

## **CONVERSATION WITH ALEXANDRA DANILOVA (1992)**

*The most celebrated ballerina of the older generation, and the only one of the Ballets Russes dancers interviewed for this book to have studied in Russia under Olga Preobrazhenska, ‘Shoura’ Danilova (1904-1997), whom I went to see at her Manhattan apartment, had already danced as a soloist for the Mariinsky Theatre before emigrating, and like Tamara Geva made her debut again with Diaghilev. For the reticent Massine, who worked a great deal with Danilova, one word was enough to define the nature of her dancing: ‘Champagne.’*

*An orphan, she was brought up by relatives in General M.I. Batyanov’s family, the rumour being that she was the illegitimate daughter of their son and a peasant woman. Despite the prejudices of courtly circles she was sent to the Theatre school where she was trained by the celebrated ballet teachers Elizabeth Guerdt, Agrippina Vaganova, and Olga Preobrazhenska – and thanks to her doll-like appearance she danced the child roles in the Mariinsky theatre ballets throughout her school days.*

*Thoroughly grounded in the classical ballet tradition, Danilova had participated enthusiastically in Balanchine’s experimental company then known as Balanchivadzhe – the ‘Young Ballet’. She danced with him in Lopukhov’s first ‘Dance Symphon’ and in the ‘Greatness of the Universe’ with music by Beethoven. She found herself in the Diaghilev Ballet company with Balanchine and his wife Tamara Zheverzheeva, performing leading roles in his productions, and when Zheverzheeva went to America, Danilova became Balanchine’s common-law wife. (Balanchine famously refused to let 28-year-old Danilova into his troupe Les Ballets 1933 because he said that she was too old). After Diaghilev’s death she danced in the Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo where she became a Massine ballerina.*

*After the war Balanchine created the main roles in the ballets ‘La Sonnambula’ and ‘Concert Dances’ for her.*

*In the post-war years Danilova danced in America (in the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and with her own troupe) and in England, but she left the stage in 1957 to revive classical ballet and to teach in Balanchine’s ballet school.*

– *I assume you joined the corps de ballet at the end of school?*

Yes, my first stage performance at the Mariinsky theatre was in *Swan Lake*. I remember someone asked ‘How does Danilova dance?’ and the theatre manager replied: ‘Danilova will throw herself in front of the footlights like a lump’...I remember that phrase well. I danced in the ‘cygnets’ and soon I became a soloist. Then I danced *L’Oiseau de Feu* with Shavrov. Fedor Lopukhov staged *L’Oiseau de Feu* especially for me, with stage decorations and costumes by Golovin. It is completely different from the Fokine ballet, in the staging by Goncharova: here the firebird is predatory. We loved Lopukhov. When there was the famine, he gave us advice like: ‘Why are you sitting around and complaining? Learn some languages, study history of art.’ It was very pleasant working with him. But I think he had one limitation – he would create the ballet on the drawing-board at home, not by working with a specific ballerina, and sometimes he was mistaken about her potential. As for hunger and cold, well they valued my successes at the Mariinsky theatre when they gave me the best reward – four sazhen of firewood.

*You mean to say that he invented movements without taking into account the individual dancers?*

Of course. It was different working with Balanchine for example. If he saw that it was impossible to obtain from the ballerina the desired pas he would change the choreography.

*When did you start to work with Balanchine?*

In Russia, when he had the Young Ballet. At the time we were performing in the State Duma building. But real success came to me abroad, with Diaghilev.

*Your trip abroad was organised as a tour of Germany. What can you say about your meeting with Diaghilev?*

There was something providential about how I fell in with him: after all I made no effort to see him and I wasn't looking for that place in the company – I was due to dance in Lopukhov's *Don Quixote* when I got back to Russia. In 1924, we had gone on a three-month summer tour. I remember how surprised I was on the steamship to see there was as much bread as you could wish for on the table and that no-one was checking how much you took. We performed in German resort towns, we were in London and Paris, and suddenly we got an invitation from Diaghilev. Our first meeting with him was at the house of Misia Sert, who had asked us for tea. Tamara Zheverzheeva and George Balanchine had brought their costumes and performed a dance. And when Diaghilev asked me what dance I was going to perform, my answer was:

‘None.’

‘Why not?’

‘If I am good enough for the Mariinsky, I am good enough for you’. To this day, I am sure my reply was the correct one. After all if you say that you sing at La Scala, everyone understands you have a good voice. It's the same. You don't need a better recommendation. Diaghilev laughed. All the same Boris Kochno convinced me to dance:

‘Shourotchka, do dance something.’

And then I danced a variation from Lophukhov's *Firebird*. By the way, Diaghilev asked me a question about my weight: when we arrived in Berlin from Russia, I was so ravenous I pounced on the food, and I had put on

weight – in those days we didn't pay any attention to it. I gave quite a cheeky reply along the lines of ‘As you are buying a horse, perhaps you'd like to look at its teeth as well’. But since nobody had ever talked to Diaghilev like that before, he found it quite funny. Afterwards, I found out that when he heard about our tour he had sent his nephew, Paul Koribut-Kubitovich, to look for us. He had been on our trail for a long time: whenever he arrived at one town or another it was only to discover we had just left it.

We found many Mariinsky theatre dancers in Diaghilev's troupe, and we were even able to pass on greetings to Lydia Lophukhova from her brother. Before long Diaghilev had given us all contracts , and then, without telling anyone he changed our passports to Nansen ones. With Diaghilev everyone danced in the corps de ballet although he used to say: ‘I have no corps de ballet; I have dancers.’ Then I danced little solo parts, for example Komarika. Later, when Nemchinova suddenly went to London in 1926, Diaghilev gave all her roles to me, and I retained them. Nemchinova was organising her ballet company with Anton Dolin in London but it didn't last long.

*This episode is described by S. L. Grigoriev, the ballet company's director, in his reminiscences. He reproaches Nemchinova and her husband, Zverev, for their hypocrisy: the couple's many years of work in Diaghilev's company were done on trust as their devotion to Tolstoyism prevented them from signing contracts. However, it did not stop them from dropping Diaghilev at an inconvenient moment to take up an advantageous engagement in London, something Nemchinova, Diaghilev's prima ballerina assoluta, later bitterly regretted. It has also been suggested that by expounding Tolstoyan ideas about the sinfulness of art to Nijinsky they contributed to his nervous illness. Nemchinova, by the way, studied for*

*three years in all in Moscow, at Lydia Nelidova's private school, but perfected her technique under Diaghilev's wing.*

– *But which productions in Diaghilev's company were made especially for you?*

The first ballet which Balanchine staged for me in 1926 was *The Triumph of Neptune* with music by Gerald Berners. Next *Le Bal* with music by Vittorio Rieti and stage decorations by Georgio di Chirico. I danced in nine of George's ballets in all, *The Fairy's Kiss*, Mozart's *Concert Symphony*, *Mozartiana*...

*That is the difference between generations: for Rachmaninov ballet was an entertainment, a divertissement...but you were schooled in the Petersburg classical ballet and I suppose it was not easy for you to adapt to the Balanchine style?*

Executing his choreography is very difficult. It was especially difficult in *Apollon Musagète* – the movements choreographed by George were extremely difficult to transfer to the stage, they were different, unfamiliar. But to describe that is the same as trying to describe a visual image. How can you describe a scent so that you understand the smell? Balanchine was a great painter of ballet. It was easier for the next generation – they had already seen us whilst we were the first on whom he tried out his choreography. There was one occasion when we both went to Rachmaninov's dressing room after his concert (we had specially gone to Vienna to hear him) and George told him that he would like to stage a ballet based on his music. Rachmaninov was so indignant at the idea that he threw us out.

*Did you see Diaghilev often?*

He was always present at the performances, he never missed a single one. He was a very strict critic; he noticed every detail. I once thoughtlessly

decided to make my role easier. I don't remember what I was dancing then, I think it was *The Temptations of the Shepherdess* by Bronislava Fominichna Nijinska, which is in the spirit of the eighteenth century: it has many *chassées*, and many lifts. We were dancing morning and night and I was tired and I decided not to lift but to do changement de pieds – you know we were all young... So that is what I did. After the performance Boris Kochno came to me in my dressing room and said:

‘Diaghilev wants to know why you did not do the lifts.’

I started making up an excuse, that my foot hurt...

Diaghilev paid attention to everything, not only the performance, but the costumes, hairstyles, facial expressions... But Balanchine sharpened the ballerina's cast of mind: you no longer danced on stage like an appetising loaf of bread, but like a demi-goddess, graceful and elegant. I was by no means a demi-goddess, as I said before, during the tour I had put on weight. Diaghilev gave me the role of the Bluebird to dance, which I had danced before in Russia; Dolin, our Englishman, my partner in this performance, began to lift me and suddenly threw himself down on the floor with the words:

‘I'm not a furniture mover, I'm a dancer but you're so fat that I can't lift you.’

I burst into tears. Then Diaghilev came along. When he discovered what the matter was he said:

‘Lose some weight. Until you get thinner, I will not give you any more roles.’

I turned for help to Balanchine and he advised me to put on leggings so that my legs would sweat. In those days no particular diets existed; now they write about everything, how many calories and in what, and they tell you to only eat yoghurt. I simply stopped eating, and then I went to the chemist and bought something for losing weight. On the label there was a

picture of a fat woman before she took the pills, and a thin one after she had taken them. Instead of two tablets a day I decided to take six, three in the morning and three at night. But when I took the first three tablets, obviously, I fainted. When I came round I saw George and Tamara standing in front of me. They had come to the room to call on me. George saw the open bottle of medicine on the table and without a moment's thought hurled them out of the window. How I suffered to get back into shape! But ever since then I've kept a strict eye on my figure.

*You knew Nijinska better than most people- what was your relationship with her like?*

Her difficult character was well known. For example, at rehearsals she demanded absolute attention, even from those who at that moment weren't involved. No one had the right to sew, or darn or even worse to chat. For some reason I found it difficult remembering her choreography, but later I realised why: her movements often didn't follow the musical phrase. She gave me a great deal of understanding of the fact that in dance emotions are not expressed by mime but by gesture.

*What were relations like with Diaghilev?*

A typical Russian. I am still amazed how Diaghilev, Fokine and Benois managed to work together: they were always quarrelling, someone wasn't talking to someone, someone was offended...How did these three geniuses manage to come together? Everyone thought that Diaghilev had a difficult character because he was very demanding. It's true. For example this is what happened to me. Once I met Diaghilev in Monte-Carlo in the square where the Casino and the Hotel de Paris are near the flowerbed called 'Fromage' because it is round. When he found out that I wanted to have a pedicure he said it was strictly forbidden for me to do so as he was afraid that they would cut my toe and I would get an abcess. Despite the ban I went off without another thought to do the pedicure and it was very unsuccessful: my foot

started to hurt. But I was due to dance *Swan Lake*. I persuaded George to go to Diaghilev and tell him to withdraw me from the performance. George came back with a long face:

‘Diaghilev said you must dance. He warned you.’

‘Very well then, I’ll dance.’

You see, Diaghilev knew that I had an abcess, but he deliberately sent me on stage. That’s typical Russian, and I decided to outdo him and when we were dancing ‘Pa de de’, you know, ‘ta ri ra ta ra’, the abcess burst. Then it began to fester.

*The Boris Kochno archive was sold last year at auction in Monte Carlo.*

Diaghilev liked Kochno very much. And the feeling was mutual. Relations between them were pure friendship. Kochno was the only person who dared to argue with Diaghilev.

*Where did fate take you after Diaghilev’s death?*

At first I stayed in a small ballet company managed by Sergei Leonidovich Grigoriev, our director. It participated in the opera of the Monte-Carlo Theatre. Then I went to London to dance in a revue called *Waltzes from Vienna* dedicated to the life of the young Strauss. Then I separated from Balanchine as now we were constantly apart in different countries. And that was our misfortune.

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