

Encountering *Sacre* through Role-play and Microhistory

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Abstract

Finding ways into the vast literature on Le Sacre du printemps poses challenges for specialists and novices alike. In the spring term of 2011, Selma Odom led a dance and modernism seminar, in which a group of graduate students delved into an examination of the original Sacre using the microhistories of its key stakeholders as an entry point. Everyone involved in the seminar—Selma included—was responsible for researching the involvement of two stakeholders in the Ballets Russes production and its reception, with the ultimate aim of participating in a historical role-play session at the end of the term. This interactive and collaborative assignment invited us to inhabit historical figures, taking on their personalities and viewpoints through a series of structured improvisatory vignettes that considered how the events surrounding Sacre might have unfolded. Within a decentred pedagogical framework, history came alive as we enacted a series of encounters, such as the initial meetings between Stravinsky and Roerich, and Nijinsky choreographing the role of the Chosen One on Nijinska. Throughout the process, as we pieced together historical accounts, critical responses, biographies, and (at times conflicting) autobiographies with musical and visual sources, the performativity of history was rendered visible. In this paper, Erin McCurdy, one of the students in the graduate seminar, and Selma Odom appraise role-play and microhistory as methods for research.

Introduction

In spring 2011, Selma Odom led a seminar on dance and modernism at York University, in which an interdisciplinary group of graduate students, including Erin McCurdy, delved into an examination of the original production of *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913 using microhistory and role-play. Everyone involved in the seminar was responsible for doing research with the ultimate aim of participating in a historical role-play session at the end of the course. Reflecting on this experience today, we appraise microhistory and role-play as experimental pedagogical approaches and strategies for research.

Our presentation begins with an overview of the seminar assignment followed by a discussion of the use of microhistory and role-play as methods. Then, drawing upon our own observations as well as reflections gathered from the other seminar participants, we describe our research leading up to the role-play day and the enactments themselves, concluding with some outcomes of this pedagogical experiment. Examples of photographs taken to document the process give a sense of how the seminar's work unfolded.

The Assignment

Selma Odom [SO]: The chance to focus on *Sacre* and its layers of historiography in a concentrated month excited me, and I was curious about how a workshop atmosphere might differ from a seminar spread over the usual twelve-week term. A report by the University of Melbourne Working Group on “intensive teaching formats” offers guidance which I shared with seminar members at the outset, particularly about diversifying teaching methods and choosing “fewer but deeper topics” in order to facilitate student-based, integrated learning.¹ The Working Group identifies role-plays and simulations among possible ways for participants to collaborate in the construction of knowledge. I was intrigued too by reading about how students and faculty in a seminar of the MIT School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences functioned as the intellectual laboratory for what became *The Tragedy of Thomas Hobbes*, a play produced by members of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2008.² The project’s matrix of history, science, and performance sounded like a venture worth emulating.

Meanwhile, it took a concerted effort to attract qualified students to take the course on *Sacre*. I consulted all who were interested in advance about their backgrounds and research interests, in the end finding six students and two auditors from four universities who signed on. From these conversations, I realized the students would bring expertise and maturity to the seminar. They included a Dance MFA student in choreography and dramaturgy who is a former ballerina; three PhD students in music, one an established composer and two young concert pianists; a PhD student in Communication and Culture and another in Near and Middle Eastern studies, both of whom are dancer-choreographers; and auditors from programs in Dance Studies and Art History.

This group, I hoped, could enter the vastness of the Ballets Russes research literature as a team, rereading primary sources and reviewing the received wisdom of several disciplines. They could encounter the identities, ideas, and art of historical figures in context from their own vantage points. At our first meeting, I broached the idea of devising a set of enactments as the major assignment, worth half the course grade, in addition to other work which included a review article on an exhibition catalogue or documentary film and a proposal for a conference paper or future research.

Erin McCurdy [EM]: Knowing that the enactments would be an experimental project, Selma proposed the assignment to the group and then opened the floor to discussion. Moving forward with the historical role-play depended on everyone consenting to perform in the enactments and being willing to collaborate with the group. We first met Selma’s proposal with skepticism. Having our largest assignment of the term culminate with improvised vignettes concerned us and we were uncertain about how to prepare. While everyone in the seminar had experience performing, a couple of the students had never tried their hand at acting before, which caused anxiety. There were worries that we might omit important information or blank on our research, as well as plain old-fashioned stage fright. In the end, through open discussion, we decided to dive in and take on these risks. Being such a small group spending an intensive period of time together, it quickly began to feel like a safe environment for taking chances. Moreover, Selma, who also took on researching two figures and participating in the role-play, promoted the sense that we were all in this together.

Methods

SO: Microhistory has been shaped by scholars such as the eminent Toronto-based Natalie Zemon Davis, known for her focus on the individual in social history. Perhaps you are familiar with the case of imposture in sixteenth-century France portrayed in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, the film based on her work.³ Thomas Cohen, Renaissance historian at York University, explains the practice of microhistory in terms of scale and focus: as “passion for the brief and small,” subtle reading of evidence (“we squeeze our sources hard, we read for nuance”), and intention “to assemble, as far as we are able, the entirety of past moments.”⁴ In imagining the seminar focused on *Sacre*, I wondered if we might be able to achieve Cohen’s model of a “well-rounded picture of past moments” by exploring the interactions of key individuals within the distinct community of the Ballets Russes in the pre-World War I years.⁵

EM: Our microhistory research prepared us to then step inside history through our role-play scenarios. Our enactments invited us to inhabit historical figures, taking on their perspectives, postures, and even mannerisms as we participated in a series of structured improvisations that considered how the events surrounding *Sacre* might have unfolded.

While role-play is not a new way of engaging with history, it certainly has become quite popular as of late. Museum interpreters dressed in period costumes, living history performances, and hobbyists involved in live action role-play are just a few of the ways that reenactment, role-play, and simulation are flourishing. In her study of reenactment, Vanessa Agnew, a historian at the University of Michigan, examines role-play as a dynamic way of exploring our knowledge of the past. Located between work and play, reenactment furthers our historical understanding through its detailed preoccupation with the minutiae of daily life.⁶ For Roger Kneebone, who devises surgery simulations at the Imperial College in London, low-cost immersive simulation offers the opportunity to rehearse the improvisatory aspects of a surgical operation at lower stakes than in a real emergency. Comparing the performance of an operating team to that of a jazz ensemble, Kneebone emphasizes the importance of role-play and simulation in translating knowledge into practice during the learning process.⁷

Although engaging in simulation or improvised role-play may have lower stakes, these activities still involve a level of risk-taking. Enactment creates a different dynamic between the student and the work. No longer at arm’s length, readers become active participants. In addition, employing role-play in the classroom is a form of pedagogical risk-taking that encourages students to step outside their comfort zones.

Process and Preparation

SO: Inspired by seeing the Tarragon Theatre production of Wajdi Mouawad’s *Forest*, in which eleven actors played forty-four roles, I suggested that each seminar member take on the preparation of one “major” and one or two “secondary” figures. Of the major figures responsible for the creation of *Sacre* we had enough people to have two Stravinskys, two Nijinskys, one Roerich, and one Diaghilev. The secondary figures selected were Nijinsky’s sister and future choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, rehearsal director Serge Grigoriev, ballet master Enrico Cecchetti, conductor Pierre Monteux,

Dalcroze music education specialist Marie Rambert, theatre producer Gabriel Astruc, composer Claude Debussy, and critics Jacques Rivière, Carl Van Vechten, and Cyril Beaumont. The seminar members pursued their chosen figures, forging unique paths through the daunting, often contradictory literature on the Ballets Russes.

I provided an extensive bibliography divided into the broad categories of “insiders and witnesses” on the one hand and “histories, biographies, exhibitions and monographs” on the other, along with a general bibliography on dance and modernism. Meetings one-on-one with students helped us to plan more specific work on sources relevant to individual figures. As I hoped, the group became a research collective, a community researching a community, as people exchanged findings from individually-directed investigations. Taking their identities with them, students found that the tasks of reading and research were not neutral but rather positioned, situated, relational. We were always asking the question “What is at stake?” for our given major and secondary figures. How do insiders and witnesses deploy memory, and how do later historians use evidence to build interpretations? Working with the large array of sources, we began to think of possibilities for scenes, meetings, interviews, monologues, letters, reviews and so forth.

EM: Throughout our microhistory research, we all compiled lists of key events involved in the production and reception of *Sacre* that could eventually be used for our role-play scenarios. As a group, we agreed upon the premiere as the central event we would like to explore, and so we thought of encounters that had led up to the premiere as well as those following it. We decided to begin with the meeting of Roerich and Stravinsky at Talashkino. Next we made a sequence of scenes to do with Nijinsky. This was followed by Cecchetti meeting Rambert, Monteux meeting Stravinsky, and Debussy complaining about Nijinsky’s *Jeux*. We then devised a scene based on historical accounts of the celebration that took place after the first performance.

When using role-play as a pedagogical method, it is useful to have a particular crisis, problem or issue in mind when conducting enactments. Together we decided that we were interested in exploring how the major figures might have resolved the issue of the music being drowned out by the disruption at the premiere. What changes could have been made to ensure that the conductor, the musicians, and the dancers heard the music during the subsequent performances? We agreed that this was an important practical issue that conceivably might have been addressed by the major figures involved in *Sacre* following the premiere.

We had more ideas than we could use, so we worked as a group to refine our list of scenarios and put them in order. In selecting what scenes to include, each student proposed the events that she felt were most important based on her microhistory research. To conclude, we devised scenes that dealt with aspects of the reception and aftermath of *Sacre*. These included Van Vechten conducting an interview with Stravinsky; the critics Rivière, Beaumont, and Van Vechten discussing *Sacre*; and Nijinsky reflecting on the work, years later. In some instances, we invented scenarios—such as the chance meeting between three critics—imagining what discussions might have taken place.

Once we had devised our scenarios, the individuals involved in each scene worked together to create short scripts outlining the context and focus of the scene. While our dialogues and actions were improvised, our scenarios were structured, providing us with a clear purpose for each scene. The structuring of our improvisations helped us feel secure in our research and yet open to the possibility of ‘emergence’ and discovery once

we all came together in our improvisations. As the role-play day approached, we gathered together costumes to aid in our transformation into our different figures. Historical photographs began to spring to life, as when one seminar participant stepped before the class with two pairs of eyeglasses poised on her nose, just as they appear in a well-known portrait of Stravinsky.

The Role-play Day

SO: We met in the McLean Performance Studio the morning of the role-play day to perform the prepared scenes, which we previously had decided to organize more or less in chronological order. Before we began, a seminar member arranged a display of her personal collection of hand-made costumes and soft leather footwear for Ukrainian traditional dance. The colorful embroideries swiftly pushed us into another reality, the theatre now evoking Princess Maria Tenisheva's art colony of Talashkino near Smolensk, where Nicholas Roerich and Igor Stravinsky met to work together during the summer of 1911.



Figure 1: A seminar participant sets the stage for our enactments.

Playing the scene's two major roles were the seminar's composer as the painter-ethnographer Roerich and one of the pianists as Stravinsky. Both were familiar with the photographs of this environment and its carved wooden figures, elaborate decorations, and distinctive textiles, as well as with the rich historical scholarship on the artists and their collaboration. The students hummed tunes and passed rhythmic patterns back and forth that they thought could be integrated into the score, discussing *Sacre* as "our baby." This sustained scene turned out to be serious yet funny, full of vivid detail from their joint investigations.



Figure 2: Nijinsky teaches Nijinska the Chosen One solo.

EM: In a following scene we were transported to a Ballets Russes rehearsal as two students reenacted Nijinsky teaching Nijinska the Chosen One solo. Nijinsky was portrayed by the student with the most extensive ballet experience in our group (shown in the foreground of Figure 2), while Nijinska was brought to life by an accomplished modern dancer. To construct the scene the pair rehearsed an excerpt from the Chosen One solo from Millicent Hodson's reconstruction of *Sacre*. By actually learning the choreography, teaching it, and counting the music, the pair brought to life how challenging the work truly was. This reenacted rehearsal led into an emotional scene that drew upon Nijinska's memoir in which she recalls telling Nijinsky of her pregnancy and informing him that she will be unable to dance as the Chosen One.



Figure 3: Stravinsky and Monteux meet to discuss the score.

EM: Another scene leading up to the premiere explores a meeting between Stravinsky and conductor Pierre Monteux. Interestingly, a pianist and an established musician-composer played these roles. During this scene, Monteux approaches

Stravinsky with recommendations for changes to the *Sacre* score. In particular, Monteux is concerned that some of the instruments are not audible. As Figure 3 suggests, this scene is a wonderful example of how the role-play exercise enabled us to explore some of the interpersonal dynamics surrounding the production of *Sacre*. This portrayal of Monteux helped us to consider the position of secondary figures who influenced the production but who have received less attention in the scholarly literature on *Sacre*.



Figure 4: The meeting regarding the problem of the sound.

SO: The largest scene we devised was an imaginary meeting called by Diaghilev on May 30, 1913, the day after the premiere, on how to resolve the problem that almost no one could hear the music. If audiences continued to riot, what should be done? Present in the heated discussion were five key players in addition to Diaghilev: Stravinsky, Nijinsky, Grigoriev, Monteux and Gabriel Astruc, the founder and impresario of the newly-opened Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. To be able to play Astruc, about whom I knew little, I had to immerse myself in his memoirs as well as architectural and social history. It was quite demanding to read everything and to rethink *Sacre* in terms of cost and risk before the deadline of the role-play day.

EM: A scene set during the aftermath of *Sacre* brought together three of the critics who reviewed the work: Rivière, Beaumont, and Van Vechten. This scene drew heavily upon the criticism of these three writers, yet the scenario itself was imagined. Instead of reenacting a documented event, we used role-play to discover what might have been discussed if these three critics had had the opportunity to compare their reviews of *Sacre*. We took some artistic license and devised a scenario that placed all three critics on a boat crossing the Channel exactly six years after the premiere. As Van Vechten (pictured in Figure 5), I prepared for the scene by reading his dance writings and music criticism as well as searching for mentions of him in other works such as Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. During the scene, through my discussions with Beaumont, we made the exciting discovery that both critics began their careers in dance criticism by reviewing Anna Pavlova.



Figure 5: A seminar participant portrays critic Van Vechten

Reflections

EM: After performing our role-play scenarios, we gathered as a group to reflect on our practice. With the day's events fresh in our minds, Selma posed four questions, to which we responded in writing. They were: What did you gain by doing the enactments together, today? How did you prepare? What were the disadvantages, or, what did you like the least? And, what aspects of this experience will be useful in the future?

Afterwards, we compiled everyone's written responses into a single document. Although our responses were personal, many patterns emerged across the group. In particular, everyone reported (in some way) that the microhistory and role-play approach to historiography promoted a deeper engagement with the past. Students felt a stronger connection to the historical figures than they had experienced using more conventional scholarly methods. We were able to "get inside" history.

One student wrote: "Speaking and 'acting out' information absorbed through readings, research and Selma Odom's lectures made for a more interesting and lasting memory of the historical facts and details around the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*." Another student reflected that the project "had the unanticipated effect of giving me some sense of the feelings and emotions involved in the lives of Nijinsky and Nijinska." She referred to the experience as "embodied history" or "three-dimensional history."

A recent article by Peter Felton in the new journal *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* outlines the "Principles of Good Practice" as a heuristic for assessing the scholarship of teaching and learning. According to Felton, good practice includes "inquiry into student learning" that is "grounded in context," "methodologically sound," "conducted in partnership with students," and "appropriately public."⁸ These principles coincide with the ways our inquiry was conducted during the seminar and have shaped our reflections on this experience. Through this appraisal of the alternative approaches of microhistory and role-play we have aimed to speak to the transformative effect they can have on student learning and scholarly research.

Conclusion

EM: Using the approaches of microhistory and role-play provided me with a deep connection to historical material that I had never experienced before. Completing close readings of the texts surrounding a specific event with a keen eye for detail is something I have carried forward to my dissertation research on dance and museums. Our engagement with the vast literature surrounding *Sacre* brought to light the constructedness of historiography and disciplinary boundaries, which has influenced my own research approach which foregrounds interdisciplinarity.

SO: As a teacher I was gratified by the students' exceptional investment in the reading and in the choice-making required for effective role-play. They eagerly, almost voraciously, took responsibility for mastering the sources and scholarship on their figures, gaining clear awareness of activities and relationships through the multiple perspectives of insiders, witnesses, biographers, and historians. The imperative of putting knowledge on the line in performance produced a heightened level of engagement with the entire literature. One student reflected that, in staging a prepared improvisation, "ideas came out in an expressive way in the moment" and that "we got the chance to go on and find the most possible from our memories about what we had read." For me as a scholar, the seminar experience sparked new depths of rereading and informed "The Dalcroze Method, Marie Rambert, and *Le Sacre du printemps*," my recent article on the other figure I played in the role-play day. Of all the seminars I led during a long career, I think I learned the most from this one.

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Notes

1. "Intensive Teaching Formats: Report of the Working Group," University of Melbourne, http://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/634304/Final_Report_of_WP.pdf
2. Lynda Morgenroth, "Behind the Scenes: MIT Theater and the Royal Shakespeare Company," *Soundings* (Spring 2009), accessed 29 Aug. 2013 http://shass.mit.edu/magazine/spring_09/thomas_hobbes
3. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). She reflects, "Writing for actors rather than readers raised new questions about the motivations of people in the sixteenth century.... Watching Gérard Depardieu feel his way into the role of the false Martin Guerre gave me new ways to think about the accomplishment of the real imposter, Arnaud du Tilh. I felt I had my own historical laboratory, generating not proofs, but historical possibilities" (Preface, viii).
4. Thomas Cohen, "The Larger Uses of Microhistory," *Microhistory Network*, accessed 29 Aug. 2013 http://www.microhistory.eu/the_larger_uses_of_microhistory.html

5. Cohen, "The Larger Uses of Microhistory." See also Carlo Ginsburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know about It," *Threads and Traces* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) 193-214 and Giovanni Levi, "On Micro-History," *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992) 93-113.
6. Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: What is Reenactment?" *Criticism* 46.3 (Summer 2004): 327-339.
7. Roger Kneebone, "The Art, Science, and Simulation of Performance," *International Symposium on Performance Science*, 2011, 93-102, accessed 29 Aug. 2013 <http://www.legacyweb.rcm.ac.uk/cache/fl0026607.pdf>
See also Roger L. Kneebone, "Practice, Rehearsal, and Performance: An Approach for Simulation-based Surgical and Procedure Training." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 302.12 (Sept. 2009): 1336-1338.
8. Peter Felton, "Principles of Good Practice in SoTL," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 1.1 (2013): 121-125 at 121.

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