

## *Bronislava Nijinska:* *A Legacy Uncovered* by Lynn Garafola

Although she choreographed over seventy ballets, for most of the twentieth century Bronislava Nijinska has had a bad press, when she has had a press at all. André Levinson, reviewing her 1923 masterpiece *Les Noces*, raged that this “Marxist” creation had “debased” the art of the dancer. Jean Cocteau, who wrote the libretti for *Les Biches*, *Les Fâcheux*, and *Le Train Bleu*, all choreographed by Nijinska the following year, sniped that Braque, the designer, was the “real choreographer” of *Les Fâcheux*: “All the real dancing . . . is done by the colours—beiges, yellows, browns and greys.” Serge Diaghilev, for whose Ballets Russes she created these works, thought highly of her talent, but regarded her sex as a mishap: “What a choreographer Bronia would have been if only she were a man!”<sup>1</sup>

However unjust their remarks, Levinson, Cocteau and Diaghilev did at least acknowledge Nijinska’s existence. The same cannot be said of succeeding generations, which have sinned not by commission, but by omission: In the annals of twentieth-century dance, Nijinska for the most part has been forgotten.<sup>2</sup> Invisibility has been the lot of women artists generally. But in Nijinska’s case, something more than the usual sexism has been afoot. Compounding the accident of sex was a second accident of birth. Arriving in the world two years after the brother who became this century’s most celebrated dancer, she was sister to a legend—a phrase that could have served as her epitaph. Vaslav Nijinsky first bounded across the Parisian stage in 1909 and in a handful of years captured the European imagination. Unlike his sister he created only four ballets. Until the Joffrey Ballet’s reconstruction of *Le Sacre du Printemps* last year, only one remained in repertory—*L’Après-midi d’un Faune*.

The Nijinsky legend had no room for feminine helpmates, least of all a sister whose claim to choreographic greatness was by any yardstick equal to his own. In the silver screen version of his life, Nijinska appears nowhere. The myth of his uniqueness demanded her erasure. For this reason, *Bronislava Nijinska: A Dancer’s Legacy*, an exhibition curated by Nancy Van Norman Baer, sponsored by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and presented by the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, assumes a symbolic importance that few shows of its kind can



*Bronislava Nijinska in the uniform of the Imperial Theatrical School, 1908. Nijinska Archives.*

claim.<sup>3</sup> Not only is this the first exhibition devoted wholly to Nijinska, but it is the first to suggest the breadth of her career and the magnitude of her artistic achievement.

That career began in 1894, when as a child of three she made her debut in Nijni Novgorod, performing a “Chinese Dance” and “Sailor Dance” with her brother. It continued, as did his, at the Imperial Theatrical School, attached to St. Petersburg’s Maryinsky Theater, where she trained, and in Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, where she rose from the corps to the rank of principal dancer and choreographer. From 1925, when she left Diaghilev, to 1952, when she choreographed her last ballet, she served many companies—the Paris Opéra, Teatro Colón, Ida Rubinstein Ballet, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Ballet Theatre, Chicago Ballet Repertory, Ballet International, Markova-Dolin Ballet—in addition to forming three troupes of her own—Theatre Choréographique, Théâtre de la Danse Nijinska and the Polish Ballet. Together, these enterprises map the diaspora of Russian dance talent in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Artistically, they plot the diffusion and demise of international ballet modernism.

In this movement, Nijinska played a central role. Just how central has never been fully appreciated, and it is one of the show’s great virtues that for the first time her modernism stands revealed not as an isolated or derivative phenomenon, but as the primary thrust of her career. Until now, Nijinska’s reputation has rested on two ballets—*Les Noces* and *Les Biches*—both out of repertory in this country until a spate of revivals in the eighties, and on *Early Memoirs*, a posthumous volume of autobiog-

raphy that unfortunately ends when she was only 23, in 1914, a year before she created her earliest dances.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition adds substantially to this record, for thanks to Irina Nijinska, the choreographer's daughter, the trunks carted by Bronislava across three continents and stowed in her last home in Pacific Palisades have been opened, revealing secrets kept for nearly seventy years. In the notebooks, costumes, photographs and designs loaned to the Fine Arts Museums for this exhibition, the materials now exist to measure the character and development of Nijinska's modernism.<sup>5</sup>

Of critical importance were the years, hitherto undocumented, that she spent in Russia between 1914 and 1921. Separated from her brother, fired by the Revolution's brave new art, Nijinska reimaged ballet in fully contemporary terms. She did this both theoretically and practically: in the treatise on choreography published in Kiev in 1920 (a related essay, never published, appears in the exhibition catalogue and in the winter 1986 issue of *Ballet Review*), and in the studio, named "Ecole de Mouvement," that she opened in the Ukrainian capital the previous year. Both grew out of her conviction that movement was the essence and defining property of dance and that the technique of ballet, which she never abjured, needed to keep abreast of choreographic innovation and development. The solos and group works presented by Nijinska and her students in 1919-1920 have not survived, but the diagrams and sketches from Nijinska's choreographic notebooks of the period indicate that these were fully modernist conceptions. They also support her later contention that in these dances she had made the passage to abstraction—one of the first choreographers to do so. Worked on graph paper, the diagrams are totally geometric, as if the space of the stage, represented by an enclosing square, encompassed only abstract forms. Often these are circular figures—quadrants, arcs, loops, spheres—that recall Balla's futurist experiments from 1912-1913. At other times, they take a linear form: wedges, triangles and squares that come straight from the canvases of Malevich. Several of these forms reappear in the human massings of *Les Noces*, where the emergent constructivism of the period is fully palpable. They also occur on one of the two costumes Nijinska brought with her to the West in 1921, a Bakst creation originally designed for Nijinsky to which a short underskirt was added and to the underskirt an appliqué of geometric forms. Modernist influence is equally patent in three other exhibits that date to these years. One, a highly stylized costume sketch of a Japanese dancer, is in Nijinska's own hand. The others, by Vadim Meller, are portraits of the choreographer in *Fear* and *Mephisto Valse*, two of her 1919 solos; in both, the geometric forms of the notebooks come alive in the cubo-futurist renderings of the figure.



*Costume sketch by Bronislava Nijinska for a Japanese dancer, 1920. Nijinska Archives.*



*Costume design by Vadim Meller for Nijinska in Fear, 1920. Nijinska Archives.*



*Costume design by Alexandra  
Exter for Holy Etudes, 1925.  
Nijinska Archives.*

Unrepresented in this section is the woman with whom Nijinska formed the closest and most productive association of her career. Alexandra Exter was a painter close to the cubo-futurist vanguard and a designer for Alexander Tairov's experimental Kamerny Theater when she and Nijinska met in Moscow in 1917. The following year Exter opened a studio in Kiev that may well have been the model for the Ecole de Mouvement. The two women worked together closely; their students—including Meller—mingled. Exter was often present at the discussions that went on far into the night at Nijinska's school. Although never actually constructed because of the extreme shortages of the period, all the costume designs for Nijinska's works were commissioned from Exter's studio.

That no visual material, except for the pair of Meller portraits, survives to document this first stage of the Nijinska-Exter collaboration is hardly surprising. The circumstances of Nijinska's departure from Russia precluded her taking much baggage with her. She left hastily and illegally with her mother and two young children when news reached her of Nijinsky's commitment to an insane asylum. But that the collaboration of the two in the West should go entirely unnoticed in the dance and art historical literature seems inexplicable, except on the grounds of sexism.

For unlike so many of Diaghilev's collaborations of the twenties—cocktails mixed by the ballet barman supreme—that of the two female visionaries was a true meeting of minds. Early in 1925, Nijinska left the Ballets Russes. Her decision was prompted by several things: George Balanchine's arrival on the scene; the acrimony of her relations with

Cocteau, a power in Diaghilev's inner circle; and her desire to create plotless ballets. That Exter had recently come West no doubt influenced Nijinska as well. In any event, the two pooled their talents on the chamber ensemble that made its debut in England the following summer as Theatre Choréographique. From this short-lived enterprise, which performed at such seaside resorts as Bexhill-on-Sea, Margate, Bournemouth and Selsey, and in Paris at isolated performances organized by the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs, comes the striking body of material, exhibited for the first time, that attests to the fact and quality of their collaboration.

Baer's catalogue lists six works brought to life by Theatre Choréographique—*Holy Etudes*, *Night on Bald Mountain*, *Touring*, *Jazz*, *On the Road*, and *Le Guignol*—all choreographed by Nijinska and designed by Exter. To facilitate touring and reduce costs, scenery was not used, although the bared stage, one suspects, was not uncongenial to these proponents of scenic functionalism. At least two of these ballets had their genesis in the Kiev years: *Holy Etudes*, to one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, and *On the Road*, a Japanese "pantomime" that may have grown out of the solo *Fear*. For both, Nijinska sketched the prelimi-



Costume design by  
Alexandra Exter for the  
*Bandits* in *On the Road*,  
1925. Nijinska Archives.

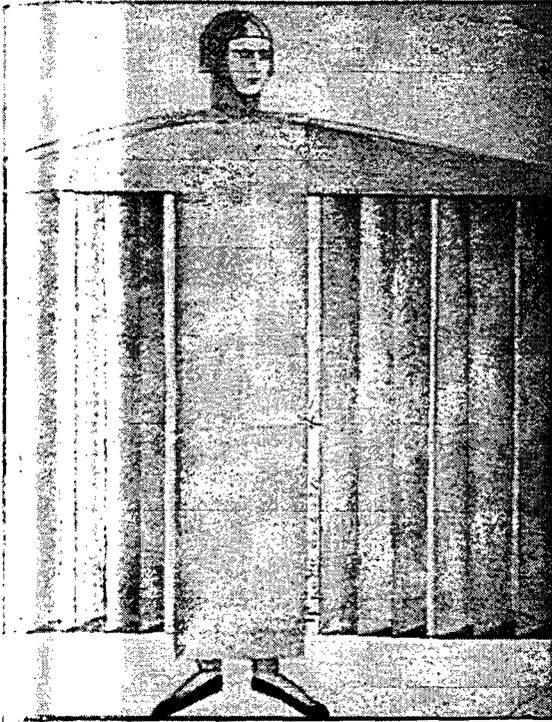


*Bronislava Nijinska in Holy  
Etudes, Theatre  
Choreographique, 1925.  
Nijinska Archives.*

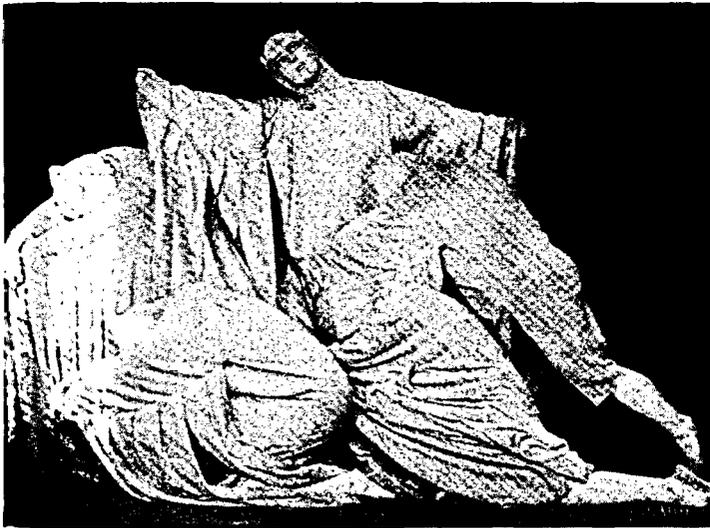
nary designs worked up by Exter in 1925. All six of these productions are represented at the Cooper-Hewitt, with Exter's costume designs mounted alongside photographs of Nijinska and her dancers in costume, the whole complemented by the costumes themselves, displayed on remarkably life-like mannequins.

Above all, the exhibits document a collaboration based on a shared aesthetic vision. The two were fascinated by angular unadorned lines and geometries of limb and torso, and they stylized the body down to the smallest detail. Both reveled in modernity, and even in ballets like *Night on Bald Mountain*, to Moussorgsky, and *Holy Etudes*, the dancers wore theatricalized versions of contemporary dress—elegant silk shifts in the former, pleated flapper dresses in the latter. Both, moreover, treated the group as a sculptural or architectural entity, a frieze of massed, designed images.

Some of the exhibit display a fine erotic wit. The female equestrians of *Touring* sport ambisexual drag—black tuxedo jackets and bustle-backed miniskirts, white starched shirtfronts, black see-through stockings, black silk top hats; in a naughty touch, they prettily brandish riding crops. *Touring*, however, is not the only work that plays with



*Costume design by  
Alexandra Exter for Night  
on Bald Mountain, 1925.  
Nijinska Archives.*



*Night on Bald Mountain, Theatre Choréographique, London, 1925.  
Nijinska Archives.*



Holy Etudes, *Theatre Choréographique*, 1925.  
Nijinska Archives.

images of gender. Nijinska's male partner in *Jazz* wears an elegant knee-skimming shift that Courrèges might have designed early in the 1960s, while in *Night on Bald Mountain* men and women are dressed identically in long body-concealing gowns.

Redefining gender boundaries was certainly a theme of twenties' fashion, as it was of art in that decade. But in Nijinska's work, its appearance transcends the moment: It seems to rush from a spring of discontent. Again and again, she exposes the gender conventions of ballet style and technique. In *Les Noces*, she puts the ballerinas on pointe not as an aerial metaphor, a symbol of femininity and its mystique, but to intimate the violence and pain of the marriage bed: The feet stab the ground like sharp, weighted knives. In *Les Biches*, her corps struts like mannequins—a parody of Petipa's top-hopping variations and society's narrow definitions of feminine behavior. In *Les Biches*, too, Nijinska overturns the romantic conventions of the pas de deux: her Garçonne (in French, literally, a feminized boy) and her Athlete go through the motions of a formal adagio—the extensions, promenades and supported turns identified with the presentation of blossoming love—without so much as exchanging a glance. Her unease with traditional representations of femininity appears in her redesigning of the Ballerina role in *Petrouchka*: Where Fokine in the original had mocked the display of shallow virtuosity, Nijinska redrew the role as a female grotesque.

Nijinska's own performing career offers more than a few gender anomalies. In a century that has seen few women perform *en travestie*, Nijinska impersonated any number of male characters, most of her own



Costumes by Alexandra Exter for *Horseback Riders* in Nijinska's Touring, 1925. Nijinska Archives.

Photography: William Jacobson.

creation. The first time she did so appears to have been at Diaghilev's urging, although the idea of Nijinska assuming her brother's role in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, a role created on her own body, suggests something more: that at the start of her career as a choreographer, she may have had to possess Nijinsky physically to exorcise him creatively. The Cooper-Hewitt show and accompanying catalogue document other male roles in Nijinska's repertory: Lysandre in *Les Fâcheux* (1924), Pedrollino in *Les Comédiens Jaloux* (1932), the title role in *Hamlet* (1934). And in the Dietrich-style tuxedos she affected in the mid-1930s, we see her cultivation of a masculine glamor image.

Given Nijinska's fascination with gender, it would be idle to pretend that her collaborations with Exter had nothing to do with the fact that both were women, Amazons in a male world. That world, institutionalized by the economics of the theatrical marketplace, ultimately destroyed their experimentalist haven. In 1926-1927, at the Teatro Colón, Nijinska staged what amounted to a retrospective of her work to date. For those ballets created for Theatre Choréographique, Exter's designs were used. She, however, did not receive credit; they were attributed to Rodolfo Franco, the Colón's in-house designer. With that, the collaboration between the two women ended. Yet the very survival of Exter's designs and the costumes executed from them suggests that Nijinska felt differently about them than about almost any other

memorabilia recording her life in the theater. Forget-me-nots of happier days, they crossed continents and seas; now in *Bronislava Nijinska: A Dancer's Legacy*, they make a collaboration of rare quality and attainment suddenly and magnificently visible.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> André Levinson, "Où en sont les 'Ballets russes'" *Comoedia*, 18 June 1923; Jean Cocteau, *Théâtre Serge de Diaghilev: Les Fâcheux* (Paris: Editions des Quatre Chemins, 1924), quoted in Frank W.D. Ries, "Jean Cocteau and the Ballet," Diss. Indiana 1980, p. 337; Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p. 466. Although Cocteau is not usually credited with the libretti of *Les Biches* and *Les Fâcheux*, Ries has found sketches in the poet's hand confirming his part in their creation. Ries, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Haskell, in his 1935 biography of Diaghilev, mentions Nijinska only in passing; that is, he identifies her as the choreographer of particular ballets, but does not discuss her choreography. Richard Buckle, in his more recent biography of Diaghilev, places her tenure with the Ballets Russes within a section entitled "The Kochno Period," a reference to the young man who joined Diaghilev's entourage as secretary in 1921. Unlike Haskell, Buckle does cover the gestation and reception of Nijinska's principal works for the Ballets Russes. In almost every instance, however, he lavishes attention on the collaborators of these productions—composers, costumers, scene designers, librettists, leading dancers—and neglects the choreographer. In his biography of Nijinsky, Buckle more often than not uses Nijinska as a source for sexual trivia. ("Nijinsky was small in a part where size is usually admired," on page 57, is typical.) At no point in his lengthy discussion of *Le Sacre du Printemps* does Buckle speculate on the connections between Nijinsky's masterpiece and *Les Noces*, although Nijinska had revived her work for the Royal Ballet in 1966, five years before the publication of Buckle's biography. As for Natalia Gontcharova, who designed the original production of *Les Noces*, she omits all mention of the choreographer in two articles discussing the ballet's creation. Significantly, both appeared in Britain, the first, in a special Diaghilev issue of Buckle's journal *Ballet*, the second, in the art publication *Leonardo*. Arnold Haskell, *Diaghileff: His Artistic and Private life* (London, 1935; rpt. Da Capo, 1978); Nathalie Gontcharova, "The Creation of 'Les Noces'," *Ballet*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (April 1948), pp. 22-26; Natalia Gontcharova, "The Metamorphoses of the Ballet 'Les Noces'," *Leonardo*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring 1979), pp. 127-143.

<sup>3</sup> From the Cooper-Hewitt (18 March—6 July 1986), where this writer saw the show, the exhibition moved to the California Palace of the Legion of Honor (13 September 1986—4 January 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Bronislava Nijinska, *Early Memoirs*, trans. and ed. Irina Nijinska and Jean Rawlinson, introd. Anna Kisselgoff (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981). The Oakland Ballet mounted *Les Noces* in 1981 and *Les Biches* the following year. Since then, *Les Noces* has been staged by the Purchase Dance Corps (State University of New York at Purchase), Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre and Eliot Feld Ballet, while *Les Biches* has been produced by the Dance Theatre of Harlem. These revivals, like those mounted in the 1970s and 1980s by various European companies, were staged by Irina Nijinska, the choreographer's daughter.

<sup>5</sup> Some of this material from the Nijinska Archives is reproduced in Nancy Van Norman Baer's exhibition catalogue, which also includes a chronology of Nijinska's life, a catalogue of her ballets and ballets for operas, and a lengthy essay that draws on extensive interviews with Irina Nijinska.