

# ROUAULT'S VISION RETURNS TO STAGE IN THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S REVIVAL OF *PRODIGAL SON*

By Amelia Marran-Baden

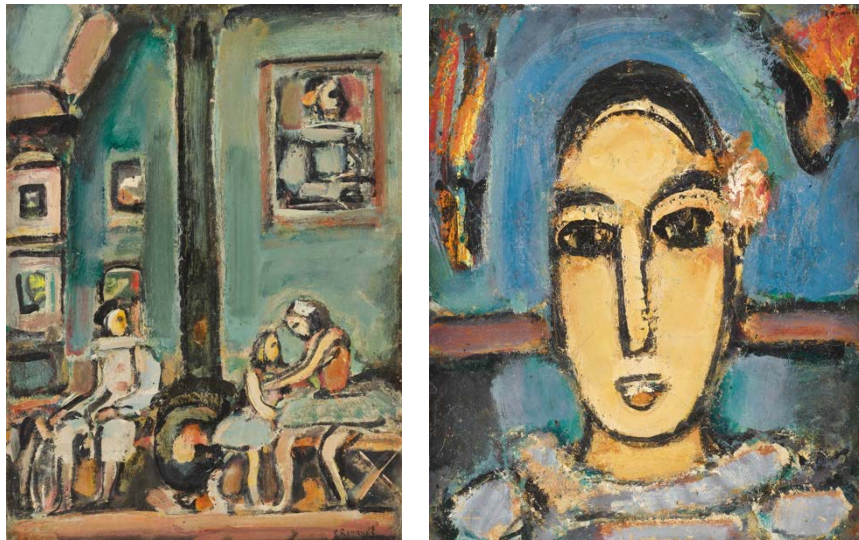
Ninety-five years after its debut for the Ballets Russes, Balanchine's parable of sin and redemption returns this winter, framed by Georges Rouault's jewel-toned sets and costumes



Miriam Miller, Daniel Ulbricht, and the Company of New York City Ballet in George Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* with costume and set design from Georges Rouault's original sketches, 2021. Photo credit: Paul Kolnik.

The stage recurs quietly throughout [Georges Rouault's](#) oeuvre. It is not an obvious feature, but it is there if you look for it, forming the ground for a trio of circus performers or the setting for a somber Pierrot. Long confined to the canvas, this theatrical impulse reached an unprecedented scale in 1929, when Rouault was invited to design the sets and costumes for George Balanchine's final piece for the Ballets Russes: *Prodigal Son*. Excitingly, this landmark of 20th-century dance will return to the stage at the [New York City Ballet](#) this

winter season, giving today's audiences the chance to see Rouault's singular vision transformed into dynamic, living scenes.



LEFT: Georges Rouault, *Cirque de l'étoile filante* (The shooting star circus), 1938. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

RIGHT: Georges Rouault, *Pierrot*, 1937-38. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

While many artists in Rouault's extended circle collaborated with the Ballets Russes—including Matisse, Picasso, Ernst, and Miró—Rouault's process for *Prodigal Son* reflected his idiosyncrasies and the spiritual aura of a profoundly religious man, whose convictions guided much of his work. To illustrate, Balanchine later recalled the friction that arose between the artist and the Ballets Russes founder, Serge Diaghilev:

*Then Rouault came. I had never seen him before. Strange man. He balanced chairs on his nose...during our rehearsals. He was a little bit — not crazy, but kind of a man of God. He couldn't do anything — costumes, scenery — nothing. So, Diaghilev locked the door, took the key, and said to him, 'you're not going to get out of here until you do something.' ...Finally, Diaghilev opened the door, and there was a pile of drawings. Little things, like that window, stained — blue little things, red, black...So Diaghilev said, 'What's that for?' And Rouault says, 'Do what you like with it.' ...I don't believe [Rouault] ever saw the ballet. As soon as he finished, he left.*



Anthony Huxley in George Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* with costume and set designs from Georges Rouault's original sketches. Photo credit: Paul Kolnik.

That modest “pile of drawings” became three expansive backdrops: a Venetian-inspired harbor by night and by day, and a tented banquet under the moonlight, all rendered with Rouault’s painterly brushstrokes and luminous jewel tones. In the production, dancers move with sharp, athletic energy, their limbs cutting through space like the swift gestures of Rouault’s bold, black outlines behind them. Iterations of those dark, calligraphic lines repeat on the costumes, tracing the tunic-like garments in shades of ruby, topaz, citrine, and amethyst and flattening their forms so they almost look like paper dolls. Balanchine, too, was interested in conveying a sense of two-dimensionality in the performance, remarking, “In designing the choreography, I had in mind the Byzantine icons that are so familiar to all Russians.”



Daniel Ulbricht and the Company of New York City Ballet in George Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* with costume and set designs from Georges Rouault's original sketches. Photo credit: Paul Kolnik.

But *Prodigal Son* and Rouault are connected by more than just aesthetic intervention; the ballet's overarching narrative of "sin and redemption" mirrors the moral and spiritual themes that ran through his entire career and can be seen in his dignified portraits of clowns and sex workers who operated on society's margins. Based on the classic biblical parable, the ballet tells the story of a wealthy king who has two sons, one deferential and loyal, the other egocentric and rebellious. Chasing life's pleasures, the Prodigal Son leaves home to embark on a journey of self-indulgence, where he gets caught in the web of alluring characters like The Siren, and loses everything. Forced to return home, the Prodigal Son expects rejection. Instead, the king not only embraces but celebrates him in what can be understood as the ultimate gesture of acceptance and grace.

Ninety-five years after its debut, the work remains an exceptional piece in Rouault's oeuvre and a rare combination of two expressionist visions that is certainly worth experiencing in person.