

NIJINSKY



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CHAPTER I



Yaponchik

1889–1905

ONE LOST NIGHT IN PARIS in the mid-1920s, Alabama Knight, the discontented heroine of Zelda Fitzgerald's autobiographical novel *Save Me the Waltz*, finds herself at the Théâtre du Châtelet where Diaghilev's Ballets Russes are playing. After the performance, spellbound, she is introduced to 'a woman with a shaved head and the big ears of a gargoyle ... [parading] a Mexican hairless [Chihuahua] through the lobby'. This woman, she is told, had once been a ballerina.

'How did you get in the ballet?' Alabama asks breathlessly, her heart suddenly set on becoming a dancer. The woman seems almost confused by the question: the answer is so simple. One has to imagine a gravelly émigré accent and a sense of surprised finality about her reply. 'But I was born in the ballet.'

This was the case with the majority of Russian dancers at the start of the twentieth century and of no one could it be said with more accuracy than Vaslav Fomich Nijinsky,* acclaimed as the *dieu de la danse*, whose parents were both gifted professional dancers and whose childhood

* 'Vaslav' is pronounced 'Vatslav', hence his family nickname Vatsa; Fomich is his patronymic, indicating that he is the son of Foma, or Thomas. The Polish spelling of his name is Waław Nizynski.

was largely spent in and around theatres. He may not actually have been born in a dressing room, like his venerable ballet master, Enrico Cecchetti, or during a performance, like his sister (their mother went into labour while dancing a polonaise at the Opera Theatre in Minsk, dashed off to a nearby hospital after arranging for an extra to take her place on stage and gave birth to Bronislava before the final curtain fell), but he might as well have been.

As Bronislava, or Bronia, would write of their early years, ‘We were born artists of the dance. We accepted without question our birthright from our parents – our dancing bodies. The theatre and the dance were a natural way of life for us from birth. It was as if, in the theatre, we were in our natural element, where everything responded in our souls.’

Neither of the Nijinsky parents – Foma (Thomas) and Eleonora, née Bereda – came from theatrical families. Foma was born in Warsaw in 1862. His grandfather, father and brother were activists, devoted to the cause of liberating Poland from Russian rule, but although he was a proud patriot Foma knew from childhood that his fate did not lie in politics. At eight he began attending the Wielki Theatre School at the Warsaw State Theatre.

In 1870, when Foma began his career there, fourteen-year-old Eleonora Bereda had already left the Wielki School. Her father, a Warsaw cabinet-maker, had died when she was seven, after his compulsive gambling bankrupted their family – and her mother had died days later. She and her nine-year-old sister Stephanie began attending classes in secret at the Theatre School and, defying the disapproval of their elder siblings who thought a career on the stage was not respectable, were soon contributing to the household expenses by performing in ballets and operas. At fourteen Eleonora, chaperoned by her two elder sisters, had been working for two years as part of the *corps de ballet* of a small company touring provincial Russia’s thriving theatres.

Like Eleonora, Foma worked as a migrant dancer after leaving the Wielki School. Higher wages compensated for the insecurity and questionable status of this type of work, for despite his talents as dancer and choreographer, headstrong Foma recognised that he lacked the patience

and diplomacy to progress steadily through the *corps* of the great state-funded theatres of Moscow or St Petersburg, as a civil servant in the Tsar's employ, to the coveted ranks of *premier danseur* and, ultimately, ballet-master.

The two young dancers met and fell in love in Odessa in 1882. Eleonora was five years older than Foma and at first she was reluctant to commit to him. After two years' passionate courtship she relented and they were married in Baku on the Caspian Sea, the capital of modern Azerbaijan. Two years later their first child, Stanislas, was born on a return trip to the Caucasus; Vaslav followed on 12 March 1889 in Kiev; and Bronia made her dramatic entrance in Minsk in 1891.

Although Eleonora had not planned to have so many children, nor so quickly (a family made a carefree, itinerant life with Foma and, indeed, her own career, increasingly untenable), according to Bronia the first years of her parents' marriage were happy ones, united by love and a shared devotion to their art. Certainly they were picturesque. In her memoirs, Bronia describes travelling the length and breadth of Russia, galloping through the Caucasus along the Georgian Military Highway from Vladikavkaz to Tbilisi as fast as possible to avoid being ambushed by brigands in the narrow passes between the mountains, or steaming down the Volga at dusk, lulled to sleep in violet light by sailors singing along to the music of balalaikas playing on the banks and the gentle splashing of the river against the sides of the boat. Bronia remembered her father one afternoon bringing home Caucasian-style Turkish delight, stuffed with almonds and delicately flower-scented; try though she might, for the rest of her life, nothing else ever tasted as good. For a long time her bed was the family's travelling trunk filled with blankets, its top wedged open.

Dance and the theatre were at the centre of the Nijinsky family's life. In 1893, when Vaslav was four, they lived in a *dacha* beside Kiev's Summer Theatre, where Foma and Eleonora were engaged for the season, on Trukhanov Island, across the Dnieper from the city. The children's nanny would sometimes take them out secretly after bedtime, while Foma and Eleonora performed, and they would tiptoe to the theatre

through illuminated gardens, where the muffled strains of the orchestra could be heard, and into the stage door. Bronia would always remember being dazzled by the ‘fairy-tale lights’ and Vaslav told her, years later, ‘of his delight in that mysterious night walk and how he used to run in front of everyone to see the lights of the many coloured paper lanterns, hanging on so many chains in so many directions’.

In an interview given in 1912, Vaslav couldn’t recall when his formal dance training began – ‘My parents considered it as natural to teach me to dance as to walk and talk. Even my mother who, of course, could recall my first tooth, couldn’t say just exactly when my first lesson was’ – but he and his elder brother Stanislas, or Stassik, joined in the classes both his parents gave society children in ballroom-dancing – waltzes, polkas, quadrilles and Russian country dances – and also in the informal ballet lessons Foma gave the children of other artists.

Other performers, friends of the family, were happy to share their knowledge, too. Three-year-old Bronia and five-year-old Vaslav persuaded Jackson and Johnson, two young African-American music-hall artists who performed to a ragtime soundtrack in top hats and white satin tailcoats with black lapels, to teach them to tap-dance – something absolutely forbidden in the tradition of classical dance because it was thought to weaken the knees and ankles. And there was much to be learned just by watching Foma rehearse his small company or befriending the gypsies in their jangling, colourful costumes, who passed by every now and then leading strings of gleaming ponies, singing and dancing along the way. Years later, Vaslav would thrill his family by imitating these ‘wild, fierce, savage’ gypsy girls, ‘trembling all over from the tips of his fingers to his toes, shaking his shoulders as if they were independent of the rest of his body’.

Vaslav performed in public for the first time in Odessa at Easter 1894, when he was just five. He and Stassik danced the *hopak*, a Cossack dance, with Stassik, wearing blue pantaloons, a loose white blouse and a broad red sash, playing the boy, and Vaslav, in an embroidered Ukrainian dress and a garland of poppies, cornflowers and ribbons on his head, the girl. Both wore knee-high boots of soft red leather and a touch

of rouge, applied by Eleonora with her hare's foot. 'With his slightly dark skin, big brown eyes, and long fluffy eyelashes, it was impossible to tell that he was a boy,' recalled Bronia. The audience loved their performance with its jumps, whirling turns, low squats and high leg lifts. 'To the shouts of "Bravo" and "Bis," they had to repeat their performance once, and then again.'

By the time Vaslav performed again, at Christmas the same year, Foma had begun regularly teaching the boys the positions and first steps of classical ballet as well as rehearsing them in folk dances like the Cossack *hopak* and the *mazurka*. For this performance Vaslav was elevated to dancing the *hopak* as a solo, wearing Stassik's outfit from six months earlier. 'How high he jumped, throwing his legs from side to side and touching the heels of his boots with his hands, striking his heels together, crouching down to dance the *prisyadka* [literally translated as 'squat', the most famous element in Russian folk dancing], flinging his legs forward faster and faster, and finishing by whirling around in a spinning *prisyatka* close to the ground! Father was so pleased with Vatsa. He said later that not every adult dancer could manage all those difficult stunts of the *hopak*.'

The three young Nijinskys then performed a sailor dance and finally, along with some other children, a Chinese dance (though Bronia commented that it only remotely resembled anything Chinese). Vaslav, as a comical old man, stole the show, taking several curtain calls on his own. It was this that Vaslav would remember with pride as his 'first appearance in public'.

Despite Vaslav's early theatrical triumphs, life on the road could be hard and Foma and Eleonora struggled to hold their young family together. Tsar Alexander III's death in October 1894 closed every Russian theatre for a period of official mourning and even private dancing lessons, usually a lucrative source of income, were seen as improper while the nation grieved. 'Throughout our childhood this would happen,' wrote Bronia, 'one day prosperity, the next anxiety.' Increasingly, over the coming years, anxiety would predominate.

Accidents and ill-health – the constant nearness of death – were one

source of this anxiety. Eleonora had been orphaned at seven; she was always afraid for her children and with reason. When Stassik was two and a half, he climbed up onto the window ledge of their rented Moscow apartment to watch a military band pass by and fell three storeys onto the cobbled street below. He was unconscious for three days and, although he recovered physically, gradually it became clear that his mental development had ceased after the accident.

A few years later, Vaslav contracted scarlet fever and diphtheria simultaneously and the doctors feared he would not survive; in 1897 Bronia and Stassik made miraculous recoveries from typhoid. Five years later, sixteen-year-old Stassik, who had never recovered from his fall as a toddler, was placed in a psychiatric hospital because Eleonora could no longer control his rages at home. Nineteenth-century mental institutions were not known for treating their inmates with compassion and the knowledge of where Stassik was and what had happened to him left its scars on Eleonora, Bronia and Vaslav, too.

Financially there were always worries. One month Foma and Eleonora could afford a clean, comfortable apartment with a nanny to look after the children while they danced in a glittering *belle époque* theatre; weeks later and thousands of miles away they would be forced to leave the children alone in cold rooms bleakly lit by paraffin lamps to perform alongside clowns and trained animals to make enough money to feed the family. Jobs could be cancelled at a moment's notice and injury was a constant threat. When Foma broke his leg, no money came in until he could dance again. There was never any possibility of saving for the future; survival was their only concern. The Nijinskys were by no means unusual in coping with such grave anxieties – these were the ordinary trials of the late nineteenth century, the dull hum of despair that throbbed beneath daily life for the vast majority of people – but they touched Vaslav's childhood with a sense of struggle against an uncaring universe that would linger with him for the rest of his life.

When times were good, Foma and Eleonora worked with the greatest dancers of their day – Maria Giuri, Virginia Zucchi, Carlotta Brianza, Enrico Cecchetti – and, although they were never employed by

the legendary Imperial Theatre in St Petersburg, they did perform at the theatre attached to the tsar's summer palace in Krasnoye Selo, just outside St Petersburg. When times were bad, they took roles wherever they could – as dancers in light opera and musicals, in *café-chantants* and, most frequently, as part of circuses.

Though being a circus performer was very far from being a *premier danseur*, the highest rank at the Imperial Theatres, the work had its attractions. Foma liked theatre-circuses like the one in Nizhny Novgorod because they allowed him to stage spectacular pantomime ballets on a grander scale than in an ordinary theatre; the children liked the clowns. Watching them, Vaslav quickly learned to juggle, turn cartwheels and walk on his hands. In 1896, Foma accepted a summer engagement in Vilno with Salamonsky's Circus and Vaslav and Bronia were taken on as performers in one of the animal acts. Vaslav played a heroic chimney sweep, who assisted an animal fire brigade in rescuing more animals from a small burning house. He and Bronia were overjoyed at being 'artists' in their own right and Bronia noticed that every evening after his performance, Vatsa, as she called him, would be unusually quiet, thinking about what he could improve upon the next day.

In his wonderful 1975 album of Nijinsky images, *Nijinsky Dancing*, Lincoln Kirstein emphasises the importance of Vaslav's early exposure to the circus, arguing that it gave him a broader vocabulary of mime and mimicry than the limited repertoire taught in the traditions of classical ballet, as well as fostering in him a powerful sense of sympathy for the underdog and a love of the surreal, the satirical and the absurd. Like Charlie Chaplin, who grew up in the parallel world of the music hall, the adult Nijinsky was a master at the art of communicating pretension and status – and sending them up – with the smallest of gestures.

As a man Vaslav would make no secret of his unwillingness to perform alongside circus acts and remembered feeling physical pain at the idea of his mother having to degrade herself by taking circus work, but the very strength of his later feeling shows the power of its early impact on him, positive as well as negative. For all his later successes, he, like Chaplin, never stopped seeing himself as an outsider: a shivering little

boy with his nose pressed up against a window-pane, looking in at a world of warmth and security of which he could never feel a part.

As the years went by, one argument recurred over and again, prompted by Eleonora's desire to settle in one place so that the children could begin their schooling and Foma's competing urge to keep moving and resentment of the family that tied him to jobs he didn't want to take. By the mid-1890s he had fallen in love with another young dancer in their company. During their engagement at the summer theatres outside St Petersburg in 1897, after many anguished nights of discussion inevitably overheard by their frightened children, Foma and Eleonora decided to separate. They agreed that when the season ended, Eleonora would take Stassik, Vaslav and Bronia, then aged eleven, eight and five, to live in St Petersburg, while Foma accepted an engagement in Moscow, where he would live with his mistress.

Each of the children, Bronia recalled, was deeply affected by the impending separation from their father, but Vaslav reacted to it differently from his brother and sister, defending his mother violently and behaving with stormy recklessness and disobedience towards Foma. As the day of their parting drew near, Vaslav could hardly bear even to look at him. 'It was as if he were throwing him out of his heart.'

Eleonora had never lived in St Petersburg and she had no family and few friends there but she had chosen it for a single reason that eclipsed every other concern: the Imperial Theatre School. Each year, the school received thousands of written applications for fewer than twenty places on offer. Acceptance into the school meant the one thing Eleonora longed to give her children: an assured future. From the age of eleven onwards, the state – or rather the Tsar – assumed responsibility for all the students' expenses. When they graduated in their late teens they were almost certain to become Artists of the Imperial Theatres with a place in the *corps de ballet* of the Mariinsky Theatre, a government position which was equivalent to that of a junior civil servant, and they would be obliged to remain with the Mariinsky for five years after graduation. If the young dancer demonstrated enough special talent to

become a soloist, greater rewards were guaranteed: recognised status in society and, on retirement, a generous pension.

The reigning *prima ballerina assoluta* of the day, Mathilde Kshesinskaya, epitomised the *demi-mondaine* heights a dancer could scale: she had seduced the young Nicholas II before he ascended the throne and then become the richly rewarded mistress of two of the Tsar's cousins, bearing a son who was never quite sure which of the imposing Grand Dukes who visited his mother was his father. Isadora Duncan disingenuously described Kshesinskaya as 'a charming little lady, wrapped in sables, with diamonds hanging from her ears and her neck circled in pearls'; in fact the dazzling jewels only served to emphasise her steely ambition and hunger for the spotlight.

In August 1898, Vaslav was one of the three hundred nine-year-olds – one hundred boys and two hundred girls – invited to the school to audition for entry that September. Just ensuring his presence at the audition had required Eleonora to pull every string she could, but her connections were impeccable: she had worked with Enrico Cecchetti, head of the Girls' School, and his Polish assistant, Stanislav Gillert, was a friend. Gillert had told Sergey Legat, one of the Boys' School instructors, about Vaslav. And though neither Eleonora nor Foma had performed at the Imperial Theatres, their careers would have been known to their peers. At least one or two of the twenty-five examiners would have been looking out for Foma and Eleonora Nijinsky's son.

The Imperial Theatre School was housed in a magnificent ochre-plastered, marble-pilastered building that extended over an entire block abutting the Alexandrinsky Theatre where the students of its drama section would one day go on to perform. Eleonora had dressed Vaslav as if for a wedding in an expensive blue sailor suit, black patent pumps and a hat – of which Vaslav was inordinately proud – with the word 'RUSSIA' spelled out in gold letters on a dark blue ribbon. Bronia, with the prospect of her own audition for the school two years ahead of her, was the most eager and enthusiastic of audiences.

'Before leaving the house, Vatsa had to show Mama one more time how he would bow to everyone at the examination, as she had taught

him: “Draw your feet together, then, without bending your back, bow your head low and hold your arms in line with the seams of your trousers. Smile so you will look pleasant. And don’t you dare play any pranks there.”

‘We all looked at Vaslav, and I thought he was the most handsome boy with his dark brown hair ... his long, thick, black eyelashes ... his high cheekbones. His face was radiant, his expressive, slanted, dark brown eyes sparkled with excitement, and his almond-shaped teeth flashed in spontaneous smiles. Then Mama crossed herself and blessed Vaslav, and we were ready to go.’

Eleonora and Bronia waited in one of the ballet school’s large, light practice rooms while Vaslav went off with the other boys for his examination. The candidates were watched closely while they walked, ran and jumped for the assembled instructors, artists and directors. Even in this pressurised environment Vaslav shone; he reported back to his mother and Bronia that when they saw him jump, the inspectors ‘praised me very much’. Next, the boys’ insteps and the turn-out of their hips and legs were inspected. Successful applicants would be handsome and well built, obviously, but other specialised qualities were considered essential for potential classical dancers: straight knees, arched feet, flexible, open hips and shoulder blades that lay flat against the back.

Most were dismissed at this stage, and then in the infirmary the few remaining boys stripped while doctors examined their hearts, lungs and joints. Finally their eyesight and hearing were tested: the instructors whispered to them through a closed door, an approximation of the stage whispers they would have to learn to decipher. Three more applicants were dropped as unsuitable, but Vaslav’s was one of the names read out as having received a place for a preliminary trial year at the school. If the chosen boys showed progress in Dance and General Subjects they would be formally enrolled as students the following year.

In May 1899, at the end of this first year, Vaslav was officially admitted to the Imperial Theatre School and the following year, aged eleven, he became one of six boarding students in his year, winning a prestigious Didelot Scholarship which would fund his academic career. Although