**Karsavina, Tamara (b. 10 March [25 February, Old Style] 1885, St. Petersburg, Russia; d. 26 May 1978, London, England)**

**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.

**Selected List of Roles by Choreographer**

Marius Petipa

*Giselle* (Giselle) (1841) (originally choreographed by Jules Perrot/Eugene Coralli; revised by Petipa in 1884)

*The Awakening of Flora* (Diana) (1894) (choreographed with Lev Ivanov)

*La Bayadère* (Nikia) (1877)

*The Sleeping Beauty* (Aurora) (1890)

*Swan Lake* (Odette/Odile) (1895) (choreographed with Lev Ivanov)

*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**

Karsavina, T. (1956) *Ballet Technique: a Series of Practical Essays*, London: Adam and Charles Black. (A compilation of essays first published in *The Dancing Times* focussed on exercises for acquiring classical technique and develop musicality. Illustrative photographs of Svetlana Beriosova and Prudent Hyman demonstrate key points.)

Karsavina, T. (1973) *Classical Ballet: The Flow of Movement*, New York: Theatre Arts Books. (In a conversational tone, Karsavina presents her slow, systematic approach to training in classical ballet, sharing the benefits of her artistry and classroom experience. Illustrative photographs of Antoinette Sibley demonstrate key points.)

Karsavina, T. (1930) *Theatre Street: The Reminiscences of Tamara Karsavina*, London: William Heinemann. (Karsavina’s celebrated memoir, subsequently republished in numerous editions)

In the 1940s-1960s Karsavina contributed numerous articles to *The Dancing Times* on ballet technique and history. Of particular interest are the articles on her teachers, partners and Ballets Russes collaborators.

**References and Further Reading**

Beaumont, Cyril W. (1945) *The Diaghilev Ballet in London: A Personal Record*, London: Putnam. (The British dance historian and critic was given special access by Diaghilev to Ballets Russes performances in London. Beaumont’s analysis of the ballets and his commentary on individual artists is astute and frank.)

Foster, A. (2010) *Tamara Karsavina: Diaghilev’s Ballerina*, London: self-published. (Foster provides a photographic chronicle of Karsavina’s career with an emphasis on the ballerina’s schooling and Maryinsky years.)

Garafola, L. (1989) *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, New York: Oxford University Press. (Garafola provides a comprehensive account of the company’s history and a choreographic analysis of its repertoire.)

Haskell, A. (1977) *Balletomania Then and Now*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf. (The writer, an influential British critic and personal friend of Karsavina, was responsible for her writing *Theatre Street*. Drawing on interviews and personal observation, he analysed her interpretive process in learning new roles.)

Smakov, G. (1984) *The Great Russian Dancers*, New York: Alfred A Knopf. (Smakov labels Karsavina a ‘decorative ballerina; working from Russian-language sources, he portrays her as modern, European-influenced dancing actress.)

**Moving Image Materials**

An early film (probably made in Paris in 1909) of Karsavina in the *Dance with a Torch (Danse Assyrienne)* is in the collection of the British Film Institute. It was a solo choreographed for her by Michel Fokine in 1907.

http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/372724

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq9wobkVvHM&feature=plcp> (excerpt)

Tamara Karsavina Exercising at Home (1920s) British Pathé. A short clip of Karsavina dancing outdoors in bare feet and a Grecian-style tunic.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGD6MNHMli4&feature=player\_detailpage

*The Golden Road to Health and* Beauty (English version of *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit*) (1925) UFA. Includes footage of Karsavina exercising at the barre and in a pas de deux from *Sylvia* with Pierre Vladimiroff. This is in the collection of the British Film Institute and the New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b69f5dc4a>

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIPed60WvV0> (barre exercises)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6e7yZeUVY4> (excerpt from *Sylvia*)

*Les Sylphides* (1953) BBC. (Karsavina introduces this recording of *Les Sylphides*, which was rehearsed by Lydia Sokolova and stars Alicia Markova in Karsavina’s former role. This is in the collection of the British Film Institute and the New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Dance Division.)

<http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b7ab0abb8>

\*MGZIA+4-2066/cassette 1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONwOVXyAnEc> (excerpt)<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVIVqd-hPAw>

*Diaghilev* (1968) BBC-TV/Barvarian TV co-production. (Karsavina appears at several points as an on-camera interview in this two-part documentary about Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. This is in the collection of the British Film Institute and the New York Public Library’s Jerome Robbins Dance Division.)

<http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/479464>

\*MGZIC 9-3410

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVIVqd-hPAw> (clip of Karsavina talking about *Firebird*)

**Photographs**

A source for photographs of Karsavina, including Figures 1-6 (below).

http://www.google.com/search?q=tamara+Karsavina&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=UbK&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&prmd=imvnso&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=1TTqT7bHL6rd0QGd1vS5AQ&ved=0CFgQsAQ&biw=1223&bih=555

The New York Public Library Digital Archive has five photographs of Karsavina including Figure 7, *Jeux*, in whic she appears with Ludmilla Shollar and Vaslav Nijinsky.

[http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchresult.cfm?keyword=karsavina%2C+tamara](file:///C:\Documents%20and%20Settings\Allana%20Lindgren\Local%20Settings\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.IE5\L6UH8C60\_blank)

Please note that the author did not research the photographers. Gerschel is probably Charles Gerschel, a Paris photographer whose life dates are 1871-1948), but the name could refer to someone else.  There does not seem to be an estate, and most NYPL Gerschel photos do not even have his first name.

The figure titles correspond to the image files that accompany this entry.

Figure 1

Tamara Karsavina in Michel Fokine’s *Firebird* (1910).

SOURCE: Google Images

Figure 2

Tamara Karsavina with Michel Fokine in *Firebird* (1910)

SOURCE: Google Images

Figure 3

Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky in *Giselle* (1910)

SOURCE: Google Images

Figure 4

Tamara Karsavina with Vaslav Nijinsky in Michel Fokine’s *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911).

SOURCE: Google Images

Figure 5

Tamara Karsavina coaching Margot Fonteyn.

SOURCE: Google Images

Figure 6

Tamara Karsavina (looking out) with Ludmilla Shollar and Vaslav Nijinsky in Nijinsky’s *Jeux* (1913).

SOURCE: Google Images

Figure 7

Tamara Karsavina with Ludmilla Shollar and Vaslav Nijinsky in Nijinsky’s *Jeux* (1913).

SOURCE: New York Public Library Digital Archives

Figure 8

Tamara Karsavina as the Queen of Shemakhan in Michel Fokine’s *Le Coq d’Or* (1914).

SOURCE: Garafola, L. (1989) Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, New York: Oxford University Press.

Figure 9

Tamara Karsavina as Oreade in Michel Fokine’s *Midas* (1914).

SOURCE: Foster, A. (2010) *Tamara Karsavina: Diaghilev’s Ballerina*, London: self-published.

Figure 10

Tamara Karsavina as Zobéide in Fokine’s *Schéhérazade* (1910) with 1920s headpiece.

SOURCE: Ballets Russes souvenir program, Paris Opéra (1919-20).

[No copyright holder]

Figure 11

Tamara Karsavina in Léonide Massine’s *Le Chant du Rossignol* (1920).

SOURCE: Ballets Russes souvenir program, Paris Opéra, May-June 1920.

[No copyright holder]

Please note that Dr. Lynn Garafola, one of the EAB members for the REM, has prints for several of the images from the Diaghilev souvenir programs. She also has prints related to Karsavina that she had made for various books. These prints could also be scanned.

Karen Eliot