



## Nijinsky, Vaslav (1890-1950)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

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One of the greatest dancers in the history of ballet, Vaslav Fomich Nijinsky almost single-handedly reasserted the primacy of male dancers in ballet after a long period of decline. A radically innovative choreographer, the full extent of whose genius is only now being recognized, he embodied the sensuality and sexual ambiguity associated with the distinctive new art of the twentieth-century.

Nijinsky was born on March 12, 1890 in the Russian city of Kiev, the son of Polish dancers who toured Russia as guest artists. He had already performed on stage with his parents when, at the age of ten, he was admitted to the St. Petersburg Imperial School of Ballet. There, as a ward of the Tsar, he also received an excellent academic education.

Sexually precocious, he was reprimanded for masturbating, thus presaging his amazing autoerotic performance on stage in his ballet *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912).

Nijinsky was a brilliant ballet student; and in 1907, after his graduation, he joined the Imperial ballet as a soloist, a rare achievement. He also fell in love with Prince Pavel Dimitrievitch Lvov, a wealthy nobleman in his early forties and himself an athlete.

The prince provided Nijinsky with an apartment, a splendid wardrobe, and a magnificent diamond ring; and he also assisted Nijinsky's mother, who had been living in marginal poverty.

When the Prince cooled toward him, Nijinsky had a brief liaison with another nobleman, Count Tishkievitch, but, he wrote, "I loved the prince, not the count."

Nijinsky then met his match in the dynamic, thirty-five-year-old Sergei Diaghilev and joined the ballet company Diaghilev was preparing to take to Paris in 1909, the Ballets Russes. Nijinsky was the star attraction of their sensational success and was soon dubbed *Le Dieu de la Danse*.

Nijinsky and Diaghilev became lovers, and Diaghilev used all his resources to create ballets designed to highlight Nijinsky's phenomenal artistry and sexual magnetism. For example, his roles as the Golden Slave in *Schéhérazade* (1910) and as the androgynous scent of the rose in *Le Spectre de la rose* (1911) displayed the dancer's talent and charisma.

Diaghilev also encouraged Nijinsky to choreograph ballets, giving him the finest dancers to work with and unprecedented amounts of rehearsal time. The four ballets that Nijinsky created, *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912), *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913), *Jeux* (1913), and *Till Eulenspiegel* (1916), were box-office failures but they are now considered, by virtue of their technical innovations, to be the foundation of modern dance.

Nijinsky's ballets and the roles he danced are especially notable for their exploration of sexuality. Indeed,



Vaslav Nijinsky with his daughter in 1916.  
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they were as scandalous for their sexual themes as for their radical balletic experimentations. Voyeurism, sexual primitivism, bisexuality, autoeroticism, and sexual ambiguity are all features of his work. Moreover, Nijinsky's own sexual charisma, and poetic acting, contributed powerfully to the erotic resonances of his performances.

In 1913, while on a tour to South America, Nijinsky impulsively married a young Hungarian woman, Romola Pulsky, who had pursued him throughout Europe. The marriage ended his relationship with Diaghilev, who was outraged by the betrayal.

At that time, there were no companies remotely comparable to Diaghilev's, so the split with his former lover left the dancer, soon encumbered by a child as well as a wife, with no way to pursue his career. The stress was intensified by the outbreak of World War I, which found him in Budapest. As a Russian citizen in Hungary, and therefore an enemy alien and prisoner of war, Nijinsky was unable to dance at all.

Despite the war, Diaghilev arranged a tour of the Ballets Russes to the United States. He was also able to effect Nijinsky's release from Hungary to rejoin the company. Diaghilev met the dancer, his wife and baby daughter upon their arrival in New York City.

The two men kissed and Nijinsky thrust his baby daughter into Diaghilev's arms, an action that infuriated his wife, who proceeded to make life unbearable for both men. As a result, Diaghilev returned to Europe, leaving the company to struggle across North America under Nijinsky's reluctant and inept management.

Later in Spain, Diaghilev again invited Nijinsky to rejoin the company, but again Romola thwarted any reconciliation. The strain on Nijinsky was intense. His career in ruins, he recognized that his marriage had been a grave error. He was also depressed by the war and began to sympathize with revolutionaries in their loathing of materialism.

Nijinsky may at this time have receded into delusion. Romola committed him to a mental institution, where drugs and experimental shock treatments (perhaps administered in an attempt to "cure" his homosexuality as well as his depression) effectively destroyed him.

He lived, like a melancholy ghost, shuttled between private homes and institutions, until April 8, 1950, when he died of renal failure in London.

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**Douglas Blair Turnbaugh** is Representative to the U.S.A. and Membre Conseiller of the Conseil International de la Danse/UNESCO. A contributor to *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Playbill*, *Advocate*, *RFD*, *James White Review*, *New York Native*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Ecrits sur Nijinsky*, among others, he is author of *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*; *Private: The Erotic Art of Duncan Grant*; *Strip Show: Paintings by Patrick Angus*; and *Beat It: 28 Drawings*. He has been awarded the Nijinsky medal (Poland) and the Diaghilev medal (Russia). His *Serge Diaghilev* is forthcoming.