich who acknowledged this painter as a source.

Conflation of characters was also problematic. Romola, the Hungarian socialite who was to become Nijinsky's wife, was synthesized with Valentine Gross, the artist who drew in the dark during the riot. For Romola to present to Nijinsky drawings she supposedly made of *The Rite* was completely out of character. And it was hardly fair to Valentine Gross, whose sketches had saved much of the dance for posterity, as Millicent objected. This response landed her the role of

the artist drawing throughout the riot at the Champs-Elysees.

Dislocations, too, arose in the language of the dialogue. However skillful the writing, it was disorienting to hear, for example, the Russian dancers address their director as “Monsieur Diaghilev” while the French manager of the Champs-Elysees speaks to him as “Sergei Pavlovich.” The language styles had been reversed. Diaghilev himself and his entourage seemed very British, specifically like West End *culturati*. Members of the audience are made to speak like Noel Coward characters. In many instances the language masked the Russianness of the Ballets Russes and the Gallic nature of the Parisian public. It could be argued that anglicizing expression was fair enough in a UK film. But for such an international story, an opportunity was lost in the language. Even dialogue coaching would not have covered the incongruity of all its English idioms (“naughty boy,” “too much lip,” etc).

We regretted all the more that the briefings scheduled with the screenwriter had never taken place. As writers ourselves we did not want to interfere with his work. But we were hired to keep facts at the centre of things. What could have been shared easily in a few briefings now had to be laboriously catalogued. No matter how accomplished the writer, some initial agreement could have established a standard of authenticity. Twenty pages of our comments were sent to David, Ross and Andy, who, with some success, brokered changes with Kevin Elyot.

Points of No Return: Soloist and Maestro

From February to March 2005 the pressure of the June shoot seemed to concentrate minds. In the end the BBC took on the mammoth task of the contracts. So at last it was definite that the Helsinki company would dance in the film. There was even progress on our own contracts. The choice of theatre venues narrowed: only London and Edinburgh remained. Dancers who had to be in Finland during the summer break withdrew and the others—luckily those most experienced in this ballet--guaranteed their availability. So we could now settle the dance cast with Dinna.

By mid April we both returned from Princeton, where we had been working on the recreation of Prokofiev's *Pas d'Acier*. The question of who would be the Chosen One had been hanging in abeyance for two years. The BBC's request to The Royal Ballet for Zenaida Yanowsky met with accord all round. From our base in Hampstead we went to rehearse with her at Covent Garden. The Royal Opera House became action central for a week, as Ross looked in on our work with Zen and brought the director Andy Wilson to meet us all. Annie Symons, costume designer for the film, visited rehearsals to consult with Kenneth on Zen's costume.

Aided and abetted by the classical music department, Ross had networked for months to organize the recording of *The Rite*, arranging at the same time to release a CD with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Despite the good news, we heard warning bells again. When a recording is made for commercial release, the conductor's priority is the music as it will stand on its own, not the ballet performance in a film. And *The Rite* as an orchestral piece is usually played faster than the original choreography requires. Rehearsal quarrels about tempi between Stravinsky and Nijinsky had become

legend even before the premiere in 1913.

When the orchestra score was printed in the 1920's, the music already had a concert hall history. So the metronome markings in current editions of *The Rite* had little relevance for the reconstruction of the choreography. No scholar really knows exactly how Pierre Monteux paced *The Rite* on that fateful night of the riot. What is certain is that his musicians had never heard it before and struggled with it, as chronicles of the period reveal. So a high-speed reading would have been hard for them as well as the Diaghilev company.

Ross, as a former dancer with The Royal Ballet, knew only too well the hazards of an orchestra neglecting the needs of live performers. When he negotiated with the conductor, Osmo Vanska, Ross tried in vain to get his agreement in advance to accommodate the dancers. Such consideration is a given in ballet, though some maestros are more noted than others for their sensitivity to performers' needs.

Saturday, 23 April, 2004. A damp morning, too chilly to feel like spring. Outside the BBC's Maida Vale recording studio, we were invited into a white van with the logo Floating Earth, a mobile unit fully equipped to record *The Rite*. The producer David Snodin, his associate Kate Dudley and our dance man Ross introduced us to Mike Hatch, the recording engineer. Then we went inside the studio to see the BBC Symphony Orchestra, in casual weekend dress, tuning up for the day's work. By our count more than a hundred musicians, including eight double basses, came to attention as Vanska tapped the baton on his music stand. Peter Maniura introduced the maestro to the players and

clarified for them the fundamental role of Stravinsky's score in the film.

The orchestra had performed *The Rite* recently and were on top form. A few members of the brass section queried the speed of the maestro's interpretation, but, pulling out his pocket metronome, he quoted the composer's markings on the score and, maybe sensing further discord, announced emphatically: "We won't have any more of that." Without doubt, the conductor led a thrilling performance. Andy Wilson sat with us for the session and during breaks talked with us about his response to the music. We were right in front of the double basses, and Andy observed that the repetitive rhythm of their bowing made him realize the shamanistic nature of the score.

During this one day session the orchestra had to record not only the performance of the music for the riotous premiere, but also rehearsal passages during which Monteux was to correct his musicians. A much acclaimed French bassoonist had been imported for the occasion, and his improvised mistakes caused great merriment for the orchestra. In fact, at first, he could not produce the wrong fingerings but got better at it with practice.

At the tea break Ross took us to the conductor so that we could have a quick word about tempi. Two places in the score are particularly difficult to sync the dance and music. The first is for the corps de ballet: Act I, Scene 2, *Ritual of Abduction*, when the men chase the women and all take partners. Rambert's annotations on the rehearsal score indicate there were big traffic problems in this section.

For our Kirov production Valery Gergiev did not want to slow down his orchestra, but we asked him to look at the *Abduction* with the dancers onstage. He saw a racing Youth take a fall and decided to slow the tempi at [43] in the score. The second difficulty is for the Chosen One: Act II, Scene 5, her *Sacrificial Dance*, when she hurls herself desperately into the final throws and jumps from [192] to the end. At the Paris Opera, when Myung-Whun Chung conducted *The Rite* for our reconstruction, he told us that leading an orchestra can be like reining wild horses, but he promised to try, and the Chosen One soared through her finale.

Our requests to Maestro Vanska at Maida Vale were refused. He had determined to follow the score as it was published and again pulled out his metronome to prove the point. We reminded him that the orchestra score was published a decade after the premiere and that surely Monteux took the choreography into account. And was the ballet not the main event of the film? He replied politely that he had stipulated in his contract that the published tempi and markings would be used. As an ultimate appeal, we asked him to support his fellow Finns who were obliged to do what Nijinsky had devised. Vanska smiled and went for tea. He is currently chief conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis. No doubt it seems a long way from Helsinki. We had been asked to attend the recording to ensure that the dance counts would coordinate with the music. It was a parallel situation to the script. We were shortly to see the havoc the tempi would wreak.

Compass Points: London/Birmingham/Helsinki

Mike from Floating Earth raced the working CD to us in

Hampstead before our return to Birmingham, where we relaunched rehearsals before going on to Helsinki. We were in touch with Andy who was manoeuvring to get the actors he wanted on the shooting dates he needed them. Excerpts from Ballets Russes autobiographies were required by all and sundry: Andy wanted to hear more about Rambert; the art director needed to know what the rehearsal piano score looked like—was it printed or in manuscript form? How did Diaghilev’s dancers dress for rehearsal, queried the costume designer. In and out of London we trawled through our files to pass on minutiae that would help make the world of the film convincing.

The casting was now top priority for producer and director alike. From time to time we got word they had signed who they wanted, and their excitement was infectious. Several members of the cast felt it was important to know how *The Rite* was rehearsed and took advantage of our ongoing work in Birmingham. Adam Garcia came first. When he entered the studio, BRB dancers who had seen him in *On the Town* let him know that they were big fans. Adam in the script has to direct rehearsals of *The Rite*, teaching the choreography and correcting the dancers. In one scene he has to teach the Chosen One and was keen to learn the role, even though he is not a classical dancer and would not dance the solo on screen himself.

There is one Nijinsky jump which he mastered faster than most ballet dancers. It is the “jump on five” which Nijinsky’s sister Bronislava documented in her memoirs. The Chosen One has to jump up on one leg, lifting the other in front and raising the arms, one at the chest and one overhead. Nijinsky was able to jump up on count one, lean

to the left on count two, to the right on count three and—still in the air—go higher on four to land on five. Only Nijinsky is reputed to have done this jump. Adam gave it a good try, nonetheless, utilizing his basketball technique for a “rim shot.” What was most important about Adam’s visit was his desire to understand the *gravitas* of Nijinsky and what *The Rite* meant to the young choreographer. This knowledge informed his acting throughout the film.

The Birmingham company began to seem like part of the film team. David Bintley let us use a studio for visitors from *The Riot* cast when we were not rehearsing his dancers. And the BRB ballet mistress, Marian Tait, welcomed the itinerant actors, sharing her office as a dressing room. Rehearsal pianist Ross Williams spotted Rachel Stirling straight away from the *Miss Marple* series, as did waitresses in the local cafes where we went over the script together. Rachel is not a dancer but was determined to perform some of the steps that Marie Rambert had done as a Maiden in *The Rite*.

Zenaida Yanowsky was the last to arrive, crossing over Rachel’s visit. So Marie Rambert and Maria Piltz had their first encounter in Birmingham. Zen knew her role by now but, being the artist she is, wanted to go deeper and to keep drilling in order to master the tempi. She was in the midst of several premieres at Covent Garden but managed to make the journey. Zen had to learn how to become the Chosen One in the *Mystic Circles of the Maidens*, when she falls and falls again, signifying that she is the victim of fate. Rachel, too, had to learn that same scene during which Rambert featured as a dancer. The two of us were pressed--our BRB premiere was on countdown--but Zen and Rachel worked

with such fervour and humour that we actually relaxed in these after-hours sessions with them.

Points of Order: Finishing in Finland

We left the Birmingham *Rite* in Marion's hands for a few days in order to finish the preparations in Helsinki. Zen and Ross joined us there for studio work with the company. The Finnish ballet masters had the dancers ready. Because of the new recording, however, we had to make adjustments in the way the movement is phrased, especially in the *Ritual of Abduction*. Zen had to be integrated into the *Mystic Circles* with the Finnish Maidens. During the lunch break we drilled her on the solo to the Vanska recording. Naturally she struggled with the final section but hoped to handle the tempi by the time of the shoot. When the dancers returned for the second part of the day, they recognized her strength and the heroic effort required. Everyone gave Zen a warm round of applause and the company took her on as one of their own.

While in Helsinki Kenneth checked all the costumes before their transport to London and compared notes with the support staff responsible for wigs and make up. Outside rehearsal hours long sessions were devoted to correction of dialogue about the choreography. Millicent went line by line through the script, correcting it against the music score and dance notes so that Ross on return to London could effect the changes. As the studio scenes had been written, the description of movement and the counts that Nijinsky and Rambert were supposed to call were wrong. They did not accord with what the film audience would see the Finns perform. From our first glance at the script we knew there

was too great a discrepancy between the dialogue about the dance and the reconstruction as it is performed. While Ross realized the problem, he had asked that we defer making changes until the Helsinki rehearsals so that he could see for himself how Millicent uses her research to teach the ballet. Once again it was his task to broker detailed amendments.

A fundamental error in the script concerned the use of counterpoint in the choreography. Stravinsky scolds Nijinsky for following the rhythms of the score too closely and proposes that he try counterpointing the movement to the music. This speech inverts reality. Nijinsky invented counterpoint in choreography, as Rambert's annotations and rehearsal memoirs prove. He not only counterpointed steps to notes but juxtaposed different rhythms on different groups, a kind of orchestration of dance that had no precedent. Nijinsky also built further rhythms on top of Stravinsky's polyrhythms, a whole new order of ballet construction. So the speech in the script was wrong three times over. The dialogue is factual, however, in having Rambert declare that Nijinsky doubled the impact of Stravinsky's music by graphically rendering the rhythms. She made that statement in a BBC television interview in the 1950's.

How could we ignore, in the name of poetic licence, the falsification of a major breakthrough in choreographic history? The argument that the audience "would not know better" is cultural nihilism. How complex the amendment process became was demonstrated during the shoot when the Stravinsky character, Aidan McArdle, who had learned his lines early and well, reverted during a take to the earlier dialogue. Ross and Millicent jumped up in protest. Andy Wilson called for a retake and Aidan, more amenable than

the character he played, returned to the updated script.

Points of Convergence: Greater London as Locale

Now it was off to London for all concerned. The venue for shooting the ballet was to be the Wimbledon Theatre, a Victorian building that could be rigged to serve as the Champs-Elysees. The backstage and front-of-house scenes, it was decided, would be purpose-built at Pinewood Studios outside London. Despite its advantages Wimbledon had too small a stage for the Helsinki decor. So Kenneth met with David Roger, production designer for the film, to discuss the repainting of the curtains and ground cover. Asked to recommend scene painters for the work, Kenneth proposed the Finnish team who had recently redone the decor with him. But their opera schedule was too crowded. He also recommended the British painters who had done ballets with us, one group for *La Creation du Monde* in Geneva and another for *Jeux* at Covent Garden. They too had projects booked long in advance. The discrepancy between theatre and television timetables complicated the project from first to last.

At length David brought Tony Roche to meet with us at the Royal Opera House where Kenneth went through the scenic documentation with him. Then Tony set to work with his team at Elms Lester Paint Frame, the tall, narrow studio near Centre Point, an early Georgian building that was converted in 1902. The turn of the century look was so perfect for the period of *The Rite* that Andy decided to shoot the Roerich character finishing the decor there.

To supervise the painting Kenneth commuted from Birmingham to Elms Lester in London. Roerich and the other designers of the Ballets Russes always had their decors painted flat on atelier floors, what is known as the “continental method” of scene painting. In England the tradition is to work on a canvas hung vertically, the only method that could be used at the Paint Frame with its extreme height and restricted width. If the purpose of the film project had been a historical documentary, Roerich would never have been seated in a chair to paint the backdrop. And, in truth, he would not have been painting the canvas himself but would have directed his assistants. For *The Rite* he had used the young painters Boris Anisfeld and Georgii Yakulov, both of whom also designed for Diaghilev.

By late May the Finnish National Ballet was installed at the Wimbledon Theatre. For several days they had been working with the film crew to shoot odd backstage moments. Our Finnish ballet master Sampo Kivela and ballet mistress Tuuli Tuominen had been in charge. A weekend was devoted to shooting the performance, with Act I scheduled for the Saturday. We had hurried down from Birmingham the night before to make the dawn shoot, liaising with Sampo and Tuuli as well as Eila, who was there to organize company matters. All had gone well and it was remarkable to see how the crew had bonded with the dancers. The Finns proved in no time that they were the perfect company for the project. A great atmosphere. Apart from the chase in the *Abduction*, less chiselled than usual due to the fast tempi, the dance sequences looked fine on the monitors where we all gathered to compare the front-of-house view with what the cameras saw.

Andy and David saw the ballet live for the first time. It seemed to us that their commitment to the dance at the centre of the film deepened once they saw the Finns performing in full costume and make up against the decor. The auditorium was well populated: journalists and friends who dropped in to watch the filming; BBC troops (runners, sparks, all kinds of assistants); and the crucial film extras (called supporting artists) there to make the riot. It felt like a real audience, and the applause for the Finnish dancers was genuine. So much so that Andy had to read the riot act to get half the spectators to protest. At full height and maximum voice, he led the assembled "Parisians"--yelling in derision, hurling insults and booing down the bravos. With Eila, Sampo, Tuuli and others we took sides for Nijinsky.

Match Point: A Wimbledon Champion

Sunday, 5 June, 2005. A brisk early morning on The Broadway, Wimbledon. Nothing was open except the ubiquitous Starbucks. Fortified by a quick cappuccino, we arrived for the shoot of Act II. The dancers were in good spirits despite their rigorous timetable. Just finished with class, they were scattered about the stage floor comparing guidebooks, already planning their day off in the London so long anticipated for its theatrical attractions and nightlife. The dancers' (typical) schedule for the day was as follows:

- 0630-0700 Pick up from hotel.
- 0700-0730 Breakfast on location
- 0730-0745 Prepare for class
- 0745-0830 Ballet class on stage
- 0830-0900 Mark through ballet for cameras/lighting

0900-1000 Make up and costume
1000-1300 Filming--ACT II "RITE OF SPRING"
1300-1400 Lunch on location
1400-1900 Filming—ACT II "RITE OF SPRING"
1900-1930 Change out of costume
1930-2000 Travel back to hotel

Act II was danced intact, a principle that Ross fought for from the outset. Andy, who deferred to him for shooting the dance sequences, directed the audience response. They worked in tandem with congenial banter and only the occasional debate. It was Zen's day and everyone looked forward to the sacrificial solo as though we were actually attending a first night, or rather, the first night ever of *The Rite*.

Zen started with enormous power, her beautiful compact jumps all the more impressive given her height. Dramatically, she had made the role her own, and everyone watched with bated breath. The Chosen One's wild spins were astonishing. Entrapped in the chalk circle, she whirled around its circumference, violently rolling her head. We had never seen that movement done better. More jumps—well over a hundred, according to Deborah Bull who danced the role for us in Rome. Zen managed to keep her elevation high despite the speed of the music. Her falls, in the section Stravinsky called "the storm," were awesome, a crisis of body and spirit that held the Wimbledon Theatre spellbound.

The score pressed to its conclusion and, for all her vitality, Zen could not keep the pace. She cried out in desperation and had to stop dancing. The speed was too much. Ever quick-witted, she immediately joked that she

sounded like Venus Williams erupting on centre court. The tennis analogy made everyone laugh—after all, we were in Wimbledon.

Ross and Andy got ready for another take. Zen danced the long solo again, magnificently, until the final throws and jumps at [192] in the score. The music was merciless. With the thrashing throws from side to side, just before the climactic jumps, she almost lost connection with the music. The Chosen One is supposed to dance herself to death, and every soloist we have seen in the role convinces, so demanding is the choreography. But in the theatre there is only one run. Repetition was taking its toll. Ross needed this take to finish the sequence.

So Zen danced on through the last section. The way she had done it in Finland was unmatched in our experience. Now, in the twisting jumps that lead to the Chosen One's collapse, her taut control gave way. Instead of lifting her feet high behind her each time, her legs began to drop, like a colt learning to leap. The breakneck music had robbed her of the apotheosis she so deserved. Applause overwhelmed her, but those of us who had seen Zen's solo in the studio shared her anguish. A remarkable performance--by the ballerina London critics would name Dancer of the Year in 2005—was flawed through no fault of her own. Kenneth asked Ross if she could have a break and do the ending once more. Such a shame to forfeit her finale. There were five cameras at different levels and angles, Ross explained, and a head-and-shoulder shot would be used. In the event the editor used the full body shot.

Points of View: History and Invention

During the filming of Act II, Andy told us that he had a camera in the flies in order to get some overhead footage of the ballet. We watched with him on the monitors several long takes of the Maidens interacting with the Chosen One. He then explained that the crew would film the Roerich character in the flies looking down and later intercut the footage. This device was useful to provide a logic for overhead shots, which in *The Rite* are particularly beautiful, given Roerich's painted ground cover and Nijinsky's choreographic patterns.

It is an invention, however, that the designer stayed backstage during the ballet. Documents make clear his response to the riot situation. He sat in the stalls beside Stravinsky, and although the composer left his seat as soon as the trouble started, Roerich remained out front during the whole performance. There was nothing the designer could do backstage, and his sense of formality prevailed. However polarized a situation, he tended to be measured and dignified. Before the Revolution Tsar Nicholas II wanted Roerich as court chamberlain and after it the Bolsheviks wanted him as minister of culture. The artist's demeanor in the film bears no resemblance to the public figure that Roerich was in Petersburg and Paris at the time of *The Rite*.

Some of the other inventions in the film actually caused dissent on the set. At the end of the Act II shoot, for instance, when the dancers' bows had to be filmed, the company did a normal curtain call, advancing in lines to the audience and bowing in unison. Then Andy conceived the

idea that the ensemble should drop its protocol and run off the stage, shocked by the audience reaction. With the director again exhorting them, the makeshift audience repeated its boo-and-bravo routine. The Finns, surprised by the directive, nonetheless followed instructions and made a hasty exit, acting frightened and upset, all of them packing into the wings stage right.

Ross rushed forward to tell Andy that the Ballets Russes would never do such a thing. Defending the idea, Andy disagreed, saying the Finns looked fantastic in their disarray. Ross looked around for support, seeking an opinion from Millicent. She concurred with him that Diaghilev's company, most of them artists of the Mariinsky, would never have left the stage until the curtain fell. They were, after all, the tsar's dancers and duty required that they observe imperial etiquette. Andy thought the flight in panic was a great way to end the riot. But as a director noted for his flair with period style, he demurred, reluctantly.

The filming of the ballet performance was finished but there remained the Champs-Elysees rehearsal scenes which were to be shot at Victoria House in Bloomsbury. The dancers were looking forward to being in the West End and left the shoot with guidebooks in hand. We hurried to the train for Birmingham to get back for the technicals before our premiere. The Finns felt very collegial toward the BRB dancers and sent their *toi toi toi* for the *The Rite's* first night by a British company.

The morning after the premiere of the ballet, which was enthusiastically received at the Hippodrome, we got back on the train for London and went to Russell Square near

Victoria House. The building was unmistakable as the next location, surrounded as it was by huge BBC vans, arc lights and technicians smoking on their break. Inside we were enthralled by the space—a perfect studio of the imagination for the period. Tall windows, latter-day art nouveau fittings on the doors, and a voluminous rectangle for dancing. The day before, the company had done extracts in period rehearsal dress. We remembered how in the Herbert Ross biopic *Nijinsky*, from the early 1980's, the Ballets Russes looked unconvincing in rehearsal. It was overdressed and overacted. What Andy, Ross, Annie and the crew did at Victoria House is probably as close as any of us will ever get to the inside of a Diaghilev rehearsal.

Points of Principle: The Pinewood Shoot

Several days into the shoot at Pinewood, when we had become accustomed to genial good mornings from Diaghilev, Monteux and other re-embodied ghosts of the Ballets Russes, we noticed a new character standing in skillfully simulated backstage of the Champs-Elysees. Attired in casual jacket and trousers, beige shoes, and a floppy hat, he looked like a tourist in Provence. His long beard, straggly hair and curly pipe marked him as the popular stereotype of a painter, exaggerated by a large flower in his lapel. What did not go with the image was the large Russian icon dangling from his neck. We inquired who the character was meant to be. To our amazement we were told it was Nicholas Roerich.

In early meetings Andy had casually discussed details of Roerich's general appearance with Kenneth, asking for

confirmation that he did have a beard, did he not, and was there not a Mongolian cast to his face. Based on portraits and photographs he knew, Kenneth explained that Roerich had Nordic features with blue eyes and that he wore a short neat beard and moustache in the Tsar Nicholas style, adding that the artist was virtually bald in 1913 and dressed in the dark-suited, stiff-collared look of the Petersburg intelligentsia. After all, like Diaghilev, Benois and many other cultural activists of the period, he had studied at the Imperial Faculty of Law. It is inconceivable, therefore, that he would attend the premiere in anything other than evening dress.

Why was there such a discrepancy between the real person and the film figure--we asked ourselves. This gulf had not happened with any other characters, even Nijinsky, who is never easy to impersonate. We went to Ross and put the question to him. He replied that Andy and David had especially wanted Pierce Quigley for the role, but, as it happened, he needed long hair for a concurrent part. So they had to compromise with his appearance. The curly pipe, for example, had been given to Roerich—a resolute non-smoker—for the atmospheric effect of making him emerge from clouds of smoke. The next day Kenneth gave Ross a xeroxed portrait of Roerich from 1913 and a photograph of the mad monk Rasputin, asking which of the two images looked more like the character given to Pierce Quigley. Ross sighed sympathetically, “Poor old Roerich--he seems to have lost out all round.”

But the worst was yet to come. Roerich was central to the creation of *The Rite* and a significant presence at its premiere. His absence from the Champs-Elysees curtain call in the script was inexplicable. For the convenience of

the plot, the bow after the performance is taken by Diaghilev, Stravinsky and Monteux, all in evening dress, together with Nijinsky in the dressing gown he wears to direct the dancers from the wings. Would Diaghilev--for whom there is no proof that he ever bowed--have gone before the public without his scenarist and designer? By fabricating this kind of detail *Riot at the Rite* diminishes in value as a docudrama. As the old adage says, truth is often more intriguing than fiction.

Winning on Points: The Finished Film

Nijinsky's affairs of the heart with Diaghilev and Romola had yet to be shot when the dancers finished and were feted by the BBC at Pinewood. Much remained to be done on the rest of the film. *Riot at the Rite* has two interlocking plots: the legend of the first night of the ballet and the triangular love story of its choreographer. They were the poles of action around which all the events of the film orbited.

Just as remythologizing occurred with the ballet, so it did with the relationship between Romola and Nijinsky. For the record, Romola did not meet Nijinsky backstage the week of *The Rite's* premiere. Enraptured by the Ballets Russes when the company performed at the Budapest Opera, she became a "groupie" before the term existed. She met Nijinsky there, and in the babble of languages, he apparently misunderstood that she was Hungary's prima ballerina. Following the company to Vienna, she got herself introduced to Diaghilev, on the pretext she wanted to write about the Ballets Russes, from inside the action, which—as destiny decreed—she did, though not as the impresario expected.

In the run-up to *The Rite* Diaghilev allowed Romola--for a fee--to study with the company's famous teacher, Enrico Cecchetti. Fascinated by Nijinsky, she arranged to have her class just before he came to be coached. From then on she used her growing friendship with Rambert to get information about Nijinsky, enabling her to elicit his confidence and close in on him. The script presents her as a solitary beauty, glowing in white chiffon and osprey feathers, coalesced with the ballerina Nijinsky dances with in *Le Spectre de la Rose*.

The device works in the script but has little to do with the clever tactician who lived out her fantasy with Nijinsky, costing him everything. What is real in the script is that Romola functions as Nijinsky's alternative to Diaghilev, the means of escape the dancer sought. The situation was even more devious. Romola herself became the pawn of a would-be rival to Diaghilev who wanted through her to poach Nijinsky for a new ballet company. If ever dance history provided the text for a thriller, this is it. But it is not the tale presented in *Riot at the Rite*. The simplified script works because it polarizes the ballet and the love story. But the definitive film about Nijinsky still waits to be made.

The collective achievement of this BBC film is that the tension between public life and private affairs prevails from beginning to end. It is gripping. This achievement belongs to all involved, from the dancers who waited patiently for hours then sprang into action, to the editor who cut so adroitly from backstage life to the performance. Despite controversies over the script and the score, we came to recognize that ultimately the film would be beautiful.

We saw daily how Andy developed the script with the

actors. Even when they followed their parts, word for word, his directorial skill probed the nuance of character and situation. We had seen his *Forsythe Saga* and, for all our sense of responsibility to historical research, we began to trust what he would do with the material. And what a spectacle it was to watch director of photography Sue Gibson organize shots of the ballet, with her bodycam man Xandy Sahla, all strapped up with equipment, racing through packs of Nijinsky dancers. We knew their work would be great to see.

The same was true with the producers, both David, whose Russian production of *Crime and Punishment* we knew, and with Ross, whose work we had admired ever since collaborating with him on a documentary about *Le Chant du Rossignol*. We respected their vision for *Riot at the Rite*, and though we felt it lost depth through needless fabrication, we believed that--through the quality of the acting, camera work, lighting, art design and costuming—in the end, it would win on points.

The Still Point: Paris at Pinewood

The day we finished our work on the film everyone made us promise to come to the “wrap party” when all was well and truly done. Japan was our next port of call. We were to audition dancers and form a company for *The Rite* at the new performing arts centre in Kobe. The occasion was the relaunch the city’s cultural life after its devastating earthquake a decade earlier. We did not know whether we would return to London in time for the party.

Thursday, 7 July, 2006. A sunny day in London. Pouring rain in Kobe. We were disappointed. The wrap party was to happen that evening and we would not be there. Kobe was not inviting in the downpour. So we stayed in our hotel room and turned on the television. A bombed out bus in Russell Square. People streaming out of tube stations, bleeding and crying. We could not make sense of what we saw. All the news flashes were in Japanese. We phoned London to find out what was happening. Our relatives told us about the multiple bombings. They also passed on the message from our answerphone: due to the crisis, the wrap party had been postponed.

Suddenly history seemed to repeat itself. We remembered the June day at Pinewood when David articulated everyone's elation and sense of shared achievement. How like the Belle Epoque, that luminous era before 1914 when it seemed that the good life and Diaghilev's seasons would last forever. Nijinsky's *Jeux* and *The Rite of Spring*, both made in 1913, captured the beauty of that moment but also foretold its demise. What was all the shouting about at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees? Maybe the protest was less about the music or even the dance than the unconscious fear that a world so familiar and secure was soon to explode.

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Captions for Illustrations

Photographs by Aidan McArdle
Wimbledon Theatre and Pinewood Studios, May-June 2006

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1. David Snodin, Producer (Album 5, B/W 83680005)
2. Andy Wilson, Director (Album 5, B/W 83670029)
3. Adam Jenkins, 3rd Assistant Director, Richard Hope as Ballet Master Sergei Grigoriev & Maidens, Finnish National Ballet (Album 5, B/W 83670018)

Starting Points: St Petersburg and the Mariinsky

4. Technical Advisors and Reconstructors of the 1913 *Rite* Kenneth Archer (Scenic) & Millicent Hodson (Choreographic) with Jarmo Rastas as The Sage, Finnish National Ballet (Album 7, B/W img 382)
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