**Nijinsky, Vaslav** **(b. 28 February [O.S.]/12 March [N.S.], 1889, in Kiev, Russian Empire; d. 8 April 1950, London, England)**

**Summary**

Vaslav Nijinsky was a Russian dancer and choreographer of Polish descent. He achieved international renown as the star of Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes company between 1909 and 1916. A dancing prodigy, Nijinsky was lauded as the best male dancer of his generation. From 1912 onwards, his choreographic modernism inaugurated the use of simpler movement language that de-emphasized virtuosity. With *L’Après-midi d'un Faune* (*Afternoon of a Faun*, 1912), *Jeux* (1913), *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913) and the little-known *Till Eulenspiegel* (1916), created during the company’s second North American tour. Nijinsky refocused attention on the choreographer as the author of dance, which had great influence on how dance as an art form was understood and discussed after the First World War. Because Nijinsky was institutionalized for mental illness in 1919, none of his choreographies survived intact and were, for decades, considered artistically irrelevant. This attitude began to change in the late 1980s, when new research and reconstructions of Nijinsky’s choreographies helped scholars and audiences to rethink his place in dance history, and his works now are considered to be important examples of modernism as well as precursors to both contemporary ballet and contemporary dance more generally.

**Training and Early Career**

Russian dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky was the second son of Thomas Nijinsky and Eleanora née Bereda, Polish citizens of Russian empire. Trained in Warsaw, the Nijinskys performed in touring circuses and provincial theatres. Nijinsky's younger sister Bronislava Nijinska (1892-1972) became a dancer and a choreographer, but their older brother Stanislav was institutionalized in childhood. In 1897, shortly before Thomas Nijinsky left the family for a mistress, the Nijinskys settled in St. Petersburg. In 1900, Nijinsky was accepted into the Ballet School of the Imperial Theatres from which he graduated in 1907, already hailed as a virtuosic prodigy in the press. He was accepted into the Mariinsky company, which guaranteed a secure income and pension. From the first, he performed leading roles with the star ballerinas, including the prima ballerina assoluta Matilda Kshesinskaia, and quickly became one of the best-paid dancers in the company.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

From 1909 onwards, Nijinsky achieved international renown as the star of the Ballets Russes, a touring company organized by the impresario Serge Diaghilev, who was also his lover. During the first season, Nijinsky was given exceptional attention in the publicity of the company over and above the official stars, although his only leading role was in *Les Sylphides* (1909), a reworking of Mikhail Fokine's 1907 one-act ballet *Chopiniana*. In 1910, he danced the male lead in most of the novelties of the season, perhaps the best known of these being the racist stereotype of the Golden Slave in *Schéhérazade*, a black man lusting after a white woman. In 1911 he created the eponymous leads for *Petrouchka* and *Le Spectre de la Rose*. The former was the story of a tragic puppet—a role that has often been used as a metaphor of Nijinsky's own life. The latter duet reversed traditional genders of ballet roles by casting the ballerina as the support of the male star.

Early in 1911, after a bizarre chain of events aptly used by Diaghilev for publicity purposes, Nijinsky was fired from the Imperial Theatres and the inaugural season of the Ballets Russes took place in Monte Carlo. No longer an Artist of the Imperial Theatres, in September 1911 Nijinsky was called to military service. He chose exile.

In 1912, Nijinsky's first choreography, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, set to Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, caused a scandal. The movement material was un-balletic, based on simple walking and idiosyncratic gesturing that connoted the emotions of the characters. The events took place on a narrow strip of stage, lit so as to emphasize the flatness of the characters and the choreographic structure relied on long pauses and stillness that did not correspond with the expectations of the audience. At the end, the faun (danced by Nijinsky) lay down on the scarf he had stolen from the leading nymph (danced by Lydia Tchernicheva) and apparently achieved an orgasm. Vladimir Telyakovsky, the Director of the Imperial Theatres, had secretly been negotiating for Nijinsky’s return to the Imperial Theatres, but *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* convinced him that the young star was too controversial for his company. In the French press, many of the critics who had lauded the Ballets Russes and Nijinsky's dancing attacked this work, claiming it was not dance, and condemning it as indecent and a crime against French art. Others took up arms to defend the freedom of art, much in the vein that Russian critics treated the work.

In 1913, Nijinsky created two choreographies, *Jeux* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*. The first, the only ballet score Debussy ever finished, largely baffled critics. It was set in a twilight garden in the near future, with three dancers (Nijinsky, Tamara Karsavina and Ludmila Schollar) flirting on the pretext of searching for a lost tennis ball. It was the first and, until *Parade* (1917),the only choreography in the company repertory with contemporary subject matter, lacking the exoticism the audience had come to expect of the Ballets Russes.

*Le Sacre du Printemps*, by contrast, depicted pagan Russians with such primitivist ardor that the audience rioted at the premiere. Set in pagan Russia, the work depicted people celebrating spring and ensuring its annual return through the ritual sacrifice of a maiden (danced by Maria Piltz). The work relied on dancing masses, on pounding rhythms and simple but rhythmically complex movement material that contemporary critics associated with rhythmic gymnastics and exercise routines instead of dancing. Although Stravinsky later took credit for the scandal, contemporary responses indicate that Nijinsky’s choreography was the source for most of the extreme opinions – both for and against – *Sacre*. Indeed, Nijinsky’s exacting approach to choreography and his manner of presuming authorship in the press changed how dance was reviewed and discussed as the art of the new author, the choreographer.

In September 1913, after increasing aesthetic disagreements with Diaghilev, Nijinsky married a Hungarian socialite, Romola de Pulzky, in Buenos Aires. Diaghilev broke with Nijinsky, dropping his choreographies from the repertory of the Ballets Russes. The following spring, Nijinsky formed a small company with his sister, Bronislava Nijinska, to produce a four-week season at The Palace, a London music hall, where Anna Pavlova had performed a few years before. Although promising original works by Nijinsky in the publicity, the company began by performing new versions of safe, uncontroversial pieces: *Les Danses Polovtsiennes*, *Les Sylphides* and *Le Spectre de la Rose*. A fortnight into the season, Nijinsky collapsed from overwork, and the season was cancelled when he could not dance for three consecutive nights. The Nijinskys left England and were in Budapest with their newborn daughter, Kyra, when the First World War began. The marriage soon began to disintegrate. Interned as an enemy alien but allowed to remain with his family and in-laws, Nijinsky filled his days perfecting a notation system he used to record *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*.

With war raging in Europe, Diaghilev took his company to tour North America in 1916. His contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York stipulated he bring his major stars, including Nijinsky. The impresario and American officials were able to arrange for the Nijinskys to leave Austria-Hungary but not on time – Diaghilev’s first New York season and the subsequent tour across North America were something of a failure. Nijinsky arrived for the second set of performances in New York in April, but refused to perform until he was paid the salaries a London court had decreed Diaghilev owed him from 1909-1913. After a settlement and Nijinsky's triumphant return to stage, Diaghilev departed with some of the key dancers. Nijinsky took over the company for a second tour (October to February 1917), less publicized and much smaller. He created one more choreography for the Ballets Russes, *Till Eulenspiegel* (1916) to the tone poem by Richard Strauss. Nijinsky collaborated with a young American theatre designer, Robert Edmond Jones, already famous for his innovative designs, to create the apparently medieval town, in which proportions were distorted in the manner of German expressionism. Little is known of Nijinsky’s choreography, but in it, the titular character mocks the powers that be and the poor celebrate him. He is hung for his actions but his spirit lives on. *Till* was probably influenced by Nijinsky’s increasing interest in the religious and moral teachings of Lev Tolstoy as well as his desire to cheer people up during wartime.

In 1917, Nijinsky returned to Europe as the United States entered the First World War. He argued with Diaghilev, who insisted that the dancer take part in another tour to South America. After the tour, Nijinsky moved to Switzerland where he continued to preach Tolstoyanism. Romola Nijinsky began to question her husband’s sanity. Nijinsky was given drugs and encouraged to write in an associative manner, resulting in what is known as his *Diary* (ms. 1919). Nijinsky performed at least once to a select audience, created semi-abstract and abstract drawings, and worked on dance notation. Just before his thirtieth birthday, he agreed to commit himself into psychiatric care at the Bellevue Sanatorium in Switzerland. Within three months, he was catatonic. He lived for another three decades, during which time his reputation as a dancer and choreographer was actively downplayed by many former colleagues and self-appointed experts, only adding to his celebrity, further abetted by the sensationalist aspects of his life that his wife and others publicized, even celebrated. Starting with Stravinsky’s retraction of his own well-documented condemnation of Nijinsky’s abilities as a choreographer in 1969, the tide began to turn. Today, Nijinsky’s choreographic works, known as reconstructions (in the case of *Faune*) and various recreations, are considered to have helped to inaugurate modernism in ballet and his importance to dance as an art form is no longer in question.

**Hanna Järvinen**

Timeline

1889 born in or somewhere near Kiev, Russia

1900 accepted into the ballet school of the Imperial Theatres in St. Petersburg

1901 falls when bullied into a high-jumping contest, convalescence causes falling behind in his studies

1907 graduates from the ballet school, accepted into the Mariinsky company with the rank of coryphé and higher salary; relationship with Prince Lvov

1908 meets Sergei Diaghilev; the two become lovers

1909 star of Diaghilev’s first Ballets Russes performances in Paris

1911 the *Giselle* incident: fired from the Imperial Theatres

1912 *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*

1913 *Jeux* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*; first South American tour, marries Romola de Pulzky

1914 birth of first daughter, Kyra; interned as enemy alien in Hungary

1916 rehired by Diaghilev for first North American tour; directs the company for a second tour; *Till Eulenspiegel*

1917 second South American tour

1919 last performance in St. Moritz, Switzerland; institutionalized at Bellevue Sanatorium

1920 birth of second daughter, Tamara

1933 ‘intimate biography’ published by Romola Nijinsky

1937 *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, a heavily edited version published by Romola Nijinsky

1950 dies in London

**Reference and Further Reading**

*Biographie:*

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Ostwald, P. (1991) *Vaslav Nijinsky: A Leap into Madness.* London: Robson Books.

*Research*

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**Paratextual Information**

A lot of photographs of Nijinsky in his dancing roles exist, although nearly all are posed in studio conditions and some retouched to appear "moving". There are extant photographs of Nijinsky’s choreographic works, though it is essential to ensure that the images are not of other choreographers’ dances (such as Léonide Massine’s *Sacre*, which used the same costumes as Nijinsky’s work of the same name).

Video material: no video of Nijinsky dancing exists; of the reconstructions of his choreographies, only Hutchinson Guest & Jeschke have used his choreographic notation and can be considered anything other than imaginative recreations. A video of this reconstruction of *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* recorded at Juilliard Theater, New York, 11.12.1989, directed by Muriel Topaz and Nancy S. Jordan, was issued in conjunction with the periodical *Choreography and dance* 1:3 (1991).

Please see the accompanying images that are in a separate file.

1. The photographic portrait of Nijinsky was taken by Igor Stravinsky (attached) c. 1913. It was recently reproduced in Jane Pritchard's V&A exhibition catalogue, *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909-1929* (2012), which lists the copyright holder as Lebrecht Music & Arts but this is from Richard Buckle's *Diaghilev* (where it's just "courtesy of Mrs Vera Stravinsky").

2. The Sem caricature was published in the French paper *L'Excelsior*, 17 May 1912. The attached copy came from a microfilm interlibrary loan from Strasbourg and the page is a bit bent. The BNF would have a copy of the original, though.