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The Dancing Times

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THE ONLY SERIOUS AND AUTHORITATIVE
BALLET CRITICISM AND NEWS

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MONTHLY
25 Wellington St. Strand.

EC6412

Vera Trefilova

A Study in Classicism

by
ARNOLD L. HASKELL

BRITISH-CONTINENTAL PRESS
LONDON
1928

**To all the pupils of Vera Trefilova
and to all those that have been thrilled at her performances, as I have been,
this study is respectfully dedicated.**

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES.

This is, I think, the first time in the literature of the dance, that a series of books has been published at a price that all can afford.

The enthusiastic applause that comes from the pit and the gallery at any performance of ballet bears witness to the popularity of ballet with the people at large, and, indeed, I would go as far as to say that the true connoisseurs of ballet are to be found in the pit and the gallery rather than in the boxes or stalls. This series is intended to appeal to that public.

These small volumes are not of a biographical nature. They are critical studies of various world-famed artists, and, what is of greater importance still, the position of those artists in the history of ballet is dealt with in full, so that the complete series will be an exhaustive history of modern ballet.

We have been singularly fortunate in obtaining the invaluable cooperation of Arnold L. Haskell and Vale-

rian Svetlow, who will undertake the preparation of the texts of these volumes.

Arnold L. Haskell, who has written the present study, and that on Thamar Karsavina, is the author of an important work, «Some Studies in Ballet», and is one of the leading ballet critics in this country. He has devoted his entire time and energy to the study of ballet in particular and of art in general.

Valerian Svetlow is probably one of the greatest living authorities on ballet, and the author of several books, which are now regarded as classics, «Karsavina», «Pavlova», «Le Ballet Contemporain» etc. This is the first time that the public at large will have the opportunity of reading this distinguished critic's work, for his former volumes have been issued in limited editions at a very high price. M. Svetlow is to undertake the works on «Pavlova», «Fokine» and «Massine».

Great care has been taken to make these little volumes as attractive as the more expensive works on ballet, and the typography has been placed in the expert hands of M. Jacques Polonsky.

London, December 1927.

Alfred H. Tysser
For the Publishers.

PREFACE.

(In a letter from Prince Serge Wolkonsky.)

Paris, March II 1928.

Dear Mr. Haskell,

For three reasons it is a pleasure for me to write these few lines of preface you so kindly asked me.

First: your interesting study and definition of the word « classical ». Applied to the dance, it is certainly younger than the same term in other arts, for instance, music or even more so in sculpture. Therefore I very much appreciate the fact that you do not dwell upon the « date » of its origin, but concentrate your attention and base your definitions on technical grounds and on the immovable formulas of the most « moving » of all arts. By doing so, you build your criticism on a *point* of view as firm and clear as the « *points* » of the lovely dancer whose art is the subject of this book.

Second: I like the line you draw between that which is legitimate in the dance and that which is not. In following the evolution of emancipated dancing, you do not hesitate to attack its worse and most hideous

expression — alas, as hideous as it is applauded — I mean the base excentricities of a Josephine Baker. Indeed with dancers of this type, the dance which is an « élévation » becomes an « abaissement » of the human figure, and the ostrich feather ornament on a part of the body not usually prominent in dancing is a regression to a state of prehistoric humanity.

Third: the same warm spirit of admiration for my country, as it expresses itself in the complex combination of arts that produced the one art of ballet, that same warmth of feeling that is so noticeable in your book « Some Studies in Ballet », I find in the pages that follow, and this adds to my acknowledgement of your work, as well as feelings of artistic admiration, a goodly portion of patriotic gratitude.

A fourth point I must add, and this is our common admiration for the exquisite dancer that is Vera Trefilova.

« Habeant sua fata libella », says a latin proverb.

With sincerest wishes for the good fate of this book.

I am Yours etc.

S. Wolkonsky.



VERA TREFILOVA

BY

CONSTANTINE KOROVIN

FOREWORD IN THE FORM OF A LETTER.

London, December 1927.

My Dear VERA ALEXANDROVNA.

I have had a very real pleasure in preparing this small volume, the first of a series devoted to the great dancers, and in trying to explain to others all that your great art has meant to me.

You are the cause of my turning ballet critic. It was your unforgettable performance as Aurora in «The Sleeping Princess» that taught me my first real lesson in ballet, criticism which is that ballet must first and last be composed for the dancer, a fact that seems to have been forgotten lately, and that music and decor must serve the dancer and not the reverse. Through you I saw the real genius of Tchaikovsky and Petipa, and understood something of what must have been the Imperial Russian Ballet and all its glorious traditions. For all this I owe you a vast debt of gratitude.

Some years later, when I came to know you, I was

not deceived. You were modest, modest to a degree as must be all artists who have conquered a highly complicated technique instead of letting that technique conquer them. Your preoccupations were with your art, not with yourself.

I have seen you as a teacher. Lucky are your pupils, for, if you can but transmit to them a hundredth part of yourself, they will be artists.

Arnold L. Haskell.

CHAPTER ONE.

*An appreciation, reprinted from the author's
« Some Studies in Ballet ».*

VERA TREFILOVA.

A discussion as to who is the greatest of all ballerinas cannot possibly lead us very far, though it is a pleasant topic of conversation and an ever recurring one among lovers of the ballet. It would seem to be the same in all branches of theatrical art, and to many heated discussion have I listened as to the comparative merits of Duse and Bernhardt, Melba and Tetrazzini.

When discussing such questions as the superiority of one artist over another, the whole problem of necessity resolves itself into one of personal tastes. There can be no definite «so and so» is the greatest, but «so and so» appeals to me the most.

J. L. Vaudoyer, the eminent French critic, says of Pavlova, «Pavlova est le Poussin de la danse». In speaking of Vera Trefilova I would say, «Trefilova is the

Ingres of the dance», and those qualities that make me appreciate Ingres more than any other artist, I find present in Trefilova, — a masterly technique and an ever increasing charm of line. The technique of Trefilova is no mere flashy virtuosity, dazzling momentarily, no cold exhibition of difficult feats. The technique is present but entirely subordinate to this great artist's unique charm and personality.

The charm lies as with Ingres in line rather than in colour, if one may say so of a dancer. I remember once in a conversation with Korovin, his characterising the charm of Trefilova as «the charm of aristocracy of movement», a wonderful pride in the carriage of the body, and it is this quality that he has brought to the fore in his painting of the great dancer.

Trefilova, like all ballerinas, is small, yet when dancing she completely dominates the stage, the corps de ballet vanishes in a mist, and every one of her delicate movements becomes a rare artistic experience to the onlooker. Never does one think of the technique, so completely has she mastered it to her own ends.

We have unfortunately had little opportunity in England of seeing her in a diversity of roles. The leading part of «The Sleeping Princess» is however of sufficient

importance to reveal her to us as the perfect classical dancer, especially as this role was danced during the season by other world-famed artists, making comparison inevitable. Trefilova alone seemed to have found the true measure. One of the dancers took the role in the dreamy poetical manner of «Les Sylphides», the other with cold mechanical precision, both a strong contrast to Trefilova. Without any sacrifice of brio she succeeds in being poetical, and extraordinary as is her technique, at no time is she mechanical in the manner of the highly technical and often exceedingly brilliant Italian trained dancers, about whom there is often a vulgarity caused by the tightness of the movements. Trefilova, with her magnificent large movements is essentially Russian in her dancing.

«The Swan Lake» is another ballet in which we have had the opportunity of seeing her, and this again is the ideal Trefilova ballet, strictly classical, yet with that romantic atmosphere of fairy tale and legend that makes it more than a mere exhibition of dancing. Here again she finds the exact measure between a purely technical display and the particular sentiment of the later romantic ballet. «The Swan Lake» is essentially pre-Fokine in conception and requires in its inter-

pretation a certain restraint in mime that is one of the characteristics of classical ballet. The Swan of «The Swan Lake» and The Swan of Fokine's famous «Dying Swan» are entirely different in conception. The Fokine Swan is more human, has more of the woman in it, and its death is not far in feeling from that of Mimi in «La Bohème», while the Swan in the «Swan Lake» is the cold white creature that swims so proudly in the lake. It is the difference between these two conceptions, the classical and the romantic, that shows us the true difference between Pavlova's Swan and Trefilova's Black Swan. The latter is nearer the swan of «The Swan Lake», more swanlike and probably for that very reason less pathetic.

Like Ingres she is classical, yet at times more subtly romantic than the professed romantics.

There is another point that places Trefilova in a very special position among dancers. She is an exceptional musician. Her ear is developed to the most amazing degree, no nuance escapes her, and never at anytime is she at variance with the music.

Technique, personality, the charm of perfect line in dancing and this unique musical sense all go to make this great genius of the dance.



BRONZE BY DE BOULOGNE.

CHAPTER TWO.

A STUDY IN CLASSICISM.

«It would be impossible to find an organisation which has given to the world more classical dancers of different and varying talents than the Imperial Russian Ballet.»

It is with these words that M. Valérian Svetloff begins his exceedingly interesting study of Anna Pavlova. It is the word «classical» in this phrase that strikes me most. Trefilova, Pavlova, Karsavina, Kschesinskaia, Egorova, Preobrajenskaia all have this one thing in common, they are classical dancers, though in every other respect they differ, each having a clearly defined speciality. Trefilova is the classical dancer «par excellence», an inspired interpreter of Tchaikovsky, Pavlova more dreamlike, more sentimental, using the word in its best sense, while Karsavina has made her name rather in the Fokine ballet, and Preobrajenskaia excels in the humorous and in mimique.

Each one of these great artists is entirely different, yet each one has this common grounding of «classicism», and it is this classicism that has permitted each dancer to express her particular personality. It is interesting therefore to enquire into the exact nature of this classicism without which the dancer cannot exist. I do not intend in this section of the book to treat the question from a dance technique point of view, but from a wider and more easily understood aspect. The word can easily be translated without any reference to the sister arts, though as it will be seen, without much difficulty, classicism in painting, music and ballet are quite closely connected.

Firstly I would translate «classicism» very freely to mean «pure dancing», the «classical dancer» to mean a dancer of perfect technique who had sought no short cuts to proficiency, and the «classical ballet» as a ballet designed first and last for the dancer. Such definitions are necessarily incomplete, but they give us an approach to the truth, which we can reach by elaborating them. Firstly by «pure dancing» I mean that dancing which has been based on the five positions, which produces long, graceful lines, and which is neither acrobatic, nor in any way violent and lacking in dignity. The move-

ments of a Josephine Baker may be a diverting spectacle, perhaps they are natural to the negro, some writers have tried to give them dignity of a magnificent tribal war dance, and have talked of folk-lore and anthropology, but they are the result of no system. While they may possess a certain character and express the personality of the energetic little negro girl, they are frankly ugly, undignified, and are comparatively simple to execute. They are without doubt deforming, giving the dancer a tendency to be knock-kneed, round shouldered and generally slovenly in carriage. The same remarks would apply to most of the negro-derived dances of to-day. They are the very reverse of classical. When danced by the negro they may have some meaning, though I believe that they are far removed from the primitive dance, but when danced by the European they are totally meaningless, and as a form of dancing it is safe to prophecy their early death. It is difficult to understand the lavish praise given by some undoubtedly intelligent critics to such teams of acrobats as the Hoffman girls. They have nothing particularly new to show us. They are healthy, some of them pleasing to look upon, though lacking in any subtlety or distinction, one or two of them have a smattering of classical technique,

which unfortunately they exhibit to the public, but to sum them up, they are the acrobats and contortionists that have been known to the public for generations.

The classical dancer then has a very definite system, built up by years of study, and it is only when this system has been thoroughly learned, has become a second nature, that the dancer is ready to be seen by the public. The opponent of classicism shows great ignorance of the subject by the argument that the pirouette, pas-de-chat, etc., are monotonous and meaningless, and that the modern public requires something significant. Apart from the sheer abstract beauty of a well executed step, a quality that is entirely missing in what the opponents of classicism would give us as a substitute, the classical dance can be full of character. The steps of a dance are like the musical notes, they are limited in number, and the effect depends on how those notes are combined and executed. The arguments used by the modern school of painting, arguments with which the author is for the most part in thorough agreement, cannot be applied in the case of ballet. The arguments of the modernist painter are naturally based upon his mediums of canvas and paint, while in ballet the medium is the human body, and however justified

deformation may be on the canvas, it is out of the question in dancing. The mistake that is always made by opponents of classical dancing, arises either from a totally incorrect view of what is actually happening, or from the fact that they have never seen a first class classical dancer. They make the great mistake of thinking that the dancer is expressing classicism, instead of taking it as it really is, that classicism is helping the dancer to express herself. They would probably understand the argument, if applied to the pianist or violinist, and the word «classicism» replaced by «school» — just as without «correct fingering» no would-be pianist, however bright the fire of genius burned within him, would be able to express himself, so it is with the dancer. Once the technique has been conquered, the artist can express his personality. He may specialise in Bach, Beethoven or Chopin, and what is more, he may interpret his chosen composer in a manner that has never been tried before. This is much more the case with the dancer, who is not bound down to such a great extent by the choregraphist. The whole Russian School of Dancing is the gradual result of the interpretation of the Italian and French methods of dancing by such Russian dancers as Vera Treflova. A simple pirouette

may be danced by any number of dancers of equal technical ability, and produce an equal number of entirely different sensations. Firstly it may be danced by the brilliant technician, and beyond the admiration her virtuosity calls for, it may leave the spectator cold and bored, a certain tightness in the movements may make it vulgar and irritating, it may be taken poetically, aristocratically, passionately, mischievously, in as many different manners as there are differences of character. There is nothing great about the pirouette itself, it is merely a note in a melody, a step in a choreographic creation, yet it can be made great by a great executant, and from an abstract point of view it is a thing of intense beauty. Ballet, as every art, requires very close study, it is not the mere idle entertainment that some would have it. Taken as such, without a knowledge of the technique or an analysis of the art of the prima ballerina it may quite conceivably be less exciting than the immediately obvious «Black Bottom» or «Heebie Jeebie!»

The modern ballet that has departed from classicism leaves little chance to the Prima ballerina to excel or to express her personality, and that is one of its many drawbacks as a form of art.

Higher up I stated that classical ballet was ballet designed first and last for the dancer. In saying this I am both very explicit as to its nature and at the same time very vague. I have stated its most essential characteristic, but it needs further explanation to find out what constitutes good classical ballet. The old fashioned ballet was a singularly stereotyped and unimaginative affair, based upon symmetry. In spite, however, of all its drawbacks, its lack of intelligence and its many ridiculous features, it possessed one solid virtue, it gave the dancer an opportunity to shine, and its movements were a definite help to the dancer's physical development. It could in no way be taken as an artistic whole. Movements could be taken separately, criticised and appreciated from a point of view of abstract beauty. The music of such ballets was often as worthless as the present day jazz and resembling it from the point of view of simplicity of rhythm and utter vapidty.

Such was the classical ballet at its worst. At its best it was a very different matter, really expressing something, a very beautiful affair. The finest artists in the country, men such as Korovin, Golovin, Roerich, the Benois, Anisfeld designed costumes for the dancers, costumes that were a help and not a hinderance as is

so often the case to-day, and the music was composed by such a genius as Tchaikovsky, music both beautiful in melody and easy for the dancer to follow, and the choregraphy magnificently created by the father of Russian ballet, Petipa.

Such productions were few, but that is in no way a criticism of the system.

Fokine, inspired by Isadora Duncan, caused what is now termed the «Romantic Revolution». The term «Revolution» is somewhat misleading in this connection. It was in no sense a Revolution, but an evolution. Those classical principles that had formed the great artists of the dance were in no way dispensed with, they were still retained as the basis of ballet. The Fokine Revolution in brief was this: The Pre-Fokine ballet possessed much real beauty, but it was lacking in significance and was rarely an artistic whole. Fokine's work was to make of ballet an artistic whole, without *destroying anything*. The dancing was to interpret the music, instead of merely keeping in time with it. This ballet was called the Romantic ballet, but in spite of the great changes, it still consisted of classical dancing, and those dancers, that interpreted it, were all without exception trained in the classical tradition.

One of the greatest dangers of classicism is an abuse of virtuosity, an insistence on quantity rather than quality. There is nothing more contrary to the spirit of classical dancing than this acrobacy, this insistence on a record number of fouettés, or pirouettes, with a complete disregard of the music or the finish of those steps. The whole beauty of the pirouette or fouetté consists not in their number, but in their crispness and their finish. I have explained the terms «classicism in dancing», «the classical dancer» and «classical ballet», and have also stated that all the great dancers have been classical dancers, but there is another and more difficult point that yet remains to be explained. Karsavina is a classical dancer, yet by nature she is essentially dramatic, Pavlova is a classical dancer yet by nature a romantic, Preobrajenskaia is a classical dancer and yet by nature a mime or a comedienne. Up to now I have used the term «classical» to denote training, and it has therefore been common to all the great dancers, and in order to explain something of their art, I have to find another term descriptive of their temperament. But there is such a thing as a classicism of temperament, and it is thus I would talk of Vera Treflova. She is a classical dancer both by training and

temperament. She may and can perform a record number of fouettés, but each one of those fouettés will be perfection, about each one there will be style and finish. The spectator is not so much amazed by their quantity as by their remarkable purity. He does not sit, restless and counting, wondering whether she will ever get through — and I have done so with countless dancers — he is too enthralled by the amazing beauty of line. The celebrated 32 fouettés of «Le Lac des Cygnes» are artistically unnecessary if not actually ridiculous and one is always struck with that fact, save when Vera Trefilova is the dancer. So classical a role only appears in all its beauty, when a ballerina who is classical in feeling as well as in technique, performs. In ballet perhaps far more than in music the temperament of the artist binds him to the interpretation of the works of certain composers. Each of the great dancers, in spite of the magnitude of her repertoire, becomes associated with a certain type of role, and for that very reason comparisons can be drawn which are detrimental to no one. One's preference will generally depend almost entirely upon one's own temperament.

Trefilova is essentially the interpreter of Tchaikovsky, of classical ballet at its very highest, and just

as Tchaikovsky was the first great Russian composer to write for ballet, Trefilova was the first great and essentially Russian dancer. Her dancing more than anything helped to break the Italian tradition. Kchesinskaia was still reminiscent of the Italian school in her technique, while Trefilova was entirely Russian. She dispelled the superstition that only the Italian dancer could be a first rate technician, and what is more, showed to an amazed public a style that was her own. Russian ballet had really been born, and Russian ballet combined both the advantages of the technical Italian and the graceful French schools. For this period immediately before the Fokine revolution was purely Russian, as Russian as what was to follow, though to the western European mind, Bakst and Rimsky-Korsakov alone suggested Russia. Tchaikovsky is, however, essentially a Russian composer, and I have Stravinsky's word for this. «Tchaikovsky's music, which does not appear specially Russian to everybody, is often more profoundly Russian than music which has long since been awarded the facile label of Muscovite picturesqueness». (1)

(1) In a letter from Igor Stravinsky to M. S. Diaghilew, Oct. 10, 1927. Printed in Souvenir Programme.

Vera Trefilova in a Tchaikovsky ballet is Russian ballet at its highest.

The Russian periods of Russian ballet have lasted but an exceedingly short time. Rapidly from its Italian origins ballet becomes truly Russian. Its first step is a change which implies no loss of nationality, then speedily it absorbs the culture of modern Paris, for a short time it retains its character, then the desire to please a foreign public transforms it, and Russian ballet is no more. In all there are but two brief periods; the birth of the Russian style, and its evolution from the classical to the romantic. The history of Russian ballet has been one crowded hour, it has altered almost every branch of art that has come into contact with it. In the brief years in which it lasted it has produced such a wealth of talent that one might well compare it to the much lengthier period of the Italian Renaissance.

In music, it has given: Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Balakirew, Tcherepnin, Stravinsky; in decorative art, Benois, Roerich, Golovin, Korovin, Anisfeld, Bakst, Doboujinsky, Soudeikine, Gontcharova, Laktionow, and in dancers, Trefilova, Pavlova, Karsavina, Kchessinskaia, Kyacht, Karali, Egorova, Preobrajens-

kaia, Nijinski, Bolm, Fokine and a quantity of others, all dancers of merit.

Amongst these many names, that of Vera Trefilova is an outstanding one. As I am never tired of repeating, the first essential of ballet should be to provide the dancer with the opportunity of showing her art, thus throwing the whole burden of responsibility on the dancer's shoulders. At the present day in such a work as «Le Pas d'Acier» it matters very little however the dancers may perform, the irritating din and the poverty of imagination displayed in the choregraphy, do not leave them the opportunity either of marring or making the whole, and so the dancer becomes a mere accessory to the general effect, and ballet loses its whole «raison d'être».

From a dancing point of view these two brief periods of ballet may be described by two names: Trefilova and Karsavina (2). With Trefilova it is dancing for the sake of dancing, for the sake of sheer beauty of movement. She is first and last a dancer, a classical dancer, a *Russian classical dancer*, and I can think of no higher praise than those last three words.

(2) See the author's «Thamar Karsavina», «A Study in Romanticism».

CHAPTER THREE.

« THE SLEEPING PRINCESS ».

In 1921 Londoners had the occasion to see Russian Ballet as it might have been presented on a Russian stage, Russian ballet at its most Russian, and therefore at its best, and it was in these performances of « The Sleeping Princess » that the genius of Treflova was revealed to a London audience in a company that was fully worthy of her. Before this production, and since, we have had the opportunity of seeing much remarkable dancing, but there is always something about it that strikes one as unsatisfactory. The prima ballerina would mar as well as make the beauty of the whole, the corps de ballet and the other dancers by comparison to her would appear incredibly clumsy, and the spectator, who was at all sensitive, would be as much irritated by the whole as he was pleased by the solo work. Moreover such productions of the celebrity concert type, so beloved by a certain class in England, do not do



(photo Mameo)

« Pure dancing is like the mother tongue... »
(Noverre)

justice to the principal protagonists, even though they may for a brief moment appear to shine the brighter. The ideal is an artist amongst lesser artists and competently trained dancers, not an artist amongst unfinished pupils, as is so often the case. The art of a dancer is almost certain to deteriorate in unsuitable company, and the audience is given little chance of intelligent appreciation. To audiences, unused to such an entertainment, the Prima Ballerina appears as a miracle, as something totally inexplicable, who is above and beyond criticism, and who can never err. They will applaud, with no discrimination and by no conceivable chance will they be able to discover talent for themselves. One of the chief reasons for the excellence of the Russian dancers was undoubtedly the knowledge shown by a large number of the audience, and the fact that that audience possessed discrimination in its applause; and an audience can only be trained by good all round productions, and not by having the star continually pointed out, and placed in a position entirely by herself.

« The Sleeping Princess » was the ideal, and the only completely satisfactory production of ballet on a large scale that we have had the opportunity of seeing.

A glance at the cast shows the number of world-famed dancers that took part in the production.

Princess Aurora

Vera Trefilova

(and at alternate performances Spessivtseva
and Egorova)

The Lilac Fairy

Ludmilla Schollar

Her Page

S. Idzikovski

The Cherry Blossom Fairy

L. Sokolova

Her Page

L. Woizikowsky

Fairy of the Humming Birds

B. Nijinska

Her Page

N. Zverew

Fairy of the Song Birds

L. Egorova

Fairy of the Mountain Ash

L. Tchernicheva

Her Page

Anatol Vilzak

Prince Charming

Pierre Vladimiroff

The White Cat

Vera Nemtchinova

Columbine

Lydia Lopokova

It would take too long to mention all the names, though each dancer is worthy of mention. It was in this ballet that Anton Dolin (3) made his debut in the corps de ballet.

A short history of the origins of this ballet would not be out of place here.

(3) See «Some Studies in Ballet»

« The Sleeping Princess » was originally produced in 1890 at the Maryinsky Theatre, the part of Aurora being taken by a Milanese dancer, Carlotta Brianza, who danced the part of the « Fairy Carabosse » in the London production, the Prince being played by Paul Gerdt, and Marie Petipa, the beautiful daughter of the choregraphist, as the « Lilac Fairy ». Later it became a favourite work with all ballerinas, the name of Kchessinskaia, in particular, being associated with the role.

Vera Trefilova could not have appeared in London under happier circumstances. Other dancers have appeared in a variety of roles, but Trefilova has had to pass the sternest test of any, an appearance with dancers of unusual ability, and, what is more, actual competition, the sharing of her role at alternate performances with other dancers of note.

Her triumph was certain and unique. Spessivtseva charmed all with the delightful quality of her art, but the role of Princess Aurora seemed to call for something that she had not. Classically trained, technically all that could be desired, she does not possess the «classical temperament» necessary for the interpretation

of Tchaikovsky, with the possible exception of the more romantic « Lac des Cygnes ».

Egorova was also highly successful from a purely technical point of view, but the role was too large, demanding more than virtuosity, just something that that delightful artist did not possess. Treflova had all that these artists lacked, in addition to a technique surpassing anything that had yet been seen. André Levinson, the celebrated Russian critic, says of her : —

« Artiste qui ne se contente pas de couler la matière humaine dans un moule unique, mais qui cisèle son oeuvre, en élague tout le superflu, lime toutes les aspérités de sorte que tout, dans la statue vivante, n'exprime que cette unique fonction : l'esprit de la danse ». It is this « esprit de la danse » that one could feel with every movement, and that made the whole difference between the dancing of Treflova and that of every other member of that brilliant cast.



BRONZE BY DE BOULOGNE

CHAPTER FOUR.

THE SWAN LAKE.

The Swan Lake is one of the most inspired ballets of the older repertoire, both musically and from the point of view of technique. Though tradition demands that it be danced in pure classic style, a more romantic interpretation is in perfect keeping with the spirit of the whole. Indeed the « leit motiv » of the swans is one of the most romantic melodies one could imagine.

The leading role is generally associated with the brilliant, if not exceedingly artistic Italian virtuoso Pier-rina Legnani, who introduced the celebrated 32 fouettés in to the Coda. The fouetté had long been suspect with ballet lovers, and to many it seemed, that it passed the line that separated pure dancing and acrobacy. The triumph of Italian methods in Russia soon made it clear that this question was purely one of academic interest, and that the public at large was entirely satisfied with the fouetté. At the present day when purists are fighting

against the most outrageous innovations, the whole question has been forgotten, and the fouetté is an accepted fact. The question is still very much present however, and it has recently been reawakened in London by a press « stunt » of very doubtful taste, in which a distinguished dancer was announced to be going to attempt to break the world's records in fouettés during a performance of « Le Lac des Cygnes » in a large London Music Hall. I was present at the performance and the result was purely acrobatic and totally uninteresting. Such a view point of dancing is one that might easily attain popularity in this country of athletic records, and the ballerina was competing as an item of popular interest with channel swimmers, roller skaters etc. This acrobacy is totally contrary to the spirit of classical dancing, and though many would try to associate it with classicism, such is not the case.

The whole question of the legitimacy of the fouetté lies with the dancer. If the fouetté is made the feature of a ballet, it should be entirely barred. Its position in a ballet should be a subsidiary one. The fouettés of a Trefilova are a complete joy. Her whole performance is on so high a level that the fouetté does not take a position of undue prominence in her repertoire,

it is in no sense a trick with her, but a step like any other, that she dances to perfection.

I have dealt with this question at some length because it is essential to have a perfectly clear understanding on this point in order to appreciate such a dancer as Vera Trefilova, and to make a very sharp distinction between her dancing and that of a Legnani.

Although the interpretation of Trefilova will differ considerably from that of a dancer of the Romantic school, there is an equally great difference between her dancing and that of an Italian dancer. Both Trefilova and the romantic dancer have this in common, that they are interpreting Tchaikovsky as he appeals to their varying temperaments, and are not merely seeking an easy means of applause. I have purposely used the word «easy» though I well know the difficulties of complicated technical feats. In comparison with a sincere interpretation as given by a true artist, the difficulties of mere acrobacy are comparatively easy.

It is a very regrettable fact that the Diaghilew ballet has presented «The Swan Lake» in an abbreviated form, and that in consequence much of the interest of the leading role, which in the true production is one of acting as well as of dancing, is lost. Even so, there is

enough of it left for us to be able to judge as to its interpretation. It is a role that calls for many qualities, and that tells us more of the ballerina than any other. In the first place, technical perfection is an essential. There is nothing in the arrangement of the dances, the tempo of the music, or the design of the costumes, that will allow the slightest slip to pass unnoticed. Added to that technical perfection, there must be « style », that « aristocracy of movement » that is such a feature of the art of Trefilova. Then there is the interpretation, the exact atmosphere which the music should convey. « The Swan Lake » is situated in sentiment between the obviously classical ballet, and the pure romance of Fokine in « The Swan ». It makes concessions to each one of these, but it is in a third category of its own. The music is frankly romantic, romantic at its very best, while the choreography is undecided. The « coda », the « pas de trois » and the « dance of the Swans » are classical, as are also the dances in the final act, while much of the grouping of the corps de ballet is nearer to Fokine in spirit, as is also that most beautiful adagio.

I have seen many ballerinas in this role, but Trefilova strikes me as having understood the spirit, as conveyed by Tchaikovsky, the best. It is in this role

that we see the subtle romanticism of a professedly classical dancer. When we understand and appreciate Tchaikovsky, we come near to understanding and appreciating the art of Vera Trefilova. Like Tchaikovsky, she is essentially Russian, but not the Russian of the cabaret that appeals immediately to the Western mind. As with Tchaikovsky, it is the spirit of her art that is Russian, not merely the superficial appearances of « Muscovite picturesqueness ».

It is this affinity of spirit that makes such a ballet as « The Swan Lake » of first rate importance in our study of Vera Trefilova, and one of the most beautiful ballets in her repertoire.

Vera Trefilova, dancing to music of Tchaikovsky, is Russian art at its best and purest. If this fact were better understood by those that profess themselves lovers of ballet, such works as « The Cat » and « Le Pas d'Acier » would not be tolerated for an instant, or at any rate would not be taken seriously as the work of the Russian Ballet.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

- « Le Ballet Contemporain » V. Svetlow
« Thamar Karsavina » V. Svetlow
« Anna Pavlova » V. Svetlow

(The above contain references to Vera Trefilova, and many remarkable chapters on the general evolution of ballet.)

- « La Danse au Théâtre » André Levinson

A chapter on Trefilova entitled « Une grande Danseuse Russe ».

M. Levinson says :

« Les danses de Trefilova portent l'empreinte de ce que les mondains appellent la distinction et qui est, pour l'esthéticien, la perfection : conformité absolue et naturelle de la forme plastique à la vie intérieure de l'artiste. »

This volume contains a photograph of Vera Trefilova.

- « Some Studies in Ballet » Arnold L. Haskell

Dedicated to Vera Trefilova in the following terms.

« To Vera Trefilova who represents to the author all that is pure in dancing, this book is respectfully dedicated. »

The chapter on Trefilova from the above work is reprinted in the present volume. This volume contains three photographs of Trefilova.

There is a vast quantity of material, books, articles, portraits and photographs, that has remained in Russia, and is now unobtainable. This makes anything in the nature of a biography of the great ballerina impossible, at any rate for the present.

Trefilova's Repertoire

In Western Europe

Le Spectre de la Rose

(Weber et Fokine) with Idzikowski — Opéra, Paris

The Black Swan

(Sibelius)

The Spring Flower of Japan

(Puccini)

Souvenir d'Egypte

(Rimsky-Korsakov)

Ophelia

(A. Thomas)

Chansons de Bilitis

(Debussy)

After the Ball

(Drigo)

Gavotte

(Gluck)

The Bumble Bee

(Korsakov)

The Torches

(Grieg)

The Swan Lake

(Tchaikovsky et Petipa)

The Sleeping Princess

(Tchaikovsky et Petipa)

At the Maryinsky Theatre

The Tulip of Haarlem

The Enchanted mirror

The naiad and the Fisherman

(with Pavlova)

Raymonda

The little hump-backed horse

Coppelia

La Fille mal gardée

Pacquitta

Graziella

La Bayadère

(Manon)

The Awakening of Flora

(Love)

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