**Sacharov, Alexander (also Sacharoff, Sakharoff, b. May 26, 1886, Mariupol, Ukraine; d. September, 25, 1963, Siena, Italy)**

**Von Derp, Clotilde (born von der Planitz, b. November, 5, 1892, Berlin, Germany; d. January 11, 1974, Rome, Italy).**

**Summary**

Alexander Sacharov and Clotilde von Derp formed one of the most celebrated dancing couples of the early twentieth century. Born into different cultural contexts and trained in different techniques, they managed to join their individual talents into a performance style that was widely admired by their contemporaries. Sacharov was the first male modern dancer in Europe, while von Derp was among the early female modern dancers in the wake of Isadora Duncan’s 1904 path-breaking recital in Berlin. Their career spanned from 1910 until the 1950s, and reached its apex in the late 1910s and 1920s. Both believed in a dance subjected to the imperatives of music, and their dances made references to ancient Greece, to commedia dell’arte, and to the Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo eras. Indebted to symbolist aesthetics, their signature works eschewed showy mannerisms in favor of subtle and fluid expression, vibrant musicality, and vivid theatricality. (Alexander, a painter as well as dancer and choreographer, designed their costumes.) Touring across Europe, the Americas, and East Asia, Sacharov and von Derp participated in the global circulation of dance modernism.

**Training and Early Career**

In 1903 Sacharov left Russia to study painting in Paris. There he came to know another Russian artist in exile, who persuaded him to move to Munich. In the German city he joined the Neue Künstlervereinigung (New Artists Union), a circle of artists that included Wassily Kandinsky, Alexej Jawlensky, and Marianne von Werefkin. (Both Jawlensky and Werefkin did portraits of Sacharov.) Sacharov studied ballet and acrobatics, but his movement performances seemed to have derived more from his study of Greek sculpture and vases. When Sacharov made his solo debut in 1910 at the Munich Odeon Theatre, his performance transgressed many of the rules dominating the theatre dance of the time. He looked young, even effeminate, clad in a thin and short Greek-style tunic, dancing barefoot at times, even on occasion without music. On one early program Sacharov printed a statement celebrating the ungendered nature of youth; this cult of youth and the androgyny reflected the ideas of Russian symbolists and of sexual reformers in Germany and Switzerland at the time.

Clotilde von Derp, born in Berlin, moved to Munich as a child. She first studied violin, then eurhythmics and ballet. Independently of Sakharov, she also made her solo debut in 1910. She performed a wide range of movements, going from a slow and intent walking to rotating in a sort of ecstatic self-abandon. She danced barefoot, delicately carving out each movement, dressed in simple attire. During these years, she also appeared in two productions by the noted director Max Reinhardt: *Midsummer Night’s Dream* in Munich (1910) and *Sumurun* in London (1911).

Although they both continued to perform in and around Munich, Sacharov and von Derp did not meet until 1913. Subsequently, they abandoned solo recitals and started appearing together. They remained primarily soloists, however, since their standard program consisted of short solos and one or occasionally two duets. Yet they relied more and more on their public image as a dancing couple. This marketing strategy (and real-life corollary when they married in 1919) conveniently masked Sacharov’s homosexuality, which was the object of caricature and gossip during his early career in Germany.

**Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

For their joint appearances, Sacharov and von Derp evolved a more elaborate presentational style. Abandoning his Greek tunic, Sacharov impersonated either historical or fancy characters, as in *Golliwog’s Cake Walk* (1916?) and *Papillon* (1916?).[[1]](#endnote-1) In *Poème printanier* (Spring Poem) and *Danseuse de Delphes* (Delphic Dancer) von Derp wore wigs and elaborate dresses, probably designed by Sacharov. Their duets at times presented a conventional image of gender, with Sacharov intently watching Von Derp and hence directing the audience’s attention toward her. But at other times, their duets offered a startling reversal of gender roles, as in their 1913 dance *Tanz der barocken Bacchus* (Dance of a Baroque Bacchus), where von Derp took the role of male protagonist, bending in front of a feminized Sacharov as a baroque Bacchus.

After the Second World War, the couple relocated to Paris and lived there until 1940. During these years, Sacharov and von Derp toured extensively across Europe and abroad, making their New York debut in 1920, appearing in China and Japan in 1930 and again in 1934, and South America in 1935. The plastic refinement of their dances, their respect of music as true ‘mimes sonores’ (‘sound mimes,’ as critic Pierre Michaud called them[[2]](#endnote-2)), and the elegance of their costumes were the key of their great success. They both managed to give a personal inflection to dances inspired by the main cultural trends. Von Derp danced Debussy’s *Faune* (1936) with a feminine version of Bakst’s famous costume for Nijinsky, while Sacharov gave a most sensible impersonation of Louis XIV in *Pavane royale* (Royal Pavane, late 1910s), one of his several solos inspired by baroque times. Although praised by many reviewers, they were opposed by the influential Russian émigré critic André Levinson, who considered von Derp a ‘natural’ dancing talent, but could not bear Sacharov’s effeminate look and ‘unmanly’ manners.[[3]](#endnote-3) Marginalized by changing tastes, and unable to return to France after the Germans occupied Paris (Sacharov was Jewish), they immigrated to Buenos Aires and Montevideo. After the Second World War, they returned to Europe and eventually settled in Italy. In 1954 they gave their farewell performance and started a much-attended summer course in Siena, which would continue until 1964. Two years later in 1956 they opened a school in Rome.

**Legacy**

Although Sacharov and von Derp taught before and after the Second World War, their students did not transmit their style. Rather, their legacy resides mostly in the pictorial documentation of their careers. Wolfgang Keilhold, a German student of Mary Wigman and dancer in postwar Italy, preserved Sacharov’s stage and costume designs, as well as hundreds of photographs showing their dancing. During his lifetime Sacharov exhibited his works on several occasions, and since his death more exhibitions have been mounted.[[4]](#endnote-4) The pictorial and photographic record of their career suggests possible correspondences between their dancing style and innovations in visual art, leading us to broaden our understanding of inter-media relations beyond the Ballets Russes. Sacharov’s closeted homosexuality adds another fascinating level of comparison with the Ballets Russes as well as with other male modern dancers of the early twentieth century, such as Ted Shawn.

**Patrizia Veroli**

**Selected solos and duets**

**Alexander:**

1910s: *Papillon* (Chopin), *Golliwog’s Cake Walk* (Debussy), *Florentinischer Frühling* (Florentine Spring, Händel), *Tanz im Stil der Renaissance* (Dance in a Renaissance Style, Frescobaldi, also titled *Quattrocento*)

*1920s: Pavane royale* (Royal Pavane, Kreisler, possibly a reworking of earlier, German solos), *Caprice de Cirque* (Circus Caper, Kreisler), *Orphée* (Orpheus, Tansman)

1930s: *Bourrée Fantasque* (Chabrier), *Exotique* (Tansman), *Mort de Saint Sébastien* (Death of Saint Sebastian, Debussy)

1940s: *Ave Maria* (Schubert), *Prélude* (Fauré), *Sarabande* (Debussy)

**Clotilde:**

1910s: *Maientanz* (May Dance, Krug, later titled *Poème printanier,* Spring Poem)*, Petit berger* (Debussy)*, Humoresque* (Reger), *Danseuse de Delphes* (Delphic Dancer, Debussy)

*1920s: Chanson nègre (*Negro Song, set to a spiritual, later titled *Impressions d’Amérique*, Impressions of America*), Chinoiserie* (Kreisler), *Danse biblique* (Biblical Dance, Pizzetti), *Danse sainte* (Holy Dance, Bach)

1930s: *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un Faune* (1936, Prelude to Afternoon of a Faun, Debussy), *Jeune fille au jardin* (Mompou)*, Berceuse de L’Oiseau de feu* (Stravinsky), *Ave Maria* (Schubert)

*1940s : La Maja y el ruiseñor* (Granados)

**Duets:**

1910s: *Tanz des barocken Bacchus* (Dance of a Baroque Bacchus), *Chanson dansée* (Dance Song, Mahler), *Valse romantique* (Chopin), *Valse rouge* (Chopin)

1920s: *Choral* (Bach), *Danse* (Bach, also titled *Hommage à Botticelli*)

1930s: *Masques et bergamasques* (Fauré), *Canzone di Natale* (Christmas Song, anonymous 14th century composer)

**Writings by Artist**

Sakharoff, A. (1943) *Réflexions sur la danse et la musique*, Buenos Aires: Viau.

Sakharoff, A. (1968) *Esprit et art de la danse*, Lausanne : Maurice Bridel.

**References and further reading**

*Alexander Sacharoff* (1964), Munich: Städtische Galerie am Lenbachhaus. In French: *Alexandre Sakharoff* (1965), Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale-Musée de l’Opéra.

Bernstein, B. and J. Laurent (1946) *Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff : 18 pochoirs originaux*, Paris: L’imprimerie des deux artisans.

*Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff* (c. 1922), Paris: Maurice De Brunoff Editeur.

Koegler, H. (2003) ‘A Single Being and a Single Soul with Two Bodies : Alexander and Clothilde Sacharoff and the Pre-World War I Munich Avant-Garde,’ *Dance Chronicle* 26 (2) : 253-59.

Peter, F.-M. and R. Stamm, eds. (2002) *Die Sacharoffs. Zwei Tänzer aus dem Umkreis des Blauen Reiters,* Cologne: Wienand.

Veroli, P., ed. (1990) *Clotilde* *& Alexandre Sakharoff: Un mito della danza fra teatro e avanguardie artistiche*, Bologna: Bora.

Veroli, P. (1992) ‘Between Art and Fashion. Alexandre Sakharoff’s Theatre Designs,’ *Dance Research* 10 (1): 78-93.

Veroli, P. (1996) ‘Alexander Sacharoff as Symbolist Dancer,’ *Experiment* 2 (1): 41-60.

Vuillermoz, E. (1933) *Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff*, Lausanne: Editions Centrales.

**Film Documentation**

Kirsanoff, D. (1936) *Jeune fille au jardin*, Paris: Pathé.

Gandin, M. (1954) *Poesia della danza*, Rome : A LUX. Documents *Bourrée fantasque, Notte di Natale*, and *La Maja y el ruiseñor.*

**Suggested Paratexts**

Jawlensky portrait of Alexander Sacharov, 1909, Lenbachhaus, Munich

<http://library.artstor.org.turing.library.northwestern.edu/library/#3|search|6|All20Collections3A20Jawlensky|Filtered20Search|||type3D3626kw3DJawlensky26geoIds3D26clsIds3D26collTypes3D26id3Dall26bDate3D26eDate3D26dExact3D26prGeoId3D26origKW3D||58|>

Georges Barbier, lithograph of Clotilde and Alexandre Sacharov, 1921, Deutsches Tanzarchiv

<http://library.artstor.org.turing.library.northwestern.edu/library/#3|search|6|All20Collections3A20Georges20Barbier|Filtered20Search|||type3D3626kw3DGeorges20Barbier26geoIds3D26clsIds3D26collTypes3D26id3Dall26bDate3D26eDate3D26dExact3D26prGeoId3D26origKW3D||5|>

Notes

1. It is not possible to ascertain exact premiere dates from the surviving documentation. Hence, the list of selected works lists the decades when works were created, along with alternate titles given the dances. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Pierre Michaud, quoted in F. M. Peter and R. Stamm, eds. (2002) *Die Sacharoffs. Zwei Tänzer aus dem Umkreis des Blauen Reiters,* Cologne: Wienand, 212-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A. Levinson, *Les Sakharoff : elle et lui (1929)*, in Idem, *Les visages de la danse*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1933, pp. 277-279. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Deutsches Tanzarchiv in Cologne has the largest collection, with smaller collections housed at the Stockholm Dansmuseet, the Paris Musée de l’Opéra, and the Munich Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)