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| Karsavina, Tamara (1885- 1978) |
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| Summary  Trained at St. Petersburg’s Imperial Ballet School, Tamara Karsavina became, in the course of her long and varied career, the prototypical modern ballerina. A dancer of rare intelligence and versatility, she was a key member of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and a muse of modern choreographers. As an artist, she was closely identified with Michel Fokine’s ‘New Ballet’, which emphasised expressivity, dramatic veracity and a more creative approach to ballet language and convention. She originated roles in some of Fokine’s greatest works, such as *Chopiniana/Les Sylphides* (1908-9), *Firebird* (1910), *Petrouchka* (1911) and *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911)*,* and in many now forgotten ones such as *Thamar* (1912) and *Le Coq d’Or* (*The Golden Cockerel*, 1914). She was an ideal collaborator, an artistic risk-taker who immersed herself in the style and atmosphere of a work. With Fokine and her most celebrated partner, Vaslav Nijinsky, Karsavina developed a modern performance aesthetic for early twentieth-century ballet. Early Training Early ballet lessons with her father, the retired dancer Platon Karsavin, prepared Karsavina to enter the Imperial Ballet School, where she received a foundation in classical technique and a fine academic education. Influential teachers included Serge and Nikolai (Nicolas) Legat and Pavel Gerdt, who embodied the French ‘graceful’ style and taught Karsavina mime. Coaching from Eugenia Sokolova contributed to her critical successes in principal roles in the ballets of Marius Petipa, and training with the former La Scala ballerina Caterina Beretta and Enrico Cecchetti, both exponents of Italian ballet technique, enhanced Karsavina’s strength and virtuosity. Contributions to the Field and to Modernism Karsavina’s grounding in classical technique and her rich understanding of its artistic traditions made her a favoured ballerina among St. Petersburg’s knowledgeable balletomanes. Her repertoire at the city’s Maryinsky Theatre, where she danced from 1902 to 1918, included many multi-act classical ballets, such as *Giselle* (1841), *La Bayadère* (1877), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) and *Raymonda* (1898), all choreographed or significantly revised by Marius Petipa, who had ruled the Imperial Ballet for more than a half-century. Among her partners was the young Michel Fokine, a budding choreographer impatient with the ossified conventions and stale academicism of the ‘old ballet’, as people were beginning to call the repertoire associated with Petipa.  Political revolution was in the air in early twentieth-century Russia, and Karsavina and Fokine were among those agitating for artistic reforms within the Maryinsky. The American modern dancer Isadora Duncan, who made her first Russian tour in 1904, stirred huge controversy in Russian ballet circles. Karsavina, like Fokine, embraced Duncan’s innovative use of concert music and emphasis on expressivity but argued against her rejection of ballet technique. For Karsavina and others who supported Fokine’s ‘New Ballet’ reforms, ballet technique served as a springboard for an expressive body poetics.  Karsavina was a charter member of Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, which gave its first performances in Paris in 1909, and quickly emerged as Fokine’s leading female interpreter and Nijinsky’s main partner. Acclaimed for the range and nuanced interpretation of her roles, Karsavina’s contribution to Diaghilev’s experiment was to dissolve classical technique into subtle interpretation and expressiveness. Like Nijinsky, she viewed herself as a full artistic collaborator, ‘completing’ the role sketched by the choreographer and subordinating herself to the work as a whole. Although she continued to perform leading roles at the Maryinsky until 1918, she wrote that Fokine and Diaghilev had facilitated her transformative journey as an artist. In addition to Fokine, she originated roles in Nijinsky’s *Jeux* (*Games*, 1913), a work that has been called the first ‘neoclassical’ ballet, Boris Romanov’s *La Tragédie de Salomé* (*The Tragedy of Salomé*, 1913) and in Léonide Massine’s ballets *Le Tricorne* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*, 1919) and *Pulcinella* (1920) choreographed after the First World War. Legacy In 1918, with her son and English husband, Karsavina left Russia and settled in London. During the next decade, she remained active as a dancer, performing on an occasional ­basis with the Ballets Russes, taking the ‘mute’ role of ‘Karissima of the Ballet’ in J. M. Barrie’s well-received play *The Truth About the Russian Dancers* (1920) and appearing in seasons at the Coliseum and other West End venues in her own productions and choreography. In 1930 she published *Theatre Street*, a popular and extremely influential memoir about her training in St. Petersburg and her experience with the Ballets Russes. She played an important role in the development of ‘British Ballet’, serving in an advisory capacity to the Association of Teachers of Operatic Dancing of Great Britain (later the Royal Academy of Dancing) and to the Camargo Society, a group devoted to the growth of British ballet, inaugurated in 1930. Karsavina supported Marie Rambert’s enterprise, teaching several Fokine ballets and dancing in performances along with Rambert’s students. Over the next years, she mentored a number of dancers and choreographers, including Margot Fonteyn and Frederick Ashton. A prolific writer, she contributed dozens of articles to *The Dancing Times* about her teachers and partners, a rare source of information about pre-Revolutionary Russian ballet during the Cold War.  [File: TKfig. 1.jpg]  Figure Tamara Karsavina  <http://michaelminn.net/andros/biographies/karsavina_tamara/karsavina_tamara.jpg>  [File TKfig. 2.jpg]  Figure Tamara Karsavina and Adolf Bolmjarp  <http://img1.liveinternet.ru/images/attach/c/6/92/402/92402039_large_tamarakarsavinaadolfbolmjarp.jpg> Selected List of Roles by ChoreographerMarius Petipa *Giselle* (Giselle) (1841)  *The Awakening of Flora* (Diana) (1894)  *La Bayadère* (Nikia) (1877)  *The Sleeping Beauty* (Aurora) (1890)  *Swan Lake* (Odette/Odile) (1895)  *Raymonda* (Raymonda) (1898) Michel Fokine *Chopiniana/Les Sylphides* (1908-1909)  *Le Pavillon d’Armide* (Armida) (1909)  *Cléopâtre* (Ta-Hor) (1909)\*  *Carnaval* (Columbine) (1910)\*  *Schéhérazade* (Zobéide) (1910)\*  *Firebird* (Firebird) (1910)  *Petrouchka* (Ballerina) (1911)  *Le Spectre de la Rose* (Young Girl) (1911)  *Narcisse* (Echo) (1911)  *Le Dieu Bleu* (Young Girl) (1912)  *Thamar* (Thamar) (1912)  *Daphnis et Chloé* (Chloé) (1912)  *Papillons* (First Young Girl) (1914)  *Le Coq d’Or* (*The Golden Cockerel*) (Queen of Shemakhan) (1914)  *Midas* (Oreade) (1914)  \*Although Karsavina did not originate these roles, she was closely associated with them. Boris Romanov *La Tragédie de Salomé* (*The Tragedy of Salomé* ) (Salomé) (1913) Vaslav Nijinsky *Jeux* (*Games*) (First Girl) (1913) Léonide Massine *Le Tricorne* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*) (Miller’s Wife) (1919)  *Le Chant du Rossignol* (Nightingale) (1920)  *Pulcinella* (Pimpinella) (1920)  *Le Astuzie Femminili* (Pas de deux) (1920) Bronislava Nijinska *Roméo et Juliette* (Juliet) (1926) Selected Writings *Ballet Technique: a Series of Practical Essays* (1956)  *Classical Ballet: The Flow of Movement* (1973)  *Theatre Street: The Reminiscences of Tamara Karsavina* (1930) |
| Further reading:  (Beaumont)  (Foster)  (Garafola)  (Haskell)  (Karsavina)  (Markova)  (New York Public Library)  (Prager and Kaufmann)  (Smakov)  (Ustinov, Benois and Karsavina) |