**Yakobson, Lenoid Veniaminovich (b. 2[15] January 1904, Saint Petersburg, Russia; d. 17 October, 1975, Moscow, USSR)**

**Summary**

A Russian dancer and choreographer, Lenoid 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 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 pointework 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*, in 1949, 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, they 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*, and 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 movement 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 this 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 because it unfolded in a totalitarian state and was never considered worthy of cultural display, and because 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.

**Selected List of Works**

*The Golden Age* (1930)

*Jewish Dance* (1949)

*Shurale* (1955)

*Spartacus* (1956/1962)

*The Bedbug* (1962)

*The Twelve* (1964)

*The Land of Miracles* (1967)

*Vestris* (1969)

*Rodin* (1958/1971)

*Exercise XX* (1972)

*Jewish Wedding* (1975**)**

**Selected Writings**

Yakobson, L. (2001) *Pis’ma Noverru* [*Letters* *to Noverre*]. Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage Publications. (Yakobson’s treatise in which he expounds his aesthetic theory in the form of letters to the eighteenth-century ballet theorist Jean-Georges Noverre)

**References and Further Reading**

Dobrovol’skaia, G. N. (1968) *Baletmeister Leonid Iakobson* [*Leonid Yakobson, Ballet Master*]. Leningrad: Iskusstvo. (A discussion of Yakobson’s early works ending in mid-career, before the founding of his company, Choreographic Miniatures)

Lopukhov, F. (1966) *Shest’desiat let v balete* [*Sixty Years in Ballet*], Moscow: Iskusstvo. (Lopukhov, a leading Soviet choreographer and theorist, contextualises Yakobson’s innovations in relation to ballet history, emphasising the importance of rejecting archaic forms of dance.)

Vol’fson, S. M., ed. (1965). *Leonid Iakobson: tvorcheskii put' baletmeistera, ego balety, miniatiury, ispolniteli* [*Leonid Yakobson: His Creative Path as a Ballet Master, His Ballets, Miniatures and Performers*]. Leningrad: Iskusstvo. (A collection of materials relating to Yakobson’s career as a choreographer)

Zozulina, N. (2012) *Teatr Leonida Iakobsona: stat’i, vospominanija, fotomaterialy* [*The Theatre of Lenid Yakobson: Articles, Reminiscences, Photographs*]. (St. Petersburg: ‘Liki Rossi’. (Interviews and reminiscences with many former dancers and associates of Yakobson’s Choreographic Miniatures company)

**Manuscript Sources and Online Resources**

A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow. (Yakobson’s personal archives, including posters, costume sketches, books, photographs, libretti and personal notebooks)

Central State Archive of Cinema, Photographic and Phonographic Deocuments, St. Petersburg. (Photographs of Yakobson’s early work) <http://www.photoarchive.spb.ru/showObject.do?object=2505016687>

Stanford University Libraries, Leonid Yakobson Video Archives. (A gift of Irina Yakobson, this is the most comprehensive film/video archive of Yakobson’s work anywhere. It also includes photographs, manuscripts and libretti.)

**Moving Image Material**

*Alla Ossipenko: Confessions of a Ballerina* (n.d.) Russkoje Video. The Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. (Includes footage of Alla Ossipenko dancing Yakobson’s *The Minotaur and the Nymph*)

*Baryshnikov at Wolf Trap* (1976) Kultur International Films. (Mikhail Baryshnikov in Yakobson’s solo *Vestris*, recorded live in performance at Wolf Trap)

*A Country Don Juan* (2012) Maryinsky Theatre*.* (A revival of the Yakobson ‘miniature’ performed by the Maryinsky dancers Igor Kolb and Viktoria Teryoshkova) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzhBLJ_sqRg>

*Gabriela Komleva: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1995). The Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. (Includes a 1976 recording of Yakobson’s *Cowboys*, danced by Komleva and Konstantin Zaklinsky)

*The Glory of the Bolshoi* (1995) NVC Arts/Warner Music Vision. (Includes 1955 footage of the pas de deux from Yakobson’s *Shurale*, danced by Maya Plisetskaya and Yuri Kondratov)

*The Glory of the Kirov* (1995) NVC Arts/Warner Music Vision. (Includes Yakobson’s *Viennese Waltz*, filmed in 1960 and danced by Ninel Kurgapkina and Boris Bregvadze, and *Reflection: Pas de Deux*, also filmed in 1960 and danced by Alla Osipenko and Anatolii Nisnevich.) For *Viennese Waltz* see also: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sm8kpgITlaE>

*Khoreograficheskie miniatiury* [*Choreographic Miniatures*] 1960 Lenfilm. The Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. (A Soviet film featuring several Yakobson ‘miniatures’, including *The Toady*, *Triptych on a Theme of Rodin*, *The Gossips*, *Young Beggars* and *The Leningrad Waltz*, danced by Igor Belskii, Irina Kolpakova, Alla Shelest, and Natalia Makarova, among others)

*Spartacus* (1962). The Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. (Excerpts from Yakobson’s version of the ballet, danced by Maya Plisetskaya, Maris Liepa, Natalia Ryzhenko, Dmitri Begak, Natalia Kasatkina and other Bolshoi dancers. Multiple clips from the 2010 revival of the ballet by the Maryinsky Theatre can be found on YouTube.)

**Paratextual Material**

*The Bedbug*. Photograph by Nina Alovert.

Routledge will have to contact the photographer both for the image and for permission to publish.

*Spartacus*. Photograph by Nina Alovert.

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Janice Ross