A wild dance through the life of ballet's brilliant, brash impresario

By **Anne Sebba**

DIAGHILEV'S EMPIRE
by Rupert Christiansen

384pp, Faber, £25, ebook £7.99

★★★★★

In the middle of the First World War, when performing in Paris was impossible, the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev took his Ballets Russes troupe to America, crossing the Atlantic via Cadiz. When they stopped in Madrid, he was introduced to King Alfonso, who asked him what exactly it was he did. "Your Majesty," replied the whip-smart Diaghilev, "I am like you, I do nothing. But I am indispensable."

This brilliant and brash son of a colonel had always been confident of his ability to achieve something in life, even while admitting (to his stepmother) that he lacked both talent and money. Yet he was certain that he could create something through others. In *Diaghilev's Empire*, Rupert Christiansen shows how he did it, and it makes for gripping reading.

Diaghilev succeeded by harnessing his wildly imaginative and resourceful ideas into radical performances that shocked audiences but also catered to their deepest desires. For 20 years, he achieved phenomenal success – alongside often manipulative sexual demands – as he spotted genius and provided the conditions for it to flourish; in the process, he transformed the concept of what is today understood as "ballet".

Vaslav Nijinsky, the fiercely athletic son of professional dancers who toured the Caucasus and Ukraine, was key to the early success. An oddball with an odd physique (just 5' 4" tall with a thick neck, rock-solid thighs and bulbous calves), and who used to pick the side of his thumbs until they bled, he could jump so high that he seemed to reach the stars, as his friend Marie Rambert said later. He soon became not only Diaghilev's personal star performer but also his lover.

One of my favourite stories in Christiansen's new book, which is bursting with extraordinary characters and anecdotes – a Who's Who of early-20th-century European artists – was Igor Stravinsky's struggle to describe accurately the perversity of Diaghilev's entourage. He settled on "a kind of homosexual Swiss guard".

But women are important in this story, too. Nijinsky's sister, Bronia Nijinska, was an avant-garde choreographer who witnessed, but could do nothing to stem, her brother's slow descent into madness from 1919 onwards. Financial backing from the sewing machine heiress Winnaretta Singer and pianist Misia Sert, muse and inspiration to many artists, was critical, while the beautiful dancer Ida Rubinstein, dismissed by Christiansen as having too much money and too little talent, hovers on the sidelines. Towards the end – Diaghilev died in 1929 from diabetes in Venice – Ninette de Valois (born Edris Stannus) and Alicia Markova (the skinny, tubercular girl from north London born Alice Marks) both fell into his orbit.

Diaghilev's Empire may not be the first biography to tackle this mercurial genius, but it feels as glitteringly modern as its subject deserves.

HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY

Rough music: a design for Nijinsky's role in Diaghilev's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, 1912

Christiansen, the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph*'s former opera critic and a self-confessed "incurable balletomane" (a word that only entered the lexicon in 1919, when the Ballets Russes came to London), knows every anecdote and foible you could wish to hear about some of the most significant cultural creators of the early 20th century. But his skill is to take his readers back to Paris in 1905 and make them feel not merely that they are witnessing the birth of a new artform, but one of which it was imperative to be a part. In the years before 1914, a new Ballets Russes production became a benchmark of taste among progressives and the bohemian young: "Not to have thrilled to *Scheherazade* was to be outside the cultural loop."

And yet, although a myth has taken hold that this new Russian ballet exploded overnight, Christiansen is at pains to show that it wasn't so sudden. Paris was ready for the Ballets Russes, primed by the art of Toulouse-Lautrec and (the imported) Isadora Duncan. Diaghilev understood that had he tried to show such highly sexualised performances in St Petersburg, he'd have been hauled off to a lunatic asylum "or sent to Siberia for hooliganism". He was therefore not so much a radical innovator as one taking advantage of what he found.

And, although the seeds later planted elsewhere have taken root in Britain, the English never responded to this erotic art in quite the same visceral way. Few patrons were "prepared to sponsor eccentric and incomprehensible modernism", as Christiansen puts it; frequently, the worry cropped up that something beautiful was being turned into something ugly. When Diaghilev programmed an evening of ballet for George V, Emerald Cunard had begged him to do something traditional in tulle, like *Les Sylphides*, and not *Les Noces*, Nijinska and Stravinsky's 1923 "Joycean collage of toasts, blessings and jokes" at a Russian peasant wedding: "Otherwise I fear His Majesty will not really love the ballet as we all feel he would if he first saw the classical ballets of some years ago."

But as the Russian ballerina Lydia Kyasht had noticed, a decade earlier, "the English do not really understand ballet... They imagine they do, but the truth is they like to come to a theatre and see a dancer kick her legs."

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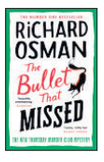
Fiction
Jake Kerridge



THE BULLET THAT MISSED
by Richard Osman

432pp, Viking, £20, ebook £9.99

★★★★½

When we're told that a victim in this third instalment of Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club series has "been killed in a very unpleasant way [involving] knitting needles", it seems entirely appropriate. Osman's all-conquering, record-smashing chronicles of the adventures of four septuagenarian sleuths continually yoke the violent and the cosily domestic, making for an odd but effective mixture of mass slaughter and cockle-warming celebration of the elderly, as if Quentin Tarantino had directed an episode of *Last of the Summer Wine*.

This time round, the Club's remit seems to have extended to committing murders as well as investigating them: retired spy Elizabeth, de facto leader of the Club, has been tasked by an international money launderer with bumping off one of his enemies, an ex-KGB high-up she tangled with during the Cold War – the penalty of her non-compliance being her own death and those of her clubmates.

A less frenetic storyline sees the foursome probing the death of a reporter on the local television news, giving Osman the chance to give us some behind-the-scenes insight into the weird world of telly, as well as the strange way in which appearing on the box turns people into public property.

Do we really believe in a character like Club member Joyce, a woman who pauses the television while watching *Countdown* "just to make it less stressful" but is a tigress when her friends are in need? We do while we read because Osman has the ability to make his characters seem real however outlandish his plots, partly because he has an Alan Bennett-ish gift for observation of the foibles of the elderly that grounds them in actuality.

His books are obviously intended to be crowd-pleasers but never seem confected, with a genuine warmth that readers clearly respond to. Every bookshop will be as crowded as the post office on pension day when this one is released, and Osman deserves that success.

MATT's week

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'I'm pleased you're all enjoying our central heating, but would somebody please buy a drink?'

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'Can I pre-book an ambulance for 1st October? I'm expecting chest pains when I see my new energy bill'

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'We can do this the easy way or the hard way, but you will tell us what your pronouns are'

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