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Books

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BY DALE HARRIS

THE BALLERINAS: From the Court of Louis XIV to Pavlova. By Parmenia Migel. Illustrated. 307 pages. Macmillan. \$10.95.
NIJINSKY. By Richard Buckle. Illustrated. 482 pages. Simon and Schuster. \$12.50.

There isn't, alas, very much to be gleaned from the lives of most dancers. Among the accounts of their triumphs, finances, love affairs, and quarrels, the significant element gets lost. What we really want to know is how they danced and what contribution they made to their art. To be told about Fanny Elssler's liaisons, Marie Taglioni's marriages, or Augusta Maywood's illegitimate children, and not at the same time be told anything illuminating about their performances, is to come away with very little of value; it is like reading a life of Keats that barely mentions his poetry. The only reason for concerning ourselves with such vanished figures at all is that they were great dancers. Their private lives are, by comparison, unimportant—which is doubtless the reason that even well-versed balletomanes know so little about their off-stage exploits.

Parmenia Migel's *The Ballerinas* sets out to enlighten us on this topic. Accurate and scholarly though she is, she has an overriding interest in personalities and adventures. She is absorbed by the people behind the careers. She takes their artistry as self-evident and concentrates instead on their biographies. Her aim is to present the most celebrated dancers from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, and, though she deals skimpily

with the final stages, the formulation of ballet history that her choice implies is entirely convincing. The two-hundred-odd years covered in *The Ballerinas* saw the establishment, growth, decline, and renewal of the art of dance. Thus, the book begins with Mlle. de la Fontaine (1655–1738), who in 1681 took the lead in Lully's *Le triomphe de l'amour*, the first time that women danced professionally at the Opéra de Paris, and it ends with Anna Pavlova (1881–1931), who in 1909 journeyed west from Russia with the Diaghilev company that changed the course of ballet history.

In between comes a remarkable assemblage of characters. Few of them led mundane lives. Theatrical conditions, then as now, bred insecurity, rivalry, and unscrupulousness, but these lives are by definition all success stories. To achieve ballerina status has always meant to serve an arduous apprenticeship and then to triumph publicly. Even Matilda Kchessinskaya (1872–1971) was no exception; she had

Fanny Elssler



genuine talent. As the mistress first of Czar Nicholas II and then of his cousin, the Grand Duke André, Kchessinskaya wielded enormous power; appointed Prima Ballerina Assoluta at the Maryinsky Theater, she brooked neither interference nor rivalry. Yet we know from impartial evidence that she was also a great dancer. Even Isadora Duncan, no ballet fan, found her enchanting.

The term "ballerina," despite common usage, is not synonymous with "dancer." It signifies preeminence and implies mastery, the latter being a quality whose nature varies a good deal. In the nineteenth century the evanescence of Taglioni's style was balanced by the voluptuousness of Fanny Elssler's, so that Théophile Gautier characterized the one as Christian, the other as pagan. Ballerinas often come in contrasting pairs of this sort. The eighteenth century witnessed the simultaneous appearance of Camargo and Sallé, and the twentieth of Pavlova and Karsavina, Markova and Danilova, Baronova and Toumanova.

In such polarities the essential, non-biographical matter can be located: Dancers of distinction bring individual qualities to the practice of their art and help to shape its course. Kchessinskaya, by being the first Russian dancer to learn the secret of Italian virtuosity, initiated a whole new national style in which strength and elegance were combined. Camargo, by shortening her skirt, executed bravura steps that were, until then, the prerogative of men. Sallé, by substituting a muslin shift for the stiff panniers of her time, by dispensing with a wig, by wearing slippers rather than high heels, was able to employ a more natural and expressive mode than had yet been seen. Taglioni, by perfecting the art of dancing on point, gave the ballerina unprecedented swiftness and insubstantiality, thus opening a hitherto unglimped spiritual realm. At one blow she established the ascendancy of vaporous femininity.

So effectively, in fact, did Taglioni

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accomplish this that she helped to banish the male dancer from the stage. Within twenty years of her retirement ballet—which had begun in the sixteenth century with the glorification of kingship and had exalted male prowess right through the eighteenth—became a superior form of leg show, a parade of female attractions. Except for character parts, men were no longer to be seen. Denied the contrast of male strength, the ballerina degenerated from an ideal into a sexual object. The sixty-year decline of ballet in the West was prefigured by the mid-century's replacement of the *premier danseur* by a shapely girl in tights and male costume, whose task it henceforth was to partner the ballerina.

These are the matters that need discussion. What Parmenia Migel, a recognized ballet historian, sets out to do is admirably done. Indeed, in the chapters on Sallé and Taglioni she deals masterfully with her chosen area. But another, more significant book remains to be written, one that examines the dancer's role in the development of ballet and deals with private lives only in relationship to art. In some cases this relationship has important artistic consequences. A full account, for example, of Kchessinskaya's undoubted influence



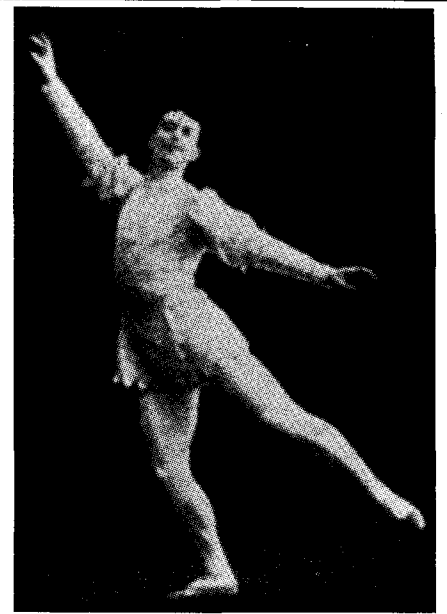
When males were banned:
Carlotta Grisi and Lucien Petipa
performing in *La Peri*

on the imperial ballet would be illuminating. *The Ballerinas* is not that sort of book, but at least it will be easier to write now that Miss Migel has brought together so many hitherto obscure facts.

Like Kchessinskaya, Vaslav Nijinsky is one of the few dancers whose private life need concern us. As a performer he played a decisive role in Diaghilev's success. His strength, technique, and interpretive genius revealed the extraordinary potentialities of an art form that Western audiences had long written off.

Although Adolf Bolm's barbaric energy in *Prince Igor* overwhelmed Paris, it was Nijinsky, a classically trained virtuoso with a wide range of styles at his command, who became the company's great star. He, Pavlova, and Karsavina made people recognize the profound nature of dance. He and Karsavina were perfect partners; each gave the other something indispensable. But Pavlova, fully conscious of Nijinsky's unprecedented public appeal, left Diaghilev to fend for herself. Her training at the Imperial Theater, with its emphasis on female glorification (though not to the entire exclusion of men), and the awareness she always had of her own genius, made the idea of male parity difficult to accept. In any case she realized that Nijinsky was Diaghilev's chosen instrument. Through him, first as a dancer and later as a choreographer, the genius of Russian art was to be revealed.

The immediate result was a galaxy of roles choreographed for him by Mikhail Fokine—the Slave in *Scheherazade*, Petrouchka, the Specter of the Rose, Harlequin in *Carnaval*, the Blue God, Daphnis, Narcissus—each of which glorified the male element, often at the expense of the female. Even the Imperial Russian Ballet, though it had preserved male dancing, had never made it coequal with female dancing, let alone more important. But in *Spectre de la rose*, one of his greatest triumphs, Nijinsky took over precisely the kind of role that, before this time, had been the prerogative of the ballerina. His depiction of the rose brought home from a ball by a young girl was the counterpart of Taglioni's Sylphide nearly eighty years before. Both personified metaphysical aspirations and states of feeling; just as Taglioni embodied a young man's longings for more than earthly perfection, so Nijinsky gave physical definition to a young girl's ideal love. In *Scheherazade*, as the Golden Slave, he, not the beautiful Sultana, was the sexual focus. As the puppet Petrouchka, vainly struggling after happiness, he, not the female puppet (called, significantly enough, The Ballerina), was the pathetic victim of fate. Nijinsky, with Fokine's aid, created a strange, alluring dance persona: at once sexual and androgynous, athletic and remote, self-occupied and impersonal. Nijinsky's success marked the end of pat sexual designations in dance. At the same time he helped to extend the range of male sensibility. His personality as a dancer was essentially creative, polymorphous, volatile. He had the versatility and impartiality of the born role player. He prefigures Nureyev's unapologetic, even arrogant, pride in his own



Nijinsky in *La Source*

accomplishment and all the ambiguities of Mick Jagger's intense self-involvement.

Since Nijinsky's time it has become easier for men to assume their ancient rights to grace and elegance. But insecurity about virility is still powerful, and one of its foci is the supposed effeminacy of male dancers. Nijinsky, however, was never less than masculine. Fokine may have exploited the mysterious indeterminacy of his personality but would never have permitted him an effeminate style, since this, as everybody connected with Diaghilev knew, was incompatible with good dancing. To the Soviet Russians, who make heroes of their ballet stars, such generalized worries about virility are incomprehensible. But in our society only the athlete—the winner—is fully licensed to exploit his body for metaphysical ends, and even our good dancers are susceptible to society's fears.

Nijinsky's biographical circumstances have played no small part in perpetuating this situation. He and Pavlova are the most famous dancers who ever lived, the individual geniuses who, like Caruso in singing, represent an entire art. Unlike Caruso's or Pavlova's, however, Nijinsky's fame is based as much on the legend of his life as on his transcendent talent. He is remembered as a prodigy of dance, capable of performing *entrechats dix*, able to stay suspended in the air for a split second, a preternatural jumper. But, for the thousands with only a passing interest in the dance, he is better remembered for the larger facts of his life: his homosexual relationship with Diaghilev, his marriage to Romola and consequent dismissal from the Ballet Russe, his at-

tacks of severe religious mania, the madness that followed.

This is not a story to allay our bourgeois apprehensions about male dancers or, for that matter, about the dubiousness of artistic creativity. Yet Nijinsky satisfies our need for an antihero of art, and for that reason alone he exerts an unending fascination. Someone or other is always on the point of filming his life. Maurice Béjart, in *Nijinsky, Clown of God*, has made him the subject of a vast, vulgar dance spectacle. Nijinsky has had more books written about him than has any other single dancer. He has become a mythic figure, a prototype of the Promethean artist, doomed to endless suffering for his presumption. To the world at large he is a compound of genius, sinner, victim, and saint. His sexual deviation seems an emblem of his miraculous talent, a confirmation of our worst suspicions about high art. His madness

substantiates our belief that genius is unstable, dangerous, the enemy of order. At the same time it satisfies our desire for retribution. Nijinsky's stardom lasted a mere nine years, and for two of these he was interned in Hungary and Austria as an enemy alien during World War I and did no dancing. Those alive today who saw him perform are a small and diminishing band. As time passes it becomes harder and harder for the rest of us to believe that he ever existed. However, interest in him does not slacken. He becomes ever more fascinating the farther he recedes from us. Yet his wife, Romola, is still alive; his sister—Bronislava Nijinska, the great choreographer of *Les Noces* and *Les Biches*—has only just died; his old partner Tamara Karsavina still survives; and so does Marie Rambert, a pupil of Dalcroze who helped him with the rhythmic problems in choreographing *Sacre du printemps*. The facts, in

other words, are still part of what we know about him.

Richard Buckle's *Nijinsky* is on the face of it an attempt to set down all the facts, to unmask the legend and restore Nijinsky to the history of ballet. For, apart from his talent as a dancer, Nijinsky choreographed three of the seminal dance works of modern times: *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, *Jeux* (to a commissioned score by Debussy), and *Sacre*. Though only the first of these survives, all played an important part in the development of our twentieth-century sensibility. They figured in the heroic struggle to evolve new forms of apprehension during the years before World War I.

Richard Buckle, ballet critic for the (London) *Sunday Times*, is aware of Nijinsky's share in this great endeavor, and he devotes a lot of space to making it clear. By the end the reader is in no danger of mistaking the importance of Nijinsky's contribution to choreography: in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* his innovative, anticlassical style and his unabashed presentation of the Faun's erotic self-discovery; in *Jeux* his stylized gestures and use of a contemporary sport—tennis—to express the conflicts and competitiveness of love; in *Sacre* his orgiastic group movements, a world away from nineteenth-century grace, to create a primitive ritual of death and rebirth. All three ballets were implicated in the scandal of avant-garde art. *Faune* was denounced on the front page of *Le Figaro* as "filthy and bestial" and was publicly defended by Rodin. *Jeux* was dismissed as full of "meaningless, pretentious contortions" also by *Le Figaro*. And *Sacre*, largely on account of Stravinsky's music, caused one of the most violent outbreaks of disapproval and confusion in the history of the theater. In the midst of the opening night riot a countess cried out, "I am sixty years old, and this is the first time anyone has dared to make fun of me!" Thus, in the same year as the New York Armory Show, was the modern world announced through the medium of an art that for most of the Paris audience was only five years old.

But Buckle is not content to recount these matters for their own sake. He often appears to be doing so only because they amplify the tragic legend, which for him is clearly the more important consideration. He devotes a lot of space to the sheer glamour of the ballet world and lapses frequently into a quasifictional re-creation of scenes that seem especially exciting to him. In the end he settles for neither the Nijinsky achievement nor the Nijinsky legend. He has amassed an enormous

A caricature by Jean Cocteau of Nijinsky, recovering in the wings after performing *Le Spectre de la rose*. *Diaghilev* is shown third from left.



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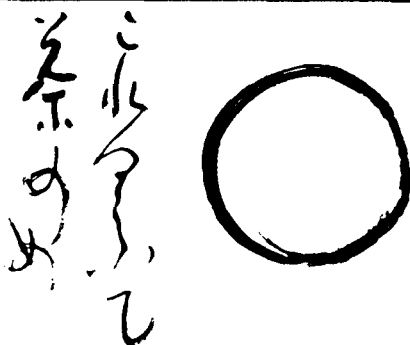
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quantity of material from primary documents, books, articles, conversations with survivors, and questionnaires, but he never seems to have discovered what to make of it all. The result is that we get only a hazy impression of Nijinsky, both as a man and as an artist. The simple legendary outline of his life is confused by a series of abrupt changes in subject matter, whose purpose seems to have been to make Nijinsky's artistic significance clear but which only muddles the reader. The focus keeps shifting from Nijinsky to Diaghilev, the Ballet Russe, Diaghilev's entourage, high society in Edwardian England, homosexuality, modern art, Russia, and, distressingly, Richard Buckle—who, every so often, steps from behind the scenes to tell us how his career as a ballet critic was foreshadowed by an adolescent fascination with Nijinsky. This is not necessary background material so much as uncertainty of aim.

One problem faced by Buckle was the need to collaborate with Nijinsky's widow, whose single-mindedness about Diaghilev's villainy (already made clear in the biography of her husband that she published in 1934) has limited Buckle's options. Romola, after all, sees herself as an apostle of normality who succeeded in rescuing an innocent, duped youth from the clutches of a corrupt, older man. Buckle is not prepared to subscribe to so naïve a view, particularly in light of the madness that in due course followed the disturbance of Nijinsky's emotional and professional equilibrium by Romola's ambitions. Nevertheless, he adopts a disingenuous tone towards Diaghilev, to whom, in effect, he denies equal status as a vulnerable, passionate human being.

The Nijinsky legend demands a villain, and Diaghilev fits the role to perfection. But the legend keeps colliding with the facts of art. Diaghilev was infinitely complex and infinitely human. To view him as a kind of Lord Henry Wotton does justice to neither his fundamental commitment to genius nor its achievements. From his vision, after all, sprang a new conception of modern art, most of modern ballet, some of modern dance, and the careers of such innovative geniuses as Stravinsky and Balanchine. Nijinsky was one of Diaghilev's most remarkable creations; under his guidance Nijinsky initiated a revolution in dancing and in choreography. For that important reason they both deserve to be treated with a more rigorous, serious, and independent approach than Buckle's. Such an approach could only add to their dignity as men and creators and to our understanding of their extraordinary artistic achievement. □

**Daughter of
"Rosemary's Baby"**

THE STEPFORD WIVES. By Ira Levin.
145 pages. Random House. \$4.95.

BY WEBSTER SCHOTT

As you may remember, in one of Ira Levin's earlier novels there was a woman. Her name was Rosemary, and she had a baby. It was the devil. In Mr. Levin's new novel a group of business and professional men live in a Connecticut town called Stepford. They have wives. Their wives are robots. Disneyland-type robots. Mr. Levin's novel is about how one Stepford wife comes to perceive her own imminent murder and replacement by a forever young, forever sexy, forever house-cleaning, audio-animatronic Disney dummy modeled in her own image and likeness. She learns too late.

After a slow start *The Stepford Wives* kills time like a souped-up clock. I began reading it one evening around 10:30 and didn't put it down until the last page at 1 a.m. It's not a think trip. It's reading fodder. If *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* turned you on, *The Stepford Wives* will give you a couple of hours of stimulation. It's not as compelling, not as engrossing as the best of its genre. Mr. Levin creates a soft environment at the beginning, and danger is slow to show. For a while, as Joanna Eberhart, a newcomer to Stepford, tries to get the wives of the community interested in Women's Liberation, it seems as though Mr. Levin has written a tract for Ms. The most serious shortcoming is lack of density or complexity. Levin doesn't probe his plot or explore his conceit, robot women, with the fullness of, say, Bill Blatty's ingenuity in *The Exorcist*. Maybe he didn't do all his homework. The mysteries of planning, construction, and execution remain mysteries.

And thus, if you have to believe with your brains, you won't believe *The Stepford Wives*. Levin isn't a good detail man. He has, however, the magician's touch; he casts a spell, and *The Stepford Wives* becomes believable through emotional transfer. As Joanna discovers the scientific backgrounds of the men running the Stepford Men's Association, as she learns of the past and forgotten feminist militancy of the Stepford wives, as she sees two of her friends change radically, her terror comes through the novel like 200 volts. In the clutch, when Joanna tries to es-

Webster Schott is a frequent critic of contemporary fiction.