
‘Whole New Worlds of Art’: Save Me the Waltz (1932), Interwar Paris, and the Ballets Russes

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Abstract

Scholarly discussion of Zelda Fitzgerald’s novel *Save Me the Waltz* has tended to focus on autobiographical connections, feminist approaches, or its treatment of similar material to her husband’s work *Tender as the Night* (1934). The novel has generally been seen as a lesser contribution to the genre of Lost Generation fiction set in Paris in the 1920s alongside the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. However, a closer inspection reveals its illuminating portrait of a key area of synergy in the arts in Paris during the interwar years: ballet. Paris was the epicenter of evolution in the world of dance, and the Ballets Russes, based there along with other companies, was arguably the most influential movement in dance in the 20th century, featuring innovative collaborations between dancers including Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, and Serge Lifar, choreographers including Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, and George Balanchine, visual artists including Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Marie Laurencin, and musical composers including Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, and Francis Poulenc. Throughout the semi-autobiographical narrative of expatriate Alabama Beggs’s dream of joining the Ballets Russes and her study of ballet with a Russian teacher, Zelda Fitzgerald’s lyrical prose brims with allusions to important figures and happenings in the European ballet world at that time. These allusions, precisely dating the novel’s action, place her heroine at the center of ballet’s role in the flowering of modern art. In this sense, *Save Me the Waltz* provides a unique window into the artistic ferment of Lost Generation Paris that has not been previously recognized, and asks us to reconsider our hierarchies of literary value in understanding this period.

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