



Lifar, Serge (1905-1986)

by John McFarland

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From rather unpromising beginnings, Serge Lifar rose to the ranks of leading international ballet dancers and choreographers of the twentieth century. Though often dismissed as a derivative choreographer and a less-than-stellar dancer by his many detractors, he parlayed the talent he possessed into a career that outlasted all his competition.



This Ukrainian stamp honoring Serge Lifar was issued in 2004.

Fiercely ambitious, with a genius for positioning himself to exploit every opportunity that came his way, he used his extraordinary looks and charismatic personality to attract the attention of powerful supporters such as Serge Diaghilev, Misa Sert, and Coco Chanel.

Born Sergei Mikhailovich Serdkin in Kiev, Russia on April 2, 1905, the future dancer seemed to know from an early age that if the front door to the palace was slammed closed in his face, he could find other more welcoming entrances. In Kiev at the age of 15, he was rejected by Bronislava Nijinska as a student in her ballet school but persisted in his dream to become a dancer: he enrolled in the Kiev Opera Ballet where Nijinska taught as well.

In 1923, Diaghilev asked Nijinska to summon five of her best male students from Kiev to join the Ballets Russes. At the last minute one of the five Nijinska choices was unable to make the journey, and Lifar leaped to fill out the quintet. Despite Nijinska's lack of enthusiasm for Lifar, either Diaghilev was helplessly drawn to the handsome eighteen year old or Lifar made certain that the master could not take his eyes off him.

Lifar's persistence, charm and manipulation paid off by 1924, when, following private tutoring by renowned ballet master Cecchetti, he was enlisted as the latest of Diaghilev's "favorites" (joining the long, distinguished list of dancer-lovers that includes Vaslav Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, and Anton Dolin, among others). As a result, he was cast in attention-getting roles and was groomed as a premier danseur and choreographer.

Despite grumblings in the company, Lifar had very real triumphs in Massine's *Zephyr et Flore* (1924) and Balanchine's *La Chatte* (1926).

Given an inch of acclaim, Lifar kept taking so much that even the world-devouring Diaghilev became exasperated at his extreme ambition and self-promotion. By that point, however, Lifar was indispensable as a star and the only choice for plum roles such as Apollo in Balanchine's history-making *Apollon musagète* (1928) and the title role in Balanchine's *The Prodigal Son* (1929).

Lifar's own first ballet, *Renard* (1929, to a score by Igor Stravinsky), though energetic and athletic, proved to be no masterpiece. His later work, however, demonstrated that he had learned much from Diaghilev, Balanchine, and Stravinsky.

After Diaghilev's death in August 1929, with the Ballets Russes in disarray, Lifar was not at a loss for long.

Jacques Rouché of the Paris Opera Ballet invited him to star in a production in the tradition of Diaghilev to be choreographed by Balanchine.

As fortune would have it, Balanchine, ill with tuberculosis, had to withdraw from the project. Stepping in to fill Balanchine's shoes, Lifar established himself with authority as choreographer and star dancer at the premiere of *Prométhée* (choreographed to a score by Beethoven). He was soon engaged as the ballet master and director at the Paris Opera Ballet, where he remained in charge, with one significant interruption, until 1957.

During his tenure at the Paris Opera, Lifar was responsible for reviving the ballet in 1929, carrying on the Diaghilev tradition with productions of Ballets Russes classics, developing a strong presence for male dancers, and employing renowned choreographers such as Balanchine, Massine, and Frederick Ashton.

In his autobiography, Lifar coyly stated that "dance is my mistress" to avoid substantive revelations about his romantic entanglements with men and women of influence. But that statement pales next to his claim that his open socializing with the German High Command during the Occupation of Paris was related to his work as an undercover agent. Although the appearance of collaboration led to Lifar's "banishment for life" from the Paris Opera Ballet in 1944, he was back at work there by 1947.

Despite later upheavals such as his stormy exit from the Opera Ballet in 1957, Lifar's stature as a major force in international dance with a direct link to the great Diaghilev continued undiminished until his death in Lausanne, Switzerland on December 15, 1986.

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About the Author

John McFarland is a Seattle-based critic, essayist, and short story writer. He is author of the award-winning picture book *The Exploding Frog and Other Fables from Aesop*. He has contributed to such anthologies as *Letters to Our Children: Lesbian and Gay Adults Speak to the New Generation*, *The Book Club Book*, *The Isherwood Century*, and *Letters to J. D. Salinger*.