CHAPTER 8

Blum Brings Michel Fokine into the Fold

Although the Great Depression had begun in the United States with the stock market crash of 1929, the French economy and that of Monte Carlo, protected by high tariff barriers, remained somewhat insulated from the worldwide recession until after 1931.

Economic crisis and political turmoil reinforced each other. In 1932 the right-wing Bloc National lost control of parliament to the Radicals who then governed with the support of the Socialists, although the latter refused to be represented in the cabinet. In Germany, in part as a result of economic chaos and inflation, Hitler and the Nazis rose to power in 1933. Right-wing movements hostile to the Revolution and the republic had long existed in France, the most important of which was the Action Française, founded by Charles Maurras at the turn of the century. He believed that "four alien nations, Jews, Freemasons, Protestants and Métèques [immigrants] dominated and corrupted the nation."[1] He sought a return of the Catholic Church and the monarchy, appealing to conservatives and the military. The Action Française created the Camelots du Roi, a violent street gang that presaged the actions of future Fascist movements in Italy, Germany, and elsewhere.

With the rise of Hitler, and the popularity of other Fascist movements and their leaders such as Mussolini in Italy, authoritarian and Fascist movements like the anti-parliamentary Jeunesse Patriotes and the Croix de Feu emerged in France. On February 6, 1934, right-wing extremists managed to organize a huge demonstration at the Place de la Concorde. The crowd then crossed the Seine and tried to break into the Chamber of Deputies of the French Parliament. They were forcibly held back and were fired upon by the police. This caused Prime Minister Daladier to resign and brought to power a government of national unity. All the left-wing political groups united in a

Popular Front in 1935 that defeated the conservative Radical government then led by Prime Minister Pierre Laval, who had made the cardinal mistake of cutting government spending and raising taxes during a potential depression. As a result, René's brother Léon Blum came to power in 1936 as the first Socialist and Jewish prime minister of France. Unfortunately, the intransigence of the Communists, who refused to join the new government, led to sit-down strikes all over France and weakened the new government from the start.[2]

Blum's Ballets de Monte-Carlo began optimistically on April 3, 1936, with the ballet master Nicolas Zverev and dancers Vera Nemtchinova, Marie Ruanova, Nathalie Krassovska, Hélène Kirsova, Anatole Vilzak, Anatole Oboukhoff, and André Eglevsky. They surged ahead with Blum's almost divine plans to rescue a company that he so believed in. Soon a new ballet master, George Gué, took over. Other dancers were hired in June: Woizikovsky, Raievska, Tarakanova, and Igor Youskevitch. De Basil kept some of the repertoire and a number of the original performers, including Baronova, Riabouchinska, Lichine, and Danilova, who returned to Blum in 1938. As the company's performances increased in number and success, Blum engaged more dancers, especially English ones. Soon the company would have more than ninety dancers. The fact that some of his most celebrated soloists stayed with de Basil seemed not to distress the ever-optimistic Blum.

Blum was constantly appealing to his superiors for one thing or another, and in 1936 his tone reflected his oppressive sense of isolation. Writing from Paris on March 3, 1936, he asked Delpierre for more rehearsal time, and said that he was facing more difficulties during the spring season than ever before: "I have a new company, new choreography, and new productions. How can I get six different ballets ready for performance when there is so little rehearsal time in the theatre?"[3] Blum was convinced that a successful opening night was essential to attract the favorable attention of impresarios in London and New York. Once again, he reiterated the enormous sacrifices he had made for the new company, to the sum of 700,000 francs, not to mention the emotional toll it had taken.

Michel Fokine, by then fifty-six, took over as ballet master when René Blum finally extricated himself from his ties to de Basil. Fokine longed to reclaim his fame in European capitals, as his time in America had disappointed and exhausted him. With Fokine and the other Russian dancers, Blum tried to sustain the glorious tradition of Russian ballet despite world economics that stressed the very core of the company's ambitions. Blum refused to admit defeat, and plowed on to achieve his dream of a ballet company, with Fokine as the inspiration.

Fokine's first new work for Blum, *L'Épreuve d'Amour*, premiered April 4, 1936, with scenery and costumes by the exciting artist André Derain. The

Figure 8.1
Vera and Michel Fokine in *Carnaval*. Courtesy of Archives Monte-Carlo, SBM.

music, thought originally to be by Mozart, actually was by several composers for a divertissement performed in 1838.[4] The ballet came to be appreciated not as one of Fokine's most experimental or brilliant productions, but as a charming, beautifully arranged piece of "Viennese Chinoiserie." Jack Anderson quoted Cyril Beaumont, who noted poetically that "'it possessed the charm of porcelain vases,' while Fernau Hall thought that it was 'expertly crafted.' Most important, Fokine found a way to disguise the weaknesses of

the young Blum company. . . . Unfortunately the American audience did not take to it."[5]

The ballet's elaborate story, created by Fokine and Dérain, includes four leading roles: the Mandarin, his daughter Chung-Yang, her lover, and an Ambassador from a Western country. The curtain opens to reveal a group of monkeys whom the pompous Mandarin soon dismisses. Maidens enter with the lover, whose duet with Chung-Yang is interrupted by her father. The Ambassador arrives with gifts, and executes some stunning virtuosic movements. While seeking the affections of the young girl, he is attacked by a dragon who is actually her lover. The Ambassador is frightened away, and then set upon and robbed by friends of the young girl. The Mandarin finally agrees to the marriage of his daughter to her beloved, whereupon the Ambassador's goods are returned to him. The devious Mandarin, seeing the Ambassador as a better prospect for his daughter, changes his mind. But in the end, the Ambassador refuses the marriage, feeling that he prefers to be loved for himself. The young lovers wed, leaving the Mandarin with his monkeys, a butterfly, and his dreams of a wealthy life. An old silent film *L'Épreuve* helps somewhat to understand the kinds of movement themes Fokine designed. For example, in the beginning he held close to reality with figurative and gestural motifs, while still using the ballet vocabulary. For the

Figure 8.2
L'Épreuve d'Amour, with Jean Yazvinsky and Hélène Kirsova. Décor and costumes by André Derain. Photo by G. Detaille, courtesy of Archives Monte-Carlo, SBM.

monkey group, Fokine chose stereotypical animalistic imagery. In the same comedic manner, he exaggerated the overweening qualities of the Mandarin, giving him the villainous qualities of a silent-film character.

The movements for the daughter also recall the caprices of film heroines, fawning and meek, with hollow "Oriental" poses, at the same time keeping to the ballet lexicon. Vera Nemtchinova, the original Chung-Yang, admitted in an interview to the "simpering" behavior that Fokine insisted on, in order to give the character a more farcical style.[6] the *Dancing Times* hailed "Nemtchinova for her brilliant dancing and miming as the daughter, and especially for her turns sur la pointe."[7] The review extolled the beauty of a lovely pas de deux with Eglevsky and Nemtchinova, and commented, "If the choreography of *L'Épreuve d'amour* is, as I heard some say, a trifle old-fashioned, then give me old-fashioned choreography. I enjoyed every minute of it."[8] The Paris journal *L'Illustration* adored Fokine's treatment of the music, extolling the ballet's "finesse, and light touch, following the score with an impeccable awareness of its details."[9]

Fokine's several new productions remain important contributions to the repertoire. Critic A. V. Coton spoke of this "resurrection" of Fokine by Blum as the major happening in the spring of 1936 and critics rejoiced on both sides of the Atlantic.[10] Dance writers called Fokine "the father of modern ballet" as he did not approve of using ready-made dance steps, short skirts, and pink dancing shoes. Fokine believed that the time period and character of the nation represented should be researched and reflected in the dance, and that the corps of dancers should be used for expression, not just ornamentation. He believed an attempt should be made to harmonize music, scenery, and choreography.

Fokine, as a dedicated and passionate composer of ballet movement, was praised by Cyril Beaumont who remarked that Fokine knew the music exceptionally well, and worked for days on its sequencing: "He knows what phrase of movement is to be interpreted, where there is to be a pose, and for how long. He composes like a painter, sketching a few movements here, arranging a few details of a pose there; it is one of the most entrancing experiences to see these apparently isolated elements gradually set in their proper order and combined to form a beautiful dance."[11]

Twelve-year-old Adda Pourmel (Gertner) was hired into the Blum company with an "exclusive contract." Asked about the difference between working with Massine and Fokine, she said she greatly preferred Fokine: "With Fokine, you always knew where you stood, never with Massine. When Fokine was selecting a cast for his ballets, he would have the entire company execute the most difficult combinations in his choreography and assign the solos accordingly."[12] Pourmel thought that Fokine's process was fair, but often not popular with dancers whose technique was weak. Unfortunately,

she added, "With Mr. Massine, he based his choices on who he liked at the time, and thought nothing of replacing someone in a role that had been theirs for a long time, putting in someone of his own choice, whether capable or not."[13] Pourmel summed it up: "He liked girls with big boobs."[14]

Pourmel also preferred Fokine in other ways, especially because he was ready with choreography from the first rehearsal through performance, "so that his ballets are encrusted in my memory as if I had done them last week."[15] She deplored working with Massine, who changed details every day and never seemed satisfied.

However, Pourmel recalled, it was not physically easy to accomplish what Fokine asked. "He always demanded certain positions and did not care how painful these might be. While I was rehearsing *Schéhérazade* in the role of one of the boys, the high saut de basque, ending in an arch (the hat had to touch the floor), on one knee which also had to touch the floor, no cheating allowed, all this at great speed. I could not sleep with sheets over my body for several weeks, I was in such pain."[16]

Pourmel remembered Blum "as the boss in Monte Carlo, that he had total control of the company, and that everyone loved him."[17] Her mother was appointed costume mistress, and other mothers complained that Blum had given her mother the job, but Blum believed she deserved it. Pourmel recalled that "Blum didn't hurt anyone's feelings; he was a pure soul, never seemed to get angry with us, and he tried to attend every performance."[18] She said that at one point in New York in 1938, when Blum showed up at a rehearsal on the Metropolitan Opera stage, "The whole company stopped rehearsal and ran to hug him and begged him to stay and watch."[19]

Despite challenges, the reviews for the maiden Monte Carlo season hailed Director René Blum as a brilliant leader with great taste. Alfred Henderson in *Le Petit Niçois* praised the major players in this new enterprise: the great master Michel Fokine for his *Lac des Cygnes;* the extraordinary triumph of Vera Nemtchinova and Anatole Oboukhoff; the graceful dancer of the very highest class, André Eglevsky; and Balanchine, whose *Aubade* brought down the house.[20] Henderson admired Marie Ruanova, writing that "there are no words in the English language to describe her spiritual beauty; her unimaginable grace, her suppleness and her spirit of gaiety and youth which imbues every member of the company around her with the desire to do ever better work."[21] *L'Éclaireur du soir* concurred: "The brilliant series of the Ballets de Monte-Carlo continues along with triumphal successes. Ovations mounted, especially for *Les Sylphides*, but also for the ingenious *L'Épreuve d'amour*, and the ravishing *Aubade*."[22] The critic for the Paris magazine *L'Illustration* applauded the glorious opening of the Fokine season and particularly his *L'Épreuve d'amour:*

> magnificently realized by the great Michel Fokine, with an enchanting libretto and designs by André Derain. . . . This fabulation was treated by Fokine with great finesse, lightness, cleverness and a true "esprit mozartien." . . . It is an enchantment for the eye and the ear. For a long time, since the premiers of Diaghilev's time, we haven't seen such a success of this quality. The young troupe of the ballets de Monte Carlo created by René Blum has shown in this interpretation, a remarkable youthfulness and discipline.[23]

On May 15, 1936, the London season at the Alhambra Theatre, with three new works and several of Fokine's more distinguished ballets, also achieved success with the critics. According to the *Dancing Times*, the "Corps de ballets has risen to heights of perfection which are a joy to watch."[24] Most of the critiques remarked upon Fokine's powerful presence in the remaking of these works. For example, the *Dancing Times* adulated Fokine's meticulous attention: "In *Petrouchka*, thanks to his scrupulous coaching, the crowd in the Fair scene became something truly remarkable, giving the impression that not one single movement, even of the humblest member of the company, had been left to chance, but that it had been specially arranged, in complete harmony with the music, to develop the story and create the necessary atmosphere."[25] A. V. Coton stated that "this was to be the first occasion since 1914 of Fokine's presence in London, directing his own works. . . . Whatever else was to fall short of the hysterical expectations of a large section of the audience, one could expect that at last *Les Sylphides* would be presented with some echo of the beauty of grouping and purity of line that must have marked the earliest performances in pre-war days."[26]

In the *Dancing Times*, a letter from Violet Rowbotham reminisced about Fokine:

> It was generally accepted among audiences and dancers that when Fokine himself conducted the rehearsals, *Les Sylphides* had a magic "out of this world." That I think, is what is lacking in productions today, the inspiration of the master artist working with the dancers. I would give much to see the Blum company again, not only for *Les Sylphides*, but for *Les Elfes*, the Mendelssohn ballet, and that masterpiece, *L'Épreuve d'amour*.[27]

The world premiere of Fokine's *Don Juan* occurred on June 17, 1936, at London's Alhambra Theatre. Based on the original Gluck/Gasparo Angiolini 1761 ballet, it was famous as a moving and important eighteenth-century classic that carried on the innovative structure and movement of the *ballet d'action*. Fokine's version took place in three tableaux; the first tableau is practically all mime when Don Juan serenades Elvira and visits her bedroom. Suddenly, he is interrupted by the arrival of Elvira's father, the Commander. When Don Juan fights a duel with the Commander, he

Figure 8.3
Don Juan. Décor and costumes by Mariano Andreu. Photo by G. Detaille, courtesy of Archives Monte-Carlo, SBM.

kills him, leaving Elvira to mourn his death. Oblivious to his evil act, Don Juan entertains friends and mistresses in the second tableau banquet scene. He tries audaciously to secure Elvira's favors, sometimes by force, and even succeeds in appeasing her anger. But unexpectedly, the Ghost of the Commander appears and admonishes Don Juan for his dissolute life. The guests are shocked and frightened as Don Juan accepts the Ghost's invitation to meet him at his tomb in the cemetery. In the third tableau, Don Juan stands close to the tomb and a statue of the Commander on horseback. Coming to life, the Commander implores Don Juan to admit his wasted life and many abandoned, forlorn mistresses. The unrepentant Don Juan is unable to yield, and consequently, the Furies chase him relentlessly to hell.

In an undated letter, Blum wrote Josette France enthusiastically that Fokine's ballet *Don Juan* was a major triumph and captivated Monte Carlo audiences, vouchsafing that the Monégasque season "is truly very brilliant; never have I had so much success, nor have I had such marvelous results in ticket sales, almost double last year's."[28]

The Ballets de Monte-Carlo programs from the London season featured photos of both Fokine and Blum, as well as their producer, Sir Oswald Stoll,

who was the chairman and managing director of the Alhambra Theatre where they played. Programming for the season was impeccable, combining Fokine's new works with his older exotic ballets such as *Schéhérazade, Prince Igor*, and *Petrouchka* and the classics such as *Coppélia, Lac des Cygnes*, and *Les Sylphides*, along with *Spectre de la Rose* and *Carnaval*. In a sense, it was a perfect menu for a smaller company (forty-eight dancers) with few stars to bewitch the audiences, and especially for those who recalled the wondrous days of Diaghilev. The Jester in *Don Juan*, played by the youthful André Eglevsky, surprised and enthralled audiences and critics. *The Times* on June 26, 1936, congratulated Fokine for his *Don Juan*, noting that he exploits the idiosyncracies of M. Eglevsky's technique with admirable results," and adored Ruanova in her dance of the Furies that was "one of Fokine's finest inventions." It praised Fokine for his "unfailing creativity and his extraordinary sense of line, which give interest and beauty to every movement."[29] Eglevsky's dancing in *Les Sylphides* also received admirable notice in *The Spectator* on May 22, 1936; the critic noted that he showed himself to be an "excellent dancer in the technical sense, with a slow dream-like quality."[30] The new *Aubade* was the recreation of an earlier Balanchine piece that Blum loved to include in the program, but *The Times* in a May 28, 1936, column seemed disappointed in the way the choreography and the music by Poulenc came together.

Writing from London on June 2, 1936, Blum reopened his dialogue with Delpierre about dwindling finances. He cited his financial doldrums, having invested all his savings and more in this new company, but noted that the London tour began initially with only four weeks of scheduled performances, and that now it was bound to last much longer, a "grand success," and he hoped to recoup part of his losses. He recounted his continuing problems with de Basil, who was slated to bring his company to London at the same time as Blum's. Blum asked Delpierre to inform the newspapers that de Basil did not establish the company that was created after Diaghilev's death, as the "Colonel" continued to claim that he was the founder of the Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo. Even in this moment of success, troubles never ceased to assault Blum's peace of mind.

The government of the Popular Front, run by René Blum's brother Léon, was elected on June 6, 1936. It endured but one stormy year, and fell in June 1937. Despite Léon Blum's short reign, he accomplished some of the most important social reforms for workers: the forty-hour work week, the month-long summer vacation, free health care, and social security. At the end of 1936, in what may have been an inevitable result of the worldwide depression that began later and lasted longer in France than elsewhere, Carmen Callil calculated that "a quarter of a million workers went out on strike, and Léon Blum was forced to devalue the franc."[31]

The careers of both Léon and René were never to recover from the devastating results of the Depression. Callil deduced that "all this caused terror amongst business leaders, and on the right."[32] Fear prompted widespread hatred for non-French citizens. By 1939, France was home to about 330,000 Jews, of whom some 30 percent were refugees.[33] Callil noted that the French Israelites, as they liked to be called, or those Jews who had been in France since the nineteenth century, had very mixed feelings about the poor Jews who were arriving from Central Europe and Russia.

Plagued by the economic crisis in France, the business of raising money and escaping de Basil's clutches placed a heavy burden on Blum. A contract dating July 13, 1936, disclosed that he was attempting to form an English Limited Company with an authorized share capital of 30,000 pounds for the purpose of taking over the activities and assets of the Ballets de Monte-Carlo, and all its costumes, scenery, and properties. Blum was to be credited with shares that were valued at half the share capital and would still be entrusted with the technical and artistic management of the Ballets de Monte-Carlo. A copy of this letter was sent to World Art, Inc. Complex negotiations begun between Denis Milner, David Milner, and M. Rubinstein continued until Blum successfully refinanced the Ballets de Monte-Carlo and tried to assure the future of his company in America.

Figure 8.4
René and Léon Blum. Courtesy of Centre d'histoire de SciencesPo.

Strong emotions were stirred up in August 1936 when the Blum company tour arrived in Glasgow and was banned from performing. This imbroglio demonstrated as well the complexity of the public relationship between René and his brother, the French Prime Minister Léon; neither wanted to appear to use the other for reasons of impropriety. Sadler's Wells Ballet, run by Ninette de Valois, was also on tour to Glasgow that August, and sought a permit to perform there the week after the Blum company's season. The Ministry of Labour believed the proximity of the two companies performing at almost the same time would compromise ticket sales for the Vic-Wells, since Blum's company had created such a stir in London.

The result was the cancellation of the Ballets de Monte-Carlo performances in August 1936 and a postponement until the following year in March 1937. An odd letter of apology and explanation followed from Ninette de Valois, director of the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company. To avoid conveying any sense of chicanery on her part, de Valois told the Scottish press that she was unaware of the Ministry's decision, and claimed "as a protest that any ill feelings should spring from an idea that artists of our country should stoop to pettiness towards our foreign contemporaries and friends."[34] Many angry remonstrances appeared in the newspapers, including a column that interviewed an indignant René Blum, who "is at a complete loss to understand the reasons for this step, especially as I have done so much for the British theatre."[35] Blum remarked that "he had taken great care to see that his brother, the French Premier, should in no way be troubled in the affair with which he is dealing as an ordinary citizen." At the end of the article, the paper presented a statement from the the French Prime Minister, Léon Blum, asserting, "The Prime Minister's part in this affair has been solely confined to the introduction of his brother, M. René Blum, to the British Embassy in Paris. The idea that the Prime Minister has even considered general acts of reprisal (such as banning British actors from the French stage) because of a measure regarding his brother personally, is not only quite absurd but offensive."[36]

In the fall, the company sailed to South Africa where they performed from September to December 11, 1936, returning to England for performances in February and March 1937. On his way to Johannesburg, Blum wrote Delpierre on September 10, 1936, requesting another 50,000 francs, as soon as possible, to be deposited with Madame Viel-Fiévet, his secretary. On September 15, Delpierre replied that he had sent the money, and described the very difficult fiscal times in Monte Carlo as, unfortunately, the powers in France were not helping the Société des Bains de Mer. He ranted that "France has incurred our enmity due to its unjust, harsh and self-interested laws that only serve to extend the crisis in the Principality of Monaco."[37]

In order to ameliorate the severity of France's behavior toward Monte Carlo, on December 2 Blum advised Delpierre to write his brother Léon at the quai Bourbon about the measures that France had enacted almost intentionally to hurt Monte Carlo. For example, Monégasques were not permitted to work in France, even though there was a 1919 treaty that reassured the Monégasque of France's "protection." In addition, France allowed more gambling than any other country, cutting the earnings from gambling in Monte Carlo, and France forbade the sale of lottery tickets from Monaco. All these acts worked substantially against the Monégasque economy.

When the company toured in South Africa, local groups gathered to act as tour guides and caring hosts, and the reviews were mostly gratifying. For example, *The Star* newspaper in Johannesburg on October 6, 1936, noted that during *Don Juan*, audiences were stunned "by the delightful and thrilling Spanish dancing by Maria Ruanova, the Argentine ballerina."[38] Also in *The Star* on October 27, in the ballet *Casse Noisette* (Nutcracker Suite), once again Ruanova pleased the critics: "Here, during this waltz and in the earlier snow storm, we see Maria Ruanova, splendid in her strength and skill, and for a moment we forget the exquisite decorations and the delightfully costumed bon bons as we appreciate her toe-balancings and her rhythmic leaping into the waiting arms of her powerful partners."[39]

One of the dancers in the company, Stanley Judson, wrote a letter to the *Dancing Times* describing the tour in South Africa. He noted that the opening night audience in Johannesburg was "unappreciative," but eventually, spectators warmed to the company. The most favored ballets of the long tour turned out to be *Schéhérazade* and *L'Épreuve d'amour*. Apparently in his role as Apollo, Eglevsky had injured the nerves in his foot, but improved quickly. Judson described a field trip: "Last Sunday we went to the Rose Deep Mines to see the Zulus dance. M. Blum was very impressed with their energy and rhythm and the way a long line of them could keep together."[40] Adda Pourmel confirmed that while the company was performing in South Africa, the dancers went on strike and told Blum they needed more money. Pourmel later stated that "he took money from his pocket and gave it to them."[41]

The Blum company returned to England where it performed for two weeks at the end of February 1937 with an enlarged roster of seventy.

Writing again to Delpierre on March 18, 1937, Blum requested an advance for some lighting gels that could only be bought in London. In order to minimize the stigma of his pleas for money, he reaffirmed the great advantages that his Ballets de Monte-Carlo bestowed on Monte Carlo as, "they have once again defended the honor of the 'house,' with the name Monte Carlo glistening on all the walls and columns as well as appearing in the newspapers."[42] On April 20, Delpierre wrote back, informing Blum

that his contract for the Ballets de Monte-Carlo had been extended for three more years. He added that the "conseil" voted 50,000 francs for him to take the ballet company to the Paris Exposition from the 15th to the 25th of May.

From Manchester the troupe traveled to Glasgow, Scotland, where it performed on March 8, 1937, at the Alhambra. The reviewer for the *Dancing Times*, Francis Savage, painted an interesting comparison between the panoramic view of Glasgow, that is, "snow-covered hills, all gold and rose in the setting sun," and the "breathtaking vision of the first moments in *Les Sylphides*."[43] Savage wrote that Glasgow recognized their good fortune in being able to see the Russian ballets *Schéhérazade, Prince Igor, Petrouchka*, and *Spectre de la Rose*. He reiterated that inherent in every ballet is the coalescence of music, painting, and drama, along with the estimable dancing of the Blum ballet. Savage recounted the wonders of watching the perfectly synchronized corps de ballet, and variations that demanded the split-second timing of several people. The "blaze of rich color" in *Schéhérazade*, "the stolid dancing of Michael Panieff as the Negro, and the voluptuous acting of Jeanne Lauret, created a tempestuous canvas for this *Schéhérazade*."[44]

On the other hand, Savage did not find *Casse Noisette* appealing: "I was sorry not to see the old version, mainly because its good classical numbers are missing from the new. Admittedly, I do not consider the first two acts of either version worth doing, except for children, and if all the value in the last act is cut, the ballet seems a poor show indeed."[45]

Savage continued with a thorough analysis of the other Fokine staples, including *Carnaval*, which he did not think up to par, and *Spectre de la Rose*, which was very "poetic." *Un Soir*, a new ballet by Georges Gué with music by Florent Schmitt, was "so banal that one hoped the wrong couple would go back into the mirror to provide diversion"; however, "*Prince Igor* proved to be a decidedly entertaining and wild fantasy."[46]

Savage concluded with some very helpful remarks about the company. He found the corps disciplined and well-rehearsed, and indicated that the corps and the soloists performed mime artfully and skillfully. However, he was struck by the "weakness of the male dancers," and was annoyed that the advertised program sometimes changed at the last minute.[47] Other critics concurred about *Un Soir*, finding the choreography full of "attitudinizing and too little real dancing, and rarely a point of repose.[48] the *Dancing Times* of July 1937 pronounced that two astounding young artists had emerged from the Blum company: "André Eglevsky and Nana Gollner—Eglevsky, particularly in his character work, and Gollner, who has technical equipment second to none, an American Girl; a fine athletic body, charm and especially the aptitude for virtuosity. She is the first true American prima ballerina."[49]

In 1937 the company went to Monte Carlo, then Paris, London, and on a tour of the English provinces—including Brighton, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Aberdeen—and finally to Amsterdam and in December to Zurich. The technician with the company, Jean Cerrone, recalled that "we were supposed to go to Italy in 1938, but at the last minute, we returned to Monte Carlo since Mussolini did not give the visa to Mr. Blum or to the company; we found out that it was because Mr. Blum was Jewish."[50]

The new season in Monte Carlo began auspiciously on April 1, 1937, when Pierre Michaut lauded the talents of Ruanova, who united "an impeccable virtuosity with a very personal temperament."[51] Michaut cited René Blum for having brought together a number of young choreographers, designers, and musicians to inaugurate a "new French School" that would be seen later at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris. Although Maria Ruanova continued to be the hit of the company, the American Nana Gollner and the Russian Raisse Kousnetsova also received rave reviews.[52] *L'Eclaireur du Soir* spoke of their "ripe and elegant talent." The critics and audiences loved *Petrouchka*, the perfect alliance of music and mime, and the company's victorious continuation of the incomparable traditions of Diaghilev.[53] The company exuded a sense of internationalism. Many dancers from all over the world auditioned and some did make it into the company. Gradually, its russification abated, especially as the years wore on. Renée Stein asserted that "Monte Carlo and its ballet company accrued the reputation of being an international place where fruitful collaborations between different countries occurred."[54]

Blum's name appeared in all the columns, especially for the performance of *Don Juan*. The critic L. Gerbe in *Le Petit Marsaillais*, "La Vie Artistique," waxed poetic in his praise of Blum: "He knew how to bring brilliant, excellent new artists who have created ravishing theatrical sights, the beauteous South American Marie Ruanova, an incandescent dancer made of flexible steel, with pirouettes filled with grace next to a powerful verve. What a gypsy she is in *Don Juan*, and by contrast, what a tender young thing as the Chinese girl in *L'Épreuve d'amour*."[55] Gerbe extolled the abilities of the male dancers, MM Panaieff, Yazvinsky, Mouradoff, Beriosoff, and Ozohne, as well as the formidable talents of Eglevsky and Oboukhoff.

During the same period that Blum's company was touring Europe, Massine, eager to run his own company, began discussions in March 1936 with a wealthy American banker, Serge Denham, while touring with the de Basil company in the United States. Massine's deteriorating relationship with de Basil ended a year later, allowing for the seeds of a new company in collaboration with Blum and with Massine at the helm.[56] As Massine and Denham were making plans for their new alliance, Blum was working on another Paris Exposition to take place in 1937. Blum wrote Balanchine, once again, imploring him to "stage whatever he wants for the upcoming festival."[57]

The Blum Ballets de Monte-Carlo opened in Paris on May 16, 1937, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on the occasion of the International Exposition. The critic Jacques Barraux, of the leftist newspaper *L'Intransigeante*, interviewed Blum on May 17, 1937, and began the meeting with an insinuation of trouble in the company, perhaps alluding to Fokine's imminent departure. Barraux suggested that Blum and Fokine had quarreled at the end of the Monégasque season, recalling that at the premiere of *Les Elfes* the audiences went wild, and Blum rushed foward to tell Fokine, "I am angry with you, but I cannot keep myself from throwing my arms around you to congratulate you."[58]

Blum spoke with Marcel Reichenecker, a Monte Carlo critic, explaining why "la grande saison" in Paris signified so much to him. He loved being in Paris and said, "In spite of the nomadic existence I have lived for four years, this is my true terrain where I took my first steps and where I feel totally at ease." Blum's long tenure as a critic in Paris prepared him to be respectful as well as apprehensive about other Paris critics. He admitted that "I do not forget that I myself judged very severely the works of others. I must add, without bitterness, that I carry alone the weight of this terrifying enterprise. Diaghilev knew many rich people, a now extinct race, because I search for them in vain in my country."[59]

This short interview revealed the challenges and strains that Blum had endured, in spite of his successes, due to the economic and political exigencies gripping the whole of western Europe. As discussed before, Léon Blum and his Socialist-Radical ministry persuaded parliament and the leading industrial leaders to increase wages, pass a forty-hour week, introduce paid vacations and collective bargaining, and partially nationalize the Bank of France, an agenda not very different from that of President Franklin Roosevelt in the United States. Unfortunately, these desperately needed social programs were not supported by increased industrial production, while high unemployement and the flight of capital out of France persisted. Blum and his cabinet were dismissed in 1937 as the Socialists and the Radicals came into conflict over Blum's policies. From April 1938 until 1940, the Radicals were returned to power, suspending the Socialist programs. Although production did rise in the face of German rearmament and aggression, the French were never able to catch up with the German juggernaut. For René Blum, trying desperately to keep his ballet afloat, the Depression and the slow French recovery were mortal financial blows.[60]

With all of Europe in turmoil, it also explained why he needed to discover a more solid means of support that necessarily had to be connected to the American business world. In an interview with Georges D. De Givray from the *Chronique Théâtrale*, Blum was adulated for his expansive background in the arts, one that fully prepared him for his rise to prominence as

a producer: "René Blum is a prodigious producer. Trained by the greatest artists of the century, the Guitry, among others, he surpassed them with experience as a journalist and theatre critic. This formation permitted him to develop his exquisite sensibility, and his charming humor."[61]

It is remarkable that Blum and his company continued to create and to perform to appreciative audiences and critics. Émile Vuillermoz, a sophisticated and often difficult-to-please critic for Paris's *L'Illustration*, had nothing but superlatives for the Blum/Fokine season in Paris. In the June 5, 1937, issue, he spoke highly of Fokine's contributions to the company, and applauded his new works as well as his old ones. He said that *Les Elfes* satisfied audiences for its pure choreography with "poetic virtuosity, and grace," while *Don Juan* displayed Fokine's exceptional and extraordinary mastery of "gesture, attitudes and choreographic rhythms." In discussing *L'Épreuve d'amour*, he disclosed that all of the above qualites shined more brightly, especially Fokine's light irony, in this "irresistible" fantasy.[62]

Because Fokine used classical composers such as Gluck and Bach, a reviewer on May 26, 1937, questioned why Blum had not engaged contemporary composers for his company. Blum responded that indeed this was a critical point, as he had trouble finding appropriate modern musical works. He reassured the critic that he would soon be working with choreographers "sensitive" to contemporary music, but he also understood that classical works taught the young dancers in his company, sixty-three artists from ten nationalities, "the cohesion and discipline" that they needed.[63]

Jean Dorcy, in *La Tribune de Danse* of May 20, 1937, delighted in the way Fokine carefully reconstructed the choreography in his *Les Elfes* and *Don Juan*, and claimed he deserved the title "Le Hugo de Ballet." Dorcy indicated that Fokine preferred a strong dramatic theme, and that he poured all his talents into a brilliant realization of *Don Juan* as a tragicomedy. He noted insightfully that "*Don Juan* is the work that best lends itself to an analysis of Fokinnienne composition, and Fokine threaded together a series of expositionary kind of dances, using pantomime, as only he can." Dorcy also compared Fokine to the legendary poet and storyteller La Fontaine, explaining that "one speaks of the free verse of La Fontaine, just as one acknowledges the free dance of Fokine."[64] He wrote that both are classicists—in their rhythmic enunciations, in the stories that they tell, and in the sonority of their narrations. Dorcy perceived a continual flow from dance to dance in Fokine's work and posited that Fokine's greatness lived on in these newer works.

The Fokine/Blum company returned once again to London where they opened May 31, 1937, at the Coliseum. Fokine's *Les Éléments*, set to J. S. Bach's Second Suite, held its first performance in London in June 1937. Based on a series of dances in a suite, the ballet's protagonists seem to

emerge from an eighteenth-century painting, with mythical heroes such as Flor and Zephir, along with personifications of natural events such as rain, flowers, wind, and volcanoes. A rehearsal film in the New York Public Library offers a glimpse into some of the ballet's movement ideas. The silent production, filmed in black and white, begins with several dancers asleep downstage. Groups of dancers enter and leave the stage seamlessly: one intriguing section is devoted to wavelike motions of the arms. Two rows of women, eight all told, sit with their legs crossed and begin to rock back and forth as their arms move in a circular motion. Eight men and four women skillfully slip in and out of the two rows of women. Fokine envisioned a Boucher painting come to life, enhanced by a carefully manipulated Baroque score.

Despite the acerbic comments of certain critics, London audiences found Fokine's *Les Éléments* very compelling, especially the way Fokine wove the complex movement combinations to Bach's B minor suite. According to *The Times* on June 25, 1937, the ballet presented a cycle of nature, drawn from Greek and eighteenth-century classicism. Raindrops were played by dancers looking like maidens from an ancient frieze, and flowers were represented by women dancing in court costumes with immense skirts and low-heeled shoes. The first part of the ballet cleverly suggested the patter of rain as a single dancer appeared at each fugal entry,

Figure 8.5
Les Éléments. Photo by G. Detaille, courtesy of Jerome Robbins Dance Division, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

keeping the countersubject going with tapping of the hands on the boards to evoke the sound of a driving rain. The critic asserted that "Mr. Fokine has been successful in fusing through dancing, the decorative, musical and dramatic elements into a unity and has created a substantial one act ballet that interests the mind, charms the eye, and, with some reservations in the matter of the climax, is effective on stage."[65]

Les Elfes continued to baffle audiences as well as to please them. In a June 1, 1937, review in *The Times*, the critic praised the choreographer who "marvelously visualized for us the insubstantial dreams of Fokine. If he has failed with Mendelssohn, it is in part because he has been ill-served by the designer of the costumes, and in part because, instead of being content with short pieces of music—he has made a very whole-hearted attempt to be symphonic."[66]

Some reviewers preferred *Ygrouchka*, such as the critic from *The Times* on June 9, 1937, who pronounced that the ballet had "a child-like plot, easy themes, simple steps and vivid colours borrowed from Russian folk art and raised to a higher power by a process of stylization." Impressed by Nana Gollner, the critic believed her charming portrayal of the Goose Girl had surpassed her performance in *Swan Lake*. But he also found the Four Swans charming as well as "neat and nimble," and especially lauded Krassovska's dancing in *Spectre de la Rose*.[67] *Les Éléments* received good reviews on June 27, 1937, in *The London Observer*, which praised the piece and the "delightful dancing and clever choreography that mimicked the contrapuntal nature of the music."[68]

Jean Cerrone (the future manager of the Ballets Russes in America) wrote a letter to Janet Rowson Davis in response to her queries about René Blum. Cerrone met Blum in 1936 when he applied for a job with the Ballets de Monte-Carlo. He had no prior experience backstage, but as he recalled, "Mr. Blum was a very kind and generous man and after six months working there, he told me that he was very pleased with my work and that I would get a raise to 10 shillings per week" (which was a very good salary in 1937). Also when Blum introduced him to others, he never referred to him as an employee, but rather as his collaborator. Cerrone remembered that when the company was in London at the Coliseum, "Every Sunday Mr. Blum asked me to take care of his son Minouchou who was 11 years old at the time, and I would take him around London to lunch and movies and return him in the evening at Mr. Blum's expense."[69] Cerrone commented that Josette rarely took responsibility for the boy; rather, it was the grandmother who raised him.

When the company performed in Edinburgh and Aberdeen, Francis Savage was less flattering in his critique. He compared, unfavorably, the new ballets in the repertoire with Fokine's earlier creations, *L'Épreuve* and *Don Juan*. He said that *Ygrouchka*, with music by Rimsky-Korsakov, although

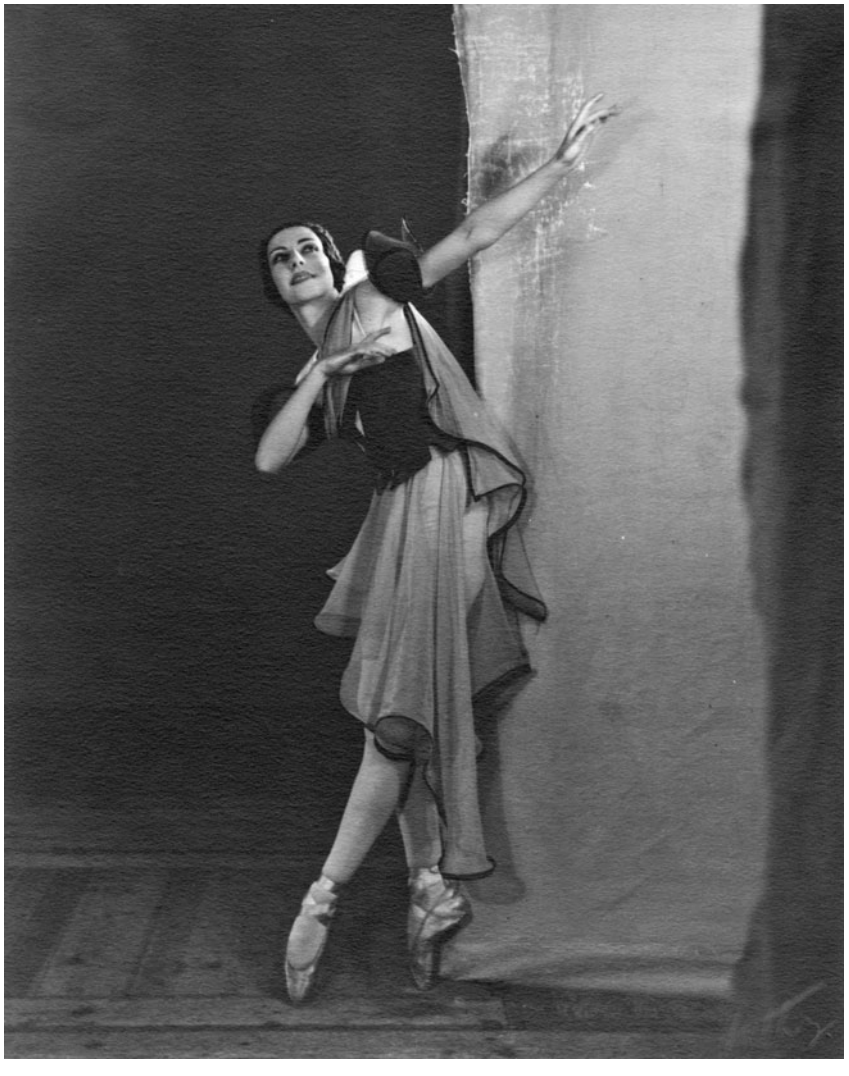

Figure 8.6
Les Elfes, with Alicia Markova. Photo by Gordon Anthony, courtesy of V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

perhaps the best, was inconsequential. *Les Elfes* was good, but the decor was disappointing. Savage observed that in his opinion the choreography in *Les Éléments* was disconnected and the dances outdated and trivialized, despite the "most satisfactory" music and the "beautiful costumes." Savage was harshest in his assessment of Glinka's *Jota Aragonesa*, which "should be given a painless death as soon as possible, for it is totally lacking in interest."[70] On the other hand, Savage had nothing but compliments for the dancers' technical ability and their consummate, vital sense of theatre.

The dancer Frederick ("Freddy") Franklin recalled the amusing story of the *Ygrouchka*, "that it was a folk tale; and that Choura [who played the girl later] had a big costume, and she came on to the stage with a flock of geese; she beats them like this" (Franklin gestured with quick hand movements). "She wants some water, and a young man falls down the well. She was marvelous. Just lovely. That was Fokine. Someone had said that they had to do something like Massine's *Coq d'Or*, which was a terrible flop, although they had great costumes."[71]

Although little is known about Fokine's departure from Blum's company, vestiges of a disagreement with Fokine were hinted at in a letter Blum wrote to Josette France on August 14, 1937, after the Monte Carlo season. Fokine's "deceit" centered on the fact that when Massine decided to leave de Basil in 1937, de Basil hired Fokine as his ballet master. Blum disclosed that "Fokine was rather crestfallen when Blum confronted Fokine with his deceitfulness in their relationship. Although Fokine refused to discuss it."[72] Blum was bitter as a result of what he called, "the ingratitude, the egotism and the duplicity of those whom he supported."[73] However, as Blum contemplated the larger picture, he added that Fokine's artistry was decidedly superb, and that "Fokine knew how to work with and train our dancers to bring them to an excellent level."[74]

Frederick Franklin believed that Blum and Fokine had an amicable relationship, and they often exchanged funny stories. When Fokine created his *Aragonesa*, which became *Capriccio Espagnol*, it was a slight piece, only twelve minutes long. Franklin recalled that "after watching the ballet, Mr. Blum said to Mr. Fokine, 'I thought that it was going to be a full ballet; you know it's not nearly long enough.' To which Mr. Fokine quipped, 'Never mind, we play it twice in a row. They will dance it twice.'"[75]