**Parnakh (Parnok, Parnac, Parnach), Valentin Yakovlevich (b. 15 July 1891, Taganrog, Russia; d. 29 January 1951, Moscow).**

**Summary**

Brother of the celebrated poet Sofia Parnok, Valentin Parnakh was a Russo-Soviet dancer, jazz musician, actor, poet and translator, a mover and shaker of the European avant-garde as Pablo Picasso’s portrait of him (1922) bears ready witness. Parnakh’s approach to artistic movement was truly synthetic, free of ideological dogma and academic convention, even though in Paris he published a sophisticated and original volume, *Histoire de la Danse* (*History of Dance*, 1932). Among the Russian apologists of eccentric and mechanical dances, Parnakh was the only one to compare Taylorist techniques with the new cultural exigencies of the proletariat, presenting Taylorism – in art – as the creative application of jazz dances such as ragtime, the shimmy and fox-trot. He argued this just as the Soviet establishment was issuing its first instructions on how to eliminate these ‘decadent bourgeois dances of Western importation’ from the repertoire of workers' clubs.

**Life and Works**

Parnakh studied law at St. Petersburg University, but soon switched to philology and Romance languages, while also attending courses in music at the Conservatory and in theatre at Vsevolod Meyerhold’s studio. In 1913-14, he visited the Middle East in search of his Jewish roots, and in 1915, after studying at the Sorbonne, he traveled to Spain in search of his Sephardic identity. Troubled by his wanderings across Europe (evident in his Paris memoir, *Pension Maubert*, which was written in the late 1930s, though it remained unpublished during the author's lifetime), and in the enigmatic figure satirised by Osip Mandelshtam in his novel *Egipetskaia marka* (*Egyptian Stamp*), Parnakh was, nonetheless, well received among the international avant-garde to which he was introduced by the Russian and Georgian artists Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov and Lado Gudiashvili. In Paris, Parnakh presented one of his first experimental dances – *La Volaille Miraculeuse* (*The Miraculous Fowl*, 1921) – at a Dadaist soirée organised by Francis Picabia and Tristan Tzara at the Galerie Montaigne and received the title of President of the Paris Chamber of Poets.

Parnakh bore these honours proudly when he returned to Soviet Russia in 1922, along with an entire collection of jazz instruments. There he put together his own jazz band (and Russia’s first), which gave its first concert on 1 October in Moscow on the stage of the Central Technicum of Theatre Art. For Parnakh, jazz was an aesthetic but also a very ‘physical’ and concrete medium, in which in the human body became an instrument and thus, part of the band, while the musical instruments become ‘bodies’ in a striking synthesis of rituals and dances which might involve all nations and latitudes. Also in 1922, at the invitation of the future filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, Parnakh started teaching choreography in the Moscow Dramatic Studio of the First Workers’ Proletcult Theatre. Here he performed and taught his eccentric dances, which he recorded in the very personal system of notation he called ‘hieroglyphs of dance’.

In 1922, in his ‘manifesto’ on the new dance and new music (*Jazz-Band*) published in the first issue of the Berlin Constructivist journal *Veshch’\Gegenstand\Objet* (*Object*), Parnakh declared that he had incorporated the unusual and bizarre movements of the new ballroom dances – fox-trot, one-step, and ragtime – into his own choreography. He had also created a totally new ‘supine dance’ intended to be performed on horizontal surfaces – the floor or even the top of a grand piano. Parnakh put his model of ‘synthetic compression’ (as he called it) into practice in the two dances called *Epopée* (*Epic*) and *Idole*-*Giraffe* (*Giraffe-Idol*), which he created for Meyerhold's production of *Come on, Europe!* at the Theatre of the Revolution in 1924. Parnakh described *Idole*-*Giraffe* as ‘the idolation’ – a word of his own invention – ‘of the body, the instant pause and brusque continuation of movement and gesture, the forward dismantling of the body like an idol with motionless legs; these are some of the elements for the new [kind of] performances in the theatre, the dance and the cinema’.

At the peak of his success in Moscow, Parnakh felt the need to return to Paris, where he remained from 1925 to 1931. Returning that year to Soviet Moscow, he tried to camouflage his independent spirit and boisterous character so out of step with the consolidating Stalinist regime. Retiring from the stage, he hid his transgressions and adopted the more respectable guise of a translator. Forgotten and marginalised, he lived the last decades of his life in dire poverty.

**Selected Writings**

Parnac, V. (1922), *Karabkaetsia akrobat* [*Clambering Acrobat*], Paris: Franko-russkaia pechat’. (A collection of Parnakh’s experimental poems)

Parnac, V.( 1925) *Vstuplenie k tantsam. Izbrannye stikhi* [*Introduction to Dances. Selected Poems*], Moscow: Rzhevskaia tip. (A collection of poems dedicated to different dances and dancers)

Parnac, V. (1927) ‘Dances’ in ‘Feuilles volantes’ supplement to *Cahiers d’Art* 6, 4-5. (The author’s explanation of his new dances)

Parnac V. (1932) *Histoire de la danse* [*History of Dance*], Paris: Editions Rieder. (A survey of dance from ancient to modern times)

Parnakh V. (2005) ‘Pansion Mober.Vospominaniia’, *Diaspora. Novye materialy* 7: 7-91. (A memoir by the author of his years in Paris)

**References and Further Reading**

Arenson, E. (ed.) (2000) *Zhirafovidnyi Istukan. Idole-Giraffe* [*Giraffe-Idol*], Moscow: Gileia. (An appreciation of Parnakh’s checkered career)

Gordon. M. (1996) ‘Valentin Parnakh, Apostle of Eccentric Dance’, *Experiment* 2: 423-41. (An explanation of Parnakh’s theory of dance)

Misler, N. (2004) ‘L’Idole-Girafe. Moscow 1920s’, *Experiment* 11: 97-102. (A formal analysis of Parnakh’s magisterial dance)

**Paratextual Material**

Please see the images that have been included as separate files.

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