

## The child who cast a spell on Diaghilev



Markova (front), de Valois (left)

**On the eve of a music season inspired by Diaghilev, Dame Alicia Markova casts new light on the great ballet impresario. Below, Dame Ninette de Valois recalls snubs and praise in Diaghilev's chorus line.**

**"I suppose today  
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I WAS 19 and on holiday in Littlehampton, staying with friends. The Ballets Russes had just finished a Covent Garden season and we had six weeks off for the summer. In those days (it was 1929) the delivery boy would throw the evening paper down at the end of the drive and we'd take turns to get it. That evening it was me. I went down and picked the paper up, and a big black headline struck me like a blow: "Diaghilev dead".

Shock wasn't the word. I thought, that's the end of my career and it's only just started. When we returned from the summer break I was to become a ballerina. But more than that, Diaghilev, who ran the company, was my second father, and I was more or less his child.

To lose him like this was terrible. I'd only lost my father five years before, and this felt exactly the same.

My relationship with Diaghilev took everyone by surprise. I was a child in socks and a Buster Brown haircut, and he was a man who didn't care for children, who was better known for his relationship with Nijinsky and so on. I think the company thought when they saw how close were, that the great man had gone a bit soft in the head - they called us the Odd Couple.

Today I suppose it would be unthinkable for a child to travel around Europe in the most sophisticated theatre company in the world, by my governess fiercely protected me. Wherever we were, he would ask her to take me round to his hotel and we would go off to museums and art exhibitions. I spoke no Russian and he spoke very little English, but somehow we just clicked. Perhaps it was because I didn't talk, because I was no opposition, perhaps it was my innocence that appealed to him; but there was a very deep affection there. He educated me, taught me French and art, and gave my career. I owe everything to him.

I first met him when he came to my dance school looking for dancers for the Ballets Russes' new production of *The Sleeping Princess*. I was 10 and as he looked around the studio I must have stuck out. He asked me to dance for him. I was an obedient child, and I didn't know who he was, so I wasn't overawed. I danced, he kissed me and thanked me, and left. Only then did I find out who this great gentleman was.

A few days later I got the message that Diaghilev wanted to put me in *The Sleeping Princess* as a child fairy. Even though I was not an ordinary ballet child this new item in the production caused great surprise among the members of the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev was the greatest man in ballet in the world and he had never shown any interest in child dancers. Unfortunately I got diphtheria and didn't get to dance in *The Sleeping Princess*, but once I got out of fever hospital he took me to see the company's performances for consolation.

When the company left England, Diaghilev told me to work hard at my dancing, and on their next visit, probably in seven or eight years' time, he would take me into the *corps de ballet*. But in fact they were back shortly after my 14th birthday.

My father had just died, and my mother and three sisters were left in very difficult circumstances, so I had auditioned for a part in a spectacular new *Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, with ballet choreography by Michel Fokine. It would mean good money, though very hard work.

The Ballets Russes returned as I was about to start. Diaghilev asked me to audition for him, and brought Madame Nijinska and Balanchine, who confirmed the talent in me that he had spotted. I was just 14 and could do anything the ballerinas could; I could even do double *tours* like the men. I think what decided him was hearing that I was to do eight shows a week for Fokine. I had remained a delicate child, and he said that if I went to Fokine I would be finished in a year or two.

He had also known my father, and when he heard about his death he just took over. He was a huge man, and many people were frightened of him, but to me he was always gentle. I suppose today one would say I had a father complex, but whatever it was, thank God - look what it gave me. He told Mother he would have adopted me, but he said, "What do I have to give her? I have nothing except the company."

I called him "Sergy-pop". The company, who were mostly Russians, called him "Sergei Pavlovich", the correct form of address, but I couldn't make out the second name and I thought, "Well, Pop - he is my father now." And he accepted it. No one else would have dared. He always called me *dushka*, little one.

Diaghilev was not interested in great dancers; his aim was to push one to become a great *artist*. It meant that dancing was only part of it; you had to have knowledge and experience of all the arts. Diaghilev wedded the arts of dance, music and visual art into ballet. We used to watch performances and criticise them, saying, "Very good technique but no *perfume*."

Our trips to museums introduced me to painting, but music was the most important stimulus to me, which was another thing we had in common. Today it isn't paid nearly enough attention. The trouble was that after being brought up on Delibes and Chopin, it was very hard to be confronted with Stravinsky.

I REMEMBER the first day we began to rehearse Stravinsky's *Rossignol* I couldn't make head nor tail of it. We had a pianola playing it - Stravinsky had made a piano roll - because no one was able to play it. But coming to it after the *Sylvia pizzicato* I started pouring tears. It was an evening rehearsal and Diaghilev came in, having had his dinner at the hotel, to see how it was progressing. There I was in socks and tears, and he looked sternly at Balanchine who protested that he hadn't been ill-treating me.

"You'll be sending me back to London," I cried. Diaghilev promised he would send someone the next night who would help me. The following evening he brought in this little dapper man. Stravinsky. And from then on I had this wonderful friend.

He told me simply not to count but to listen to the music, and learn the part of every instrument. From then on I had no fears. I got to know those scores inside-out, and today I'll sometimes be at a performance and think, "My God, what's the oboe doing? He's missed that entry."

It's very strange now to think of it all. I was a very innocent London child in this extraordinary cosmopolitan milieu. I was told that I was never to have an interest in any of his male stars, but despite what you often read the company was very normal, and I was very well protected, first by my governess, then by Ninette de Valois, who was dancing with the company.

I completely trusted Sergy-pop and always accepted his criticism. After two years, though, I became worried when he ordered me into the back row of the *corps*. I'd come in as a child prodigy, dancing solos for him, all this fuss, and it seemed like a reprimand.

"You don't want people to say you were given things just because of me," Diaghilev told me. "If you're going to do what I think you'll achieve, you're going to work your way through, and you will never regret that." To this day I bless him for that, because I won my spurs.

After our Covent Garden season in 1929 he talked to me about my future. He said that for nearly five years I'd worked for him and now I would begin to work for myself. I would become a ballerina, and I had achieved this through obedience and hard work. It was my last conversation with him.

*Interview by Ismene Brown*

## Quick steps on the road to glory

### *Dame Ninette de Valois recalls snubs and praise in Diaghilev's chorus line*

“He had a way of choosing dancers with more style than technique. We had rough times with some of them”

I JOINED Diaghilev's Ballets Russes primarily because I wanted to see how a company was run. I had been the prima ballerina in the Covent Garden international opera season at 21, and I was taking classes with Cecchetti, the Italian maestro who had been Diaghilev's ballet master for years and had now settled in London. Diaghilev was in and out of Cecchetti's classes all the time, studying his pupils.

I entered the company *corps* in Paris in 1923 and went all over the world with them for the next two years, rising to soloist. I loved it, particularly in Europe. Living abroad in those days was much cheaper than living in England. There were dozens of cheap hotels you could go to and I must have danced in every opera house in Europe. I watched how Diaghilev did things, and listened to his criticisms, and it was a wonderful experience.

He was very aloof, and we dancers didn't get to know him at all. Diaghilev arranged all our travel; he and his friends went first-class and we travelled second-class, 70 or 80 of us altogether. He wasn't interested in where we stayed but he was very concerned about where we went off-duty. He would reprimand us like a lot of schoolgirls if he thought we were in the wrong sort of party or restaurant.

I remember him seeing us in a perfectly harmless bar in Monte Carlo and lecturing us all: “I do not like to see my dancers in this place.” He was a terrible old snob. He was rather solid and aristocratic-looking, and he had a thing about the dignity of the Imperial Ballet which still clung to him. Frankly, it was nonsense. It was the sort of bar people would take their children in to today. I didn't take any notice of him, and I told the others so. He didn't give us enough money to do anything else, and it wasn't in our contract that he had anything to do with where we had a drink.

He was more interested in composers and musicians than dancers, apart from the stars. But occasionally he would join us all at a party. I remember one in London, where he called me over from the group of people I was with and complimented me on my dress. I was thrilled. It was a fairly ordinary dress, but what he liked was the flowers I had pinned onto the shoulder. He touched them and said quietly, “Very nice. You have good taste.”

Style was what he was most interested in. He had very good ballet masters and choreographers, and you were expected to absorb the Ballets Russes style. He was always on the lookout for stylish girls and had a way of choosing dancers with more style than technique. We had some rough times with some of them.

You can confuse style with personality; Diaghilev didn't care a hang about your personality, in fact he objected to it intruding. Once, after I had had a big success in a variation, he came round and criticised the way I had taken my curtain calls. Too flippant. He didn't take any notice of the fact that I'd had an awful lot of them - he was only concerned with the way I took them, and said so. Nothing about my dancing. He wanted quiet, dignified curtains; I'd been too gay, enjoying my applause.

I always had to do the quick *pizzicato* dances because I had the fastest footwork in the company. The Russians are not noted for their speed; you don't have to be so marvellous to beat a Russian with your feet, I can assure you. When I used to ask the gentleman who looked after our shoes for another pair he would say, “You don't need them, my dear, they're on your feet already.” It was a gracious compliment, but frankly I got sick of endlessly doing the quick work. I realised that it limited me, that Diaghilev would never cast me in roles, as such.

WE had a strike in Monte Carlo and Diaghilev was absolutely furious. The Russians were angry about the money he was paying some of the oldest members, and went on strike. I joined them because although I was English I thought I couldn't stand apart from the company. It went on for two days. Diaghilev was very angry. Looking back on it now, the poor devil didn't want them at all - he was giving them something live on out of kindness, even though they were no good to him.

Although he was possessive about his company, he lost all interest if you left. He hated his artists going. He wasn't interested in us developing on our own, he was only interested in us in relation to the Ballets Russes. I felt after two years that I was getting stuck in a rut and I didn't renew my contract that summer. I decided to leave and set up my own company in England.

I didn't talk to him about it, but I knew he was angry. He called me and begged me to come back and guest-dance with the company - quick dances, again - and I did for three or four years, whenever the Ballets Russes came to England.

But I remember how sweet he was when I agreed to go to Milan to dance the lead in *Les Biches* for him. Madame Nijinska had picked me out of the *corps* to create the role of the Hostess: “You remember it for me,” she had told me. I can still see Diaghilev coming over to me in the stalls after the performance and saying, “This is the act of a true friend,” which was very nice of him. We were perfectly good friends, but he had to accept that I didn't want to go on with him.

You can't overestimate Diaghilev's influence on ballet. He moved ballet on from the Imperial Petipa days to modern times; he is the master of everything we do today. We came to him as trained dancers but his aim was to turn us into artists. I was very lucky to come into contact with him at the height of his career.

*Interview by Ismene Brown*

*'Diaghilev and his circle', a series of nine concerts by the London Philharmonic, begins on Thursday March 26 at the Royal Festival Hall with 'Les Biches'*