La Chatte represented yet another triumph for the Ballets Russes. The ballet had its première in Monte Carlo on April 30, 1927, and during the remaining two and a half years of Diaghilev's life it was performed in Paris, London, Berlin, and various other European cities. As W. A. Propert noted in 1931: "No ballet of the recent years had a warmer welcome or better deserved it. It was constantly played during the remaining three seasons, and almost beat La Boutique Fantastique as first favourite of all the post-war ballets."¹

Many of Diaghilev's regular collaborators were involved in La Chatte and its primary contributors even adopted the collective pseudonym of Sobeka (where "So" stands for the composer Henri Sauget, "be" for the choreographer Georges Balanchine, and "ka" for the scenarist Boris Kochno). In addition, Sergei Grigoriev directed the production, and while Sergei Lifar danced the hero throughout the run of the ballet, the heroine changed several times—Olga Spessivtseva danced in Monte Carlo, but was replaced by Alice Nikitina for the Paris première, who thenceforth shared the rôle with Alicia Markova.²

If Sauget's music for La Chatte left a lot to be desired, the production still enjoyed a remarkable success due in large measure to the remarkable sets and costumes. These were the work of two brothers who were complete newcomers to the ballet world, Naum Gabo (pseudonym of Neemia Berkovich [Abramovich] Pevzner, 1890-1977) and Antoine Pevsner (Natan [Noton] Berkovich [Abramovich] Pevzner,1886-1962). Relatively obscure émigré artists, they had both exhibited as "Russian Constructivists" at the Galerie Percier in Paris in summer 1924, and subsequently at the "Salon des Indépendants." Pevsner was actually based in

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¹This article draws on research undertaken in connection with our forthcoming volume on Naum Gabo for Yale University Press.


the French capital, while Gabo had been living in Berlin since leaving Russia in 1922. The article below documents the history of the commission for La Chatte and assess its place within the broader artistic concerns of Gabo, who was the dominant figure in the process of generating the design for the ballet.

The scenario for La Chatte, freely adapted from an Aesop fable, seems, at first sight, unlikely material for a Constructivist setting and treatment. The hero is a young man who falls in love with a cat and entreats Aphrodite to transform the animal into a girl. His wish is granted and he proceeds to woo his new companion. Unfortunately, the heroine has not entirely shed her feline nature and when the goddess tests her feelings by sending a mouse to tempt her, the girl instinctively chases it and abandons her lover. Thereupon, Aphrodite changes the heroine back into a cat and the young man dies of grief. Despite its classical origins, the story became the vehicle in La Chatte for "a celebration of formal kinetic beauty," in which Balanchine's "mathematical choreography" based on the "machinery of man" found an appropriate echo in the "luminous and refracting geometric assemblage" of the set and costumes.3

The design was notable for its purely abstract forms and its use of transparent, highly reflective plastics, the visual impact of which was enhanced by dark backdrops and strong lighting. The effect is conveyed to some degree by the few photographs which record the original production, as well as by contemporary accounts (Fig. 30). Predictably, some reviewers found the production too avant-garde:

The metamorphosis wrought by Mr. Diaghilev, his choreographer and scenic designers, is wider than that from cat into lady and from lady into cat. They have transposed the Young Man, his companion and their background into a mathematical pattern. Aphrodite's temple is built out of celluloid in the form of geometrical instruments. . . . The Young Man and his fellow athletes were enlarged rulers, triangles, and circles; they move and leap as though they belonged to a theory of ballistics.4

Many others, however, judged that the combination of the Constructivist set and Balanchine's choreography was surprisingly effective. One observer commented on how the components of the set "rising against

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