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| Yakobson, Leonid (1904-1975) |
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| A Russian dancer and choreographer, Leonid Veniaminovich Yakobson choreographed for the Kirov and Bolshoi ballets from 1930 to the early 1970s, during which time he emerged as a powerful voice of Soviet ballet modernism. Based in St. Petersburg, his creative roots stretched back to the 1920s, a period of artistic experimentation when classical ballet developed exciting new movement vocabularies. He continued to explore and extend these influences until the 1970s, creating numerous short-format works — called ballet miniatures — that often used grotesque, athletic, or pantomimic movements to address social, dramatic, or erotic subjects with narrative clarity and concision. He favoured original music, often in a contemporary style, believing that distinctive forms of music elicited an individual choreographic response. Among his most notable works were his full length *Spartacus* (1956/1962) — which discarded the lifts and pointe work of traditional ballet language and featured characters who were fully developed psychologically — and *Exercise XX* (1972), a dance that verged on abstraction. In 1969, he founded Choreographic Miniatures, the first Soviet ballet company since the 1920s with a repertoire of original choreographic works by a single choreographer. Jewish by birth, Yakobson held onto his Jewish identity culturally as religious observance was effectively prohibited. During years of aggressive anti-Semitism, he created six ballets on Jewish themes; the first, *Jewish Dance* (1949), he created at a time when Jews were being actively persecuted. |
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Among his most notable works were his full length *Spartacus* (1956/1962) — which discarded the lifts and pointe work of traditional ballet language and featured characters who were fully developed psychologically — and *Exercise XX* (1972), a dance that verged on abstraction. In 1969, he founded Choreographic Miniatures, the first Soviet ballet company since the 1920s with a repertoire of original choreographic works by a single choreographer. Jewish by birth, Yakobson held onto his Jewish identity culturally as religious observance was effectively prohibited. During years of aggressive anti-Semitism, he created six ballets on Jewish themes; the first, *Jewish Dance* (1949), he created at a time when Jews were being actively persecuted. Isolated from developments in the West, Yakobson’s work angered Soviet authorities, who frequently censored or forbade his ballets. For Soviet audiences, Yakobson’s ballets offered a glimpse of a modernist aesthetic in their sensuality, subjectivity, and collaborations with innovative artists in other media. Training and Background A latecomer to ballet, Yakobson began to study dance in 1921, at the age of seventeen, with the celebrated character dancer, Alexander Chekrygin, in his Petrograd studio. Despite Yakobson’s age, Chekrygin agreed to take him on. After three years of accelerated study, Yakobson transferred to the former Imperial Ballet School, now renamed the Leningrad Choreographic School. Here he studied first in the evening and later in the regular school with Vladimir Ponomarev and Viktor Semonov. Upon graduating in 1926, Yakobson was accepted into the corps de ballet of the State Academic Theatre for Opera and Ballet (GATOB) — as the former Imperial Ballet, and future Kirov Ballet, was known in the 1920s and early 1930s — where he danced until 1933 and was promoted to soloist. Compact and muscular, with a big jump and a high degree of co-ordination, Yakobson excelled at grotesque and demi-character roles; however*,* from the start of his professional career, Yakobson was more interested in choreographing than inperforming. He had particular admiration for Mikhail Fokine and his pursuit of expressive naturalness movement outside the *danse d’école*, as well as dramatic and stylistic unity. Contributions to the Field and to Modernism In 1930, Yakobson choreographed his first major work, the second act of *The Golden Age*, to an original score by Dmitry Shostakovich. In keeping with the revolutionary spirit of the times, Yakobson incorporated non-dance movements from athletics and acrobatics into his choreography, using this as a way to update ballet language and subjects. Yakobson returned to choreograph for the Kirov Ballet from 1942 to 1950 and from 1956 to 1975. He also served as a choreographer for Moscow’s Bolshoi Ballet from 1933 to 1942. Immensely productive, despite political and economic hardships, he choreographed 180 ballets, including scores of ‘miniatures’ — movement portraits often no longer than three-to-five minutes long — on a range of subjects. In all his works, Yakobson valorised a modernist aesthetic of chance and uncertainty, improvising in the rehearsal studio distinctive movement phrases crafted to the individuality of each dancer.  Challenged rather than intimidated by the restrictions imposed by Soviet censors on his ballets, Yakobson offered Soviet dancers and audiences an experience quite different from the prevailing Soviet aesthetic. Given his fraught relationships with Soviet political authority that limited his artistic opportunities, his ballets became important resistive cultural texts during the Stalinist decades and in the years following the cultural ‘thaw’ of the late 1950s and early 1960s. His work represents a little-known body of choreography that carried on — albeit in a limited way — the experimentalism of the early Soviet avant-garde, long after the latter had been decimated.  Yakobson’s ballets revealed both narrative as well as abstract qualities, offering a different lens on dance modernism as it originated in early-twentieth-century Russia and was subsequently developed in the West. Yakobson questioned the form and content of ballet while repositioning its social relevance and retaining early-twentieth-century movement innovations, such as turned-in and parallel foot positions, oddly angled lifts, and floor work — the modernism of which challenged Soviet ballet orthodoxies.Yakobson’s work is little-known outside Russia: it unfolded in a totalitarian state and was never considered worthy of cultural display, and there was little official effort to preserve his choreographic archive.   Legacy Yakobson, who died in 1975, viewed ballet as a form of political discourse that could be layered with social challenges. At the same time, he used it to articulate individual and cultural subjectivities, particularly the suppressed identity of Soviet Jews. The majority of Yakobson’s ballets celebrated reinvention and self-authorship — the freedom of the individual voice, as subject, practice, and medium. Yakobson viewed ballet as a vital medium of national identification, important in shaping the contours of Soviet cultural life. Reaching beyond aesthetics, or Jewishness, and bolstered by his strong personal will, Yakobson’s ballets challenged the role of the dancing body in the USSR during some of the most repressive decades of totalitarian control. He used performance to define prohibited cultural identities and resist propagandistic agendas while paving the way toward a flowering of new dance in the post-Soviet 1990s. In 1970, Yakobson completed his major treatise on ballet, *Letters to Noverre* [*Pis’ma Noverru*], in which he expounded his views in a series of epistolary responses to Jean-Georges Noverre’s seminal *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* (1760). Yakobson’s book remained unpublished until 2001 when his widow, Irina Yakobson, financed its posthumous publication. |
| Further reading:  (Dobrovol’skaia)  (Lopukhov)  (Vol’fson)  (Zozulina) |