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| Lifar, Serge (1905-1986) |
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| A crucial figure in the rehabilitation of ballet at the Paris Opéra, Serge Lifar had a glamorous career as a dancer, choreographer, and intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s. Acclaimed for the harmonious lines of his sculptured body and charismatic stage personality, he was less gifted as a choreographer, favouring a neo-classical style and heroic ballet narratives featuring a protagonist whom he himself usually played. He also achieved considerable fame, especially in France, as a dance historian, theorist, and heir to Serge Diaghilev, in part through the numerous collections that found their way to important institutions and also because of the support of the Russian émigré community. A controversial figure owing to his relationship with German authorities during the occupation of Paris (1940-1944), Lifar was figure much loved by his dancers and idolized by the media. Despite his relentless self-promotion which made him a media star in France, his influence as a choreographer, teacher and ballet theorist has remained largely confined to his home country. |
| A crucial figure in the rehabilitation of ballet at the Paris Opéra, Serge Lifar had a glamorous career as a dancer, choreographer, and intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s. Acclaimed for the harmonious lines of his sculptured body and charismatic stage personality, he was less gifted as a choreographer, favouring a neo-classical style and heroic ballet narratives featuring a protagonist whom he himself usually played. He also achieved considerable fame, especially in France, as a dance historian, theorist, and heir to Serge Diaghilev, in part through the numerous collections that found their way to important institutions and also because of the support of the Russian émigré community. A controversial figure owing to his relationship with German authorities during the occupation of Paris (1940-1944), Lifar was figure much loved by his dancers and idolized by the media. Despite his relentless self-promotion which made him a media star in France, his influence as a choreographer, teacher and ballet theorist has remained largely confined to his home country.  File: Serge Lifar.jpg  Serge Lifar 1  Source: Serge Lifar, 1930s; photographer unknown. Image can be found at <http://michaelminn.net/andros/biographies/lifar_serge/>  Lifar trained briefly with Bronislava Nijinska in Kiev, which he left to join Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in 1923. In the years that followed he worked closely with Enrico Cecchetti and in 1925 became the company’s premier danseur, a position he held until the demise of the company in 1929. He starred in virtually all of George Balanchine’s early ballets, most notably *La Chatte* (1927), *Apollon Musagète* (later *Apollo*, 1928) and *Prodigal Son* (1929), and also played leading roles in Léonide’s Massine’s *Le Pas d’Acier* (1927) and *Ode* (1928). Lifar choreographed his first ballet, *Le Renard*, in 1929, and after Diaghilev’s death that year, was engaged as premier danseur of the Paris Opéra by its director Jacques Rouché. In 1930 he added to his laurels by becoming the company’s *maître de ballet*, a position closer to that of artistic director.  Lifar’s fame rests both on his impressive gifts as a dancer and on his efforts to restore the prestige of the Paris Opéra as a dance institution. After decades of travesty dancing and works whose chief attraction lay in their ballerinas, Lifar returned the male dancer to the Opéra spotlight, often in heroic pantomimes such as *Les Créatures de Prométhée* (1929) and *David Triomphant* (1937), reflecting an aesthetic shift that began with the Ballets Russes and its promotion of male stars such as Vaslav Nijinsky (and Lifar himself). Fully supported by Rouché, Lifar made dance central to the Opéra through his celebrity and glamour as a performer, his support of young French dancers, and his unremitting promotion of ballet. He restored *Giselle* to a position of prominence in the Opéra repertoire (the first modern staging of the ballet at the Opéra was in 1924), and mounted an abbreviated version of *The Sleeping Beauty* (*Divertissement de Tchaikowsky*, 1932), thereby emphasizing the nineteenth-century classical roots of contemporary ballet. He encouraged up-and-coming dancers to modernize their technique by taking classes with former stars of the Russian imperial stage, thereby hastening the displacement of the Italian ‘school’, exemplified by Carlotta Zambelli, the La Scala-trained former étoile who continued to teach at the Opéra until 1955.  Lifar won his first triumph in *Giselle* in 1932 when he partnered (and also overshadowed) Olga Spessivtzeva, one of the era’s legendary Giselles. Four years later he partnered the first French Giselle since the 1860s, Lycette Darsonval. At the same time Lifar restaged two works closely associated with Nijinsky: Michel Fokine’s *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1931) and Nijinsky’s *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* (1935), which he now reconceived as a solo. He convinced Rouché to make important institutional reforms, such as abrogating the right of subscribers to attend ballet rehearsals and reserving one night a week for all-ballet performances. In 1935 he published *Manifeste du chorégraphe*, which argued for the autonomy of the choreographer. His argument was hardly original in light of Rudolf Laban’s theories of dance as an ‘absolute’ art and the many plotless ballets choreographed in the 1930s by Massine and others. Nevertheless, it was important because of the role that composers and librettists continued to enjoy at the Opéra and other French theatres. Lifar’s *Icare* (1935) dispensed with music, but in general he commissioned scores from contemporary French composers, including Georges Auric, Jean Françaix, André Jolivet, Francis Poulenc and Henri Sauguet.  A prolific choreographer, Lifar was at his best in narrative ballets centred on heroic characters that he imbued with the dazzle of his own personality. The most important of his plotless works was *Suite en blanc* (1943), a virtuosic suite of entrées and variations, which he conceived for himself and the Opéra’s best dancers – Darsonval, Yvette Chauviré, Solange Schwartz, Roger Ritz and Roger Fenonjois – whose talents he had nurtured and who were devoted to him. The ballet gave many of the Opéra’s youngest dancers the opportunity to perform in small groups as well as in the corps, and was regarded by Lifar as a manifesto of neoclassical style.  By the early 1940s Lifar stood at the apex of a newly consolidated star system at the Opéra. He could negotiate his salary, which was significantly higher than any of the company’s other dancers. Moreover, he held veto power over the engagement of other choreographers. During the Second World War, when Paris was occupied by the Germans, Lifar continued to dance at the Opéra, staging works with German artists and composers, and also travelling to Berlin. After the Liberation in 1944, he was accused of collaboration and barred from the Opéra for several years. He recovered his post as ballet master in September 1947 but was allowed to perform on the Opéra stage only in February 1949. Six years later, he was forced to retire as premier danseur and also lost his veto power. In 1958 he resigned from the Opéra after a career of nearly thirty years.  Until 1945, all of Lifar’s books and articles were written by Modest Gofman, the distinguished Russian émigré scholar and Pushkinist and subsequently by other ghostwriters whose names Lifar never publically acknowledged. Because of his stature, Gofman was instrumental in establishing Lifar’s position as an intellectual in the 1930s. Among the books written on his behalf by Gofman were the memoir *Du temps que j’avais faim* (1935), the historical survey translated as *Ballet. Traditional to Modern* (1937, in Russian; 1938, in English) and *Serge Diaghilev, His Life, His Work, His Legend: An Intimate Biography*, published in Russian in 1939 and in 1940 in English. Gofman’s authorship of the latter explains the exceptional interest of the early chapters, which drew not only on his own knowledge of Russia’s Silver Age but also on letters and other documents whose whereabouts are today unknown. Many of these documents presumably came from the treasure-trove of manuscripts, art works and books that Lifar acquired (by somewhat dubious means) after Diaghilev’s death. Much of this material was subsequently sold at auction in much publicised sales both during and after Lifar’s lifetime.  A member of numerous cultural institutions, Lifar was extremely active as a writer, lecturer and exhibition organizer (his first show, in 1939, was devoted to Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes). He was an indefatigable promoter of classical dance but also a vigorous opponent of modern dance, a reason why the latter failed to establish a foothold in France until the 1960s. Lifar significantly strengthened the position of ballet at the Paris Opéra at the same time that he modernized its technical and choreographic practices. Idolized by critics and especially by Russian émigré writers such as André Levinson, Julie Sazonva and André Shaikevitch, Lifar enjoyed a level fame in France unrivalled by any of his ballet contemporaries. This may well be why he continues to await a well-researched study that examines his life, work and writings with objectivity and intellectual sophistication. Archives Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra, Paris.  Civico Museo Teatrale alla Scala, Milan.  Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.  Musée historique de l’Ancien-Evêché, Lausanne.  Museo teatrale alla Scala, Milan.  Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.  Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Selected List of Choreographic Works *Le Renard* (1929)  *Les Créatures de Prométhée* (1929)  *Bacchus et Ariane* (1931)  *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1931)  *Divertissement de Tchaikowsky* (1932, new version 1948)  *Sur le Borysthène* (1932)  *Vie de Polichinelle* (1934)  *Icare* (1935)  *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1935)  *David Triomphant* (1937)  *Aenéas* (1938)  *Oriane et le prince d’amour* (1938)  *Le Chevalier et la damoiselle* (1941)  *Joan de Zarissa* (1942)  *Suite en blanc* (1943)  *Les Mirages* (1947)  *Le Chevalier errant* (1950)  *Phèdre* (1950) Selected Writings (1935) *Du temps que j’avais faim* (Translation of Stradnye gody moia iunost’ v Rossii [Years of Unhappiness: My Youth in Russia])  (1935) *Manifeste du chorégraphe*  (1938) *Ballet. Traditional to Modern* (Originally published as *Tanets. Osnovnye techenija akademicheskogo tantsa* [Dance. New Trends in the Academic Dance] 1937).  (1939) ‘Igor Strawinsky: Législateur du ballet’, *La Revue Musicale*, May-June.  (1940) *Serge* *Diaghilev, His Life, His Work, His Legend: An Intimate Biography* (Translation of *Diagilev i s Diagilevym* [Diaghilev and with Diaghilev] 1939.)  (1942) *Giselle: Apothéose du ballet romantique*  (1947) *Carlotta Grisi*  (1950) *Auguste Vestris, le dieu de la danse*  (1951) *Lifar on Classical Ballet*  (1952) *Traité de chorégraphie*  (1954) *A History of Russian Ballet from Its Origins to the Present Day* (Translation of *Istoriia russkogo baleta ot XVII veka do ‘Ruskogo baleta’ Diagileva* [History of the Russian Ballet from the 17th Century to Diaghilev’s ‘Ballets Russes’] 1945.)  (1959) *The Three Graces: Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Olga Spessivtseva. The Legends and the Truths*  (1970) *My Life. From Kiev to Kiev. An Autobiography* (Translation of *Ma vie*, Paris: Juilliard, 1965.)  (1989) *Les Mémoires d’Icare* Filmography *Nuits de feu* (1936) (released in U.S. in 1940 as *Nights of Fire*). Feature film directed by Marcel L’Herbier, with choreography by Lifar.  *L’Opéra de Paris* (1936). Short film directed by Claude Lambert, featuring Lifar in an on-camera dancing role.  *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1936, also known as *Afternoon of a Faun*). Documentary film directed by Roberto Rossellini.  *La Mort du cygne* (1937, released in U.S. in 1938 as *Ballerina*). Feature film directed by Jean Benoît-Lévy, with choreography by Lifar.  *A la mémoire d’un héros* (1951). Short film directed by Ray Ventura, with choreography by Lifar.  British Film Institute, London.  *Mephisto-Valse* (1951). Short film directed by Ray Ventura, with choreography by Lifar.  British Film Institute, London.  *Le Spectre de la danse* (1961). Short film directed by Dominique Delouche, with choreography by Serge Lifar. British Film Institute, London; Cinémathèque de la Danse, Paris: Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.  British Film Institute, London; Cinémathèque de la Danse, Paris; Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.  *Lifar musagète* (2004). Documentary film directed by Dominique Delouche.  Cinémathèque de la Danse, Paris. |
| Further reading:  (Christout)  (Christout and Lefèvre, Serge Lifar à l’Opéra)  (Guest)  (Huguenin)  (Laurent and Sazonova)  (Levinson)  (Pastori)  (Poudru)  (Sazonova and Cocteau)  (Schaïkévitch)  (Schaïkévitch, Serge Lifar et le ballet contemporain)  (Schaïkévitch, Serge Lifar et le destin du ballet de l’Opéra)  (Veroli) |