



George Zoritch

George Zoritch, who died on November 1 aged 92, was a Russian-born leading dancer with the Ballet Russe in the 1930s renowned for his good looks and captivating personality.



Apparently ageless, Zoritch appeared with the vigour of a man half his age in the 2005 documentary *Ballets Russes*, which became a surprising hit with the general public in Britain and America. In the programme he performed with the octogenarian ballerina Nathalie Krassovska, and talked about ballet, life and friendship with a charm that vividly brought back a golden era of dance.

Born Yuri Zoritch in Moscow during the Bolshevik Revolution on June 6 1917, he was taken by his mother, an opera singer who had been deserted by her husband, to the quieter city of Kovno, in Lithuania, where she joined the opera house while he and his brother had their first dance lessons.

When Yuri was 14 the family moved to Paris to further his training, and he won a scholarship to study with Paris's leading teacher, the ballerina Olga Preobrazhenskaya .

After nine months he was given his first professional job by the dance-actress Ida Rubinstein, who had a short season booked at the Paris Opera in creations by Michel Fokine (the famous choreographer of *Les Sylphides*, *Petrushka* and other landmark Diaghilev ballets). Zoritch rapidly became a sought-after performer in a number of companies linked with former Diaghilev stars.

An engagement with Bronislava Nijinska's Ballets de Paris in 1935 led to his long-time membership of the two Ballet Russe offshoots formed after Diaghilev's death and run by former colleagues, and later by rivals Colonel Vasiliy de Basil and René Blum. In the de Basil company, the 18-year-old Zoritch instantly became a favourite of the

choreographer Leonid Massine, who made 11 ballets for him, notably *Jardin public* and *Symphonie fantastique*.

When Massine himself created another breakaway Ballet Russe to tour the United States, Zoritch was his leading man. During the company's American tours over the next few years, his looks and personality soon found him a parallel career as a dancer on Broadway and in Hollywood.

He was an eye-catching Sword Dancer in the Cecil B de Mille epic *Samson and Delilah*, with Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr; and of his performance in Cole Porter's *Night and Day* in 1946, the Hollywood Reporter commented: "If the handsome Zoritch can act the way he dances and looks, there is another new name star from this film." Unfortunately Zoritch never shed his thick Russian accent, to his own regret.

In 1951 he joined the Grand Ballet du Marquis de Cuevas, with which his physique adorned a number of roles of fleeting aesthetic value. He took 18 curtain calls for his performance as the Spectre of the Rose, in a new version by Nijinska — she was said to be furious, since she had created it to feature a different performer in the role her brother Nijinsky had made famous.

Zoritch danced with many star ballerinas, including Alicia Markova and Alexandra Danilova, but never claimed special virtuosity for himself. Yet *The New York Herald Tribune's* eminent ballet critic Walter Terry found that he “dances... beautifully, displaying once again that catlike elegance of motion which always raises his dancing above the level of mere execution of steps”.

Artistry was a subject that Zoritch felt strongly about. In his engaging memoir of 2003, *Ballet Mystique: Behind the Glamour of the Ballet Russe*, he wrote: “Good ballet dancing is not simply a gathering of a vocabulary of steps; it is more like a good conversation, having theme and meaning. None of us older dancers enjoyed the phenomenal techniques displayed by today’s dancers. We enjoyed, however, a mood, a quality and artistry, which comes from keen individual perception... Seeing the current brilliant dancers, I frequently leave the theatre devoid of emotion.”

In 1957, aged 40, he joined the American version of the Ballet Russe under Sergei Denham, settled down in his new adopted country and moved gradually into teaching. He started his own ballet school in Los Angeles, but found children less congenial students than the older ones to whom he gave master classes.

In 1973, at the University of Arizona at Tucson, he set up a highly respected ballet department, becoming feared for his sarcasm, strictness and high standards. He remained there until he retired in 1987.

George Zoritch, who had taken American citizenship, then revisited his native country, where he made firm friends with the Soviet ballet chief, Yuri Grigorovich of the Bolshoi, and became a regular judge in international ballet competitions .

He never married.



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