

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky.* By Kevin Kopelson. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1997

What puzzles me about Kevin Kopelson's *The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky* is that while the book contains at least sixteen photographs of the beautiful, talented, and non-gay identifying dancer, it presents no images of his lover Serge Diaghilev. Non-gay identifying? If Nijinsky lived today, perhaps one would find him frequently logged onto to one of those perplexing chat rooms: "straight men for straight men." Why bother with the queer afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky, a straight dancer who died long before Stone-wall?

Kopelson answers this quite eloquently:

Nijinsky was the Lord Alfred Douglas of the Ballets Russes. The dancer, however, had even more lilac-hued notoriety than the dilettante who, having lauded the love that dare not speak its name, landed Oscar Wilde in Reading Gaol— notoriety based upon common knowledge of his relationship with Serge Diaghilev, upon his having been one of the first sensuous young men to dominate a Western stage recently riven by the homosexual/heterosexual division we're still contending with, and upon his mastery of leading roles and body languages that had little to do with conventional masculinity. Notoriety, moreover, that few of the gay dancers who've worked in Nijinsky's wake, including Rudolf Nureyev and Michael Jackson, have matched. (4-5)

Kopelson's text succeeds as an analysis of dance, a deconstruction,

or as a treatise of the aesthetic turn. And it is important to consider *The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky* in a slightly different frame of reference. How does this book enact a strategy to make the world a more welcoming place for same-sex affection? Kopelson calls Nijinsky's career homoerotic rather than homosexual. His Nijinsky resembles Adrian Johnston, a stunningly beautiful budding dancer of this moment who identifies as straight but who challenges conventional notions of masculinity in innumerable ways.

Perhaps because Nijinsky identified as heterosexual, his example for acceptance of same-sex affection becomes weaker. Homosexuality—as the stigmatized, dangerous, ever open to bashing existence that it is—prompts many men who engage in sexual activities with other men to construct a meaning of those encounters as anything but gay. They are not even explained as “lapses of judgment” or “the ignorance of youth” because such rationalizations would involve admitting participation in a homosexual encounter. We live in a time dominated by dichotomous sexual identity and it is not permissible for a heterosexual-identifying male to admit a homosexual encounter. So if Nijinsky would still rationalize today that he had sex with Diaghilev because it gave him a patron, got him on stage but it meant nothing to him on the personal level, if that is what Nijinsky might say, how instructive would his queer afterlife be?

Had Kopelson presented the Nijinsky-Diaghilev alliance as an end in itself, the book would have contributed more to taking the ongoing conversation about homosexual desire to another level. Perhaps this is the real limitation of queering Nijinsky's life. Presenting their relationship as an example of opportunistic homosexuality, the book significantly departs from the advocacy that proponents of queerness want to make about same-sex affection today: that it is a good in itself, not something used merely for transitional gain and then discarded. At the same time, bringing an instance of opportunistic homosexuality to the public imaginary is a useful position. After all, there is no official blessing for the joy of homosexual affection for its own sake anyway. With enough queer afterlives (or current lives) articulated, perhaps an affirmative turn can be made. And therefore Kopelson's book opens up a new way of seeing ourselves and others. Because while we recognize that Nijinsky only slept with Diaghilev to get to the top, we can say that if Vaslav were alive today, he'd do it for the way his heart fluttered and his brain went foggy whenever Serge cooed at him backstage.

*Patrick Muller*