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*Theatralia*. 2022, vol. 25, iss. 2, pp. 203-222

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2022-2-18>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.77261>

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Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20230120

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# Reconstructing the Glorious Past: Bronislava Nijinska's School of Movement

Hanna Veselovska and Viktor Ruban<sup>1</sup>

A colossus in the world of ballet, Bronislava Nijinska<sup>2</sup> happens to be better known as a dancer and choreographer than as one of the founders of the School of Movement, itself a major and, in many ways, pivotal cultural phenomenon of its time. The School, which originated in Kyiv and functioned there from 1919 to 1921, had a brief but colourful and productive life, leaving its indelible mark on the evolution of the art of dance.

That is why a reconstruction of the School's main works today is essential in understanding Nijinska's creative legacy and the role the School has played as a potential contributor to modern choreography. Reflecting the global artistic processes of the time, Nijinska and her students also expressed the individual social drama and tragic nature of the circumstances in which they had to live and create in their intense professional pursuits.

## Delayed opening

A leading ballet soloist of the Kyiv City Theatre, Bronislava Nijinska began her pedagogical career in 1916, when she was invited to teach stage practice and dance at the Kyiv Music, Drama, and Opera Courses.<sup>3</sup> That was the time when, together with her husband, ballet master and dancer of the Kyiv Opera Alexander Kochetovsky, she also intended to open her own ballet studio in the city (KURINNA 2011: 73), but with more than enough odds against it, the idea materialised only about two years later. Firstly, there was the factor of World War I, which made Kyiv essentially a front-line city, given the active hostilities undergoing in Galicia. On top of this, Nijinska and Kochetovsky apparently had some family issues, which at the time proved particularly acute (NIJINSKA 2014: 297), and finally, a new ballet school would have to face huge competition from the other art schools in the city where dance was already being taught.

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1 Hanna Veselovska is a theatre critic and scholar from Ukraine. Viktor Ruban is a choreographer, director, and performer also from Ukraine.

2 The transliteration of Cyrillic names and titles is done according to the Library of Congress romanisation standards or internationally accepted versions of names. For the artists, whose names exist in more than one transliteration version, Ukrainian transliteration was preferred.

3 According to Lynn Garafola, however, Nijinska had by then already gained some pedagogical experience during her stay in Saint Petersburg (GARAFOLA 2011: 112).



**Fig. 1:** Fundukleevska Street, Kyiv. From Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinematic Arts of Ukraine, Kyiv.

One additional problem of opening a ballet studio in Kyiv in 1916 was the lack of systemic dance education in the city. It was believed that the Ballet School in Warsaw trained professional staff for the Kyiv Opera, so dance classes from *maîtres de ballet* Zakhar Lanhe and Anton Romanowski were offered in the city not so much to professional ballet dancers who wanted to improve their skills but rather to dramatic and opera performers as well as amateur theatre actors. This state of affairs looked resolutely dissimilar to what was happening in the artistic environment which Nijinska would plunge deeply into during the year of 1918. Beginning artists had the opportunity to obtain a basic academic education in Kyiv, and then develop their skills further in the independent studios of Oleksandr Murashko<sup>4</sup> and Alexandra Exter.

It was only after some significant changes had taken place in the local system of art education that Nijinska managed to open her own studio, soon to become known as the School of Movement. In 1918, the new Ukrainian government led by Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky,<sup>5</sup> launched a substantial reform of art schools, effectively creating

4 Oleksandr Murashko (1875–1919) was a great Ukrainian painter known to have influenced Kazimir Malevich. He opened his art studio in Kyiv in 1913 and founded the Association of Kyiv Artists in 1916 and the Ukrainian State Academy of Arts in 1917.

5 Pavlo Skoropadsky (1873–1945) was a Ukrainian aristocrat of Cossack dissent, who after the Russian Revolution of 1917 was made a Hetman of Ukraine by the invading Germans. He proclaimed the Ukrainian State based on a mixture of monarchist and republican grounds on 29 April 1918 but had to abdicate on 14 December 1918.

institutions anew or providing state support to the most respected among them. In the field of art education, the reform yielded the establishment of the Academy of Arts, which continues to function to this day; in the theatrical and musical sphere, the government granted institute status and guaranteed state funding to the Music and Drama School named after Mykola Lysenko.

In addition, there were a variety of private studios and courses active on a partial basis in disciplines such as cinematography and dance which previously had little or no relation to professional educational centres. During this period, in 1918, a whole host of ballet studios were opened in Kyiv to train classical dancers, including studios run by Mikhail Mordkin and Ilya Chistyakov.

After leaving Kyiv for Moscow in December 1917, Nijinska returned almost a year later – at the time of another change of political power, vividly presented in Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The White Guard*.<sup>6</sup> Politically, the city was extremely restless, yet the artistic processes raged on with extraordinary force and this was reflected in the activities of various studios and courses which opened their doors one after another. Thus, the second half of 1918 saw the height of activity in the studio run by a good acquaintance of Nijinska, Mikhail Mordkin, and marked perhaps the most tumultuous phase for the Kyiv studio of avant-garde artist Alexandra Exter.

The local artistic storm, which destroyed the existing hierarchy between artists of differing social stature, generation, and nationality, engulfed Nijinska as well. In the second half of January 1919, one of the Kyiv newspapers published several advertisements for the enrolment of students in her School of Movement, and on 10 February, classes in the new dance studio began.

## Nijinska's special approach

As has been unanimously established by researchers (including VOLKHONOVYCH 1997; RATANOVA 2010; KURINNA 2011; KOVALENKO 2014; SIBILSKA-SIUDYM 2016) of Nijinska's life and work, the opening of her own school was a deeply thought-out step on her part and she had been preparing for the event for years, thinking about what exactly and how she would teach. Researchers also consider the name itself 'School of Movement' a very intentional choice, something through which Nijinska apparently wanted to manifest a special pedagogical approach.

Indeed, Nijinska's School of Movement offered a unique variant of learning, one that would combine academic learning with a new self-invented system (RATANOVA 2010: 316–318). A former student of the Imperial Ballet School, Nijinska retained classical dance as the base subject in her school curriculum, which traditionally consisted of two parts: 'ballet barre' and 'middle'. By contrast, the classics were rather neglected in the various 'free dance' studios that mushroomed around Kyiv, or wherever dance classes

<sup>6</sup> In the novel, which is in many ways a biography, the author depicts events unfolding in Kyiv during the 1918–1919 civil war, focusing on local politics and the fighting between the-then Ukrainian authorities and the invading Russian White Guard Army.

were given under the system of Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, as was the case with a studio of his student Adolfinia Pashkovskaya.

The school curriculum thereby united what many considered to be mutually exclusive elements: the academic approach and avant-garde innovation. Two educational programmes for beginners and professionals of the opera and drama scene, published in a local newspaper (ADVERTISEMENT 1919), featured practical disciplines (classical dance, Nijinska's system, body language, character dance) and theoretical disciplines (music theory, dance theory, dance writing on musical notation, conversations about art).

It can be assumed that Nijinska introduced her system parallel to classical training on purpose, as the latter enabled students – and her personally, since she trained herself along with them – to be in perfect physical shape. This was approximately the same scheme of parallel learning through two types of lessons which was already in use in training programmes for so-called character dancers, which was what her father, Foma Nijinsky, and husband, Alexander Kochetovsky, and she herself had been trained in.

Nijinska's memoirs, her diary, and her treatise 'On Movement and the School of Movement'<sup>7</sup> (RATANOVA 2010: 311–320; NIJINSKA 2014: 322–411), as well as the testimonies of students, some of whom became high-level dancers and other artists, provide on the whole sufficient information about the peculiarities of the course. According to Olena Kryvinska, the students enthusiastically attended the academic 'class', where simple exercises were integrated into complex combinations (Kryvinska quoted in KOVALENKO 2014: 297). They also did unusual non-turnout exercises, jumped on straight legs, imitated the gait of a heron, improvised on coloured rugs, and created bas-relief dance figures (KOVALENKO 2014: 297–298). Descriptions of those exercises convincingly show that Nijinska wanted her students to learn new elements of avant-garde dance and was preparing them for unusual choreographic tasks.

Shedding more light on Nijinska's teaching methods is actress and director Alexandra Smirnova-Iskander, who had apparently studied either at the Central Studio or at the Kultur-Lige, where Nijinska taught as well. As Smirnova-Iskander recalls:

She introduced various sketches with the participation of two or four performers or solo compositions reminiscent of Greco-Roman style exercises, sometimes creating something similar to bas-reliefs. Students were to attend classes wearing sports attire (t-shirts, shorts, sandals) (Smirnova-Iskander quoted in NIJINSKA 1999: 12).

The exercises with body and movement, where attention was focused on new types of rotations and jumps, were designed by Nijinska as the key elements of her own, 'integrated' system. This system must have allowed her students to master, among other things, avant-garde compositions of a futuristic direction (VOLKHONOVYCH 1997). More broadly, the simultaneous application of several systems enabled students – and apparently not only from the School of Movement but the choreography department

<sup>7</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of Russian and Ukrainian sources are ours.

of the state-run Central Studio and the choreography class of the Kultur-Lige as well – to be active in various areas of dance art and beyond.

Thus, thanks to the lessons of 'classics' from Nijinska, some of her students became real ballet premieres, capable of handling both traditional and modern repertoire – as is commonly believed to have been the case for Oleg Stalinsky, a future leading dancer of the Kyiv and Lviv theatres, Serge Lifar, a future premiere at the Paris Opera, and Anna Vorobyeva, who would rise to fame as the leading ballerina at the Opera Theatre in Sofia (KURINNA 2012).

In the case of some other students, Nijinska's system soon helped such dancers as Yanek and Gheslav Khoer, Eugene Lapitsky, and Sergei Unger achieve success, however varied and short-lived, in Diaghilev's enterprise. To the rest of the students, who mostly stayed in Kyiv – as was the case with artists, actresses, and choreographers Olena Kryvinska, Iryna Avdiieva, Ievheniia Strelkova, and Nadiia Shuvarska – the system gave them the impetus to embrace avant-garde art.

## Lacking documents

Shortly after the commencement of classes, the studio began by working on individual performances, as was announced in the advertisement. According to one researcher of Nijinska's life and career:

The solos and group works presented by Nijinska and her students in 1919–1920 have not survived, but the diagrams and sketches from Nijinska's choreographic notebooks of the period indicate that these were fully modernist conceptions. They also support her later contention that in these dances she had made the passage to abstraction – one of the first choreographers to do so. Worked on graph paper, the diagrams are totally geometric, as if the space of the stage, represented by an enclosing square, encompassed only abstract forms. (GARAFOLA 1987: 80)

Owing to substantial organisational changes which were occurring in Kyiv's artistic life during that period, the School was able to put out a large number of public performances. In January 1919, the government launched the nationalisation of the Kyiv City Opera (subsequently the State Opera Theatre named after Karl Liebknecht). As a choreographer, Nijinska served on the committee tasked with preparing nationalisation of the Kyiv Opera and took part in official concerts organised by the Bolshevik authorities (KURINNA 2011: 74). Her performances turned into resonant artistic events and were quite impressive – not least because the respective stage design and costumes were made by avant-garde artists.

In this regard, reminiscences of one close acquaintance of Nijinska is worth mentioning: it is someone she mentions in her diary under the name of Mark. In reality, this was avant-garde director Marko Tereshchenko, who had also been involved in the new governing bodies. As Tereshchenko recalls:

I have always been to Nijinska's performances and, like other artists, I couldn't help but admire their form. The eye would catch at once the clarity of the lines in the performances' external drawing, the discipline and coherence of the ensemble, the actors' technical perfection of body and movements. But as an actor, I would put myself in the place of those who performed songs. And I immediately felt uneasy. I did not see a living human individuality behind all the coherence of the picture. The performers of the ensemble were made faceless. It looked as if the actor's art was isolated from life. (TERESHCHENKO 1974: 12)

And in conclusion he writes:

Where Nijinska proved especially impressive was her symbolic staging of the composition 'Demons'. For all the sophistication of the form, the external brilliance of the drawing, the actors' well-trained bodies that moved in a precise rhythm, there was something inanimate about it. (TERESHCHENKO 1974 :12)

A certain negativity can be detected in the above recollection, which has its explanation.<sup>8</sup> But even then, there is no doubt that Tereshchenko greatly appreciated Nijinska's choreographic works. Moreover, some of them even remained in the repertoire of his own theatre, which was created on the basis of the Central Studio. It is known, for example, that the Hnat Mykhailychenko Theatre staged Nijinska's composition 'Marche Funebre' consisting of two miniatures, the first one designed for a group and the other for a duet, under Tereshchenko's directorship in 1923 (KYSIL 1923: 11).

Still, establishing how Nijinska's performances actually fared with critics at the time seems quite a challenging task. As experts specifically studying Nijinska's collaboration with artist Alexandra Exter note:

Today it is almost impossible to reconstruct the ballet performances of the School of Movement. Despite the fact that in 1920 they were shown in various Kyiv clubs and even on the stage of the City Theatre, there are no reviews of them, only brief reports. However, there would always be a mention of public interest in them as well as of the fact that from performance to performance the studio was a great success. (KOVALENKO 2014: 300)

It is also true that most of the materials related to the public presentation of the School of Movements did not survive the post-revolutionary unrest, the 1941–1945 war, and the deliberate archive destruction undertaken by authorities at various points during the Soviet era, hence the absence of any photos, films, or even posters.

8 These memoirs were published in the Soviet Union at the height of the so-called Brezhnev era, when any information about emigrants was necessarily presented with a minus sign.

## 100 years on: a reconstruction project<sup>9</sup>

The unfortunate loss of documents related to the functioning of the School of Movement in Kyiv can hardly ever be properly compensated. Nevertheless, exactly one hundred years after the school was forced to close its doors and ceased to exist, a special reconstruction project was launched and successfully implemented in Ukraine with an aim to study Nijinska's pedagogical and creative methods, and her innovative approach to choreographic sketches and performances in particular. This project, entitled 'Bronislava Nijinska Dance Reconstruction', was designed and executed by a group of Kyiv-based performers and researchers (headed by Viktor Ruban), its final presentation taking place in September 2021.<sup>10</sup>

To recreate the school's activities and present the results of their study in the form of a lecture-performance, the project's authors employed what has become widely known as dance reconstruction, a method that is still almost unheard of in today's Ukraine. Because the method of dance reconstruction involves the reproduction of lost or forgotten ballets, dance performances, and 'numbers' [acts] based on preserved materials: videos, reviews, memoirs of contemporaries, etc. (PARKER-STARBUCK and MOCK 2011: 210–235; MORRIS and NICHOLAS 2018), the main challenge facing the project was immediately apparent. In terms of documents and archived materials, only a few surviving portraits and random press information about Nijinska could be used, as well as her diaries, the treatise, and students' memoirs, along with some of her own and avant-garde artists' sketches for choreographic acts.

By reconstructing Nijinska's systemic approach to dance, it was also essential to restore those postulates that led her to experimenting with the interaction of dance with other arts. After all, it was through that interaction, and first of all with avant-garde artists, that Nijinska chose to carry out her choreographic tasks. Thus, Nijinska's close, personal ties with Alexandra Exter and her Kyiv students, the avant-garde artists Vadym Meller, Nisson Shifrin, and Solomon Nikritin, prompted the idea of reconstructing performance actions 'from the opposite'. Therefore, the starting point for reconstructing her work with the body in the School of Movement and its stage performances was not based on what had been captured by contemporaries in one form or another but rather a figurative reproduction by avant-garde artists.

This approach envisaged the use of preserved colourful and expressive drawings dating to the period of 1919–1921, created by artists influenced by and created for Nijinska's dance exercises. The dancers are depicted there in dynamic, vortex-like poses, which proved quite helpful for the practical reconstruction of Nijinska's work with body and movement, as well as to the reproduction of her dance combinations in the performance-simulation project 'Bronislava Nijinska Dance-Reconstruction'. As

9 The project was the first attempt to reconstruct dance works of Nijinska's Kyiv Studio, though some of Nijinska-staged ballets had been reconstructed earlier.

10 See <https://youtu.be/-iNni4jkvCI>.



researchers note: 'The sketches provoke imagination, which insistently foretells the ballet's evolution, its spatial world' (KOVALENKO 2014: 298).

## Main markers and presentation format

In reconstructing Nijinska's creative work, special attention was given to such characteristics as the pedagogical method she had applied in the School of Movement, her systemic and interdisciplinary approaches to the creative process and close connection with avant-garde fine arts. In terms of more specific tools and methods, such features as Nijinska's readiness for group improvisation and the perceived need, wherever appropriate, to depart from templates were used, as is stressed in her treatise, 'to develop spirit' (NIJINSKA 2014: 378–379).

The format of the final presentation was defined as a lecture-performance, which consisted of fragments of performative sketches interspersed with bits of archive materials, narrative-information elements, and rare moments of verbal reflection on the part of performers. The main idea behind this format was to replicate the structure of a given act of the earlier choreographic performances, whereas the structure itself was designed to represent the synthesis and cohesion of individual parts, and the presence of various kinds of art. It also allowed the project to metaphorically emphasise the mosaic nature of Nijinska's image being reproduced, since in the process of reproduction the same image was virtually 're-assembled' by filling in historic gaps.

In terms of primary historic documents employed in the reconstruction, the lecture-performance was based on a programme of the School of Movement's 1920 season graduation performance entitled 'The Evening of Choreographic Sketches of Bronislava Nijinska', which took place on 4 June 1920, in the Taras Shevchenko Theatre.<sup>11</sup> The local newspaper *Kyiv Day* had this to say on the occasion:

The programme includes familiar performances: 'Demons', 'Polovtsian Dances', 'Nocturne' by F. Chopin, 'Petrushka', and others. We can say that as earlier Mme. Nijinska is wonderful: 'Doll' and 'Petrushka' in her performance are exceptional. The studio has made significant progress since its performance at the Merchants' Assembly. The large audience (a great joy these days) loudly greeted the artist. Present among the spectators were representatives of the American Red Cross. (E.M. 1920: 2)

## Performative acts and resource materials

In terms of specific methods of reconstruction, the lecture-performance utilised the following performative acts:

<sup>11</sup> Formerly the Bergonic Theatre, presently the National Theatre named after Lesia Ukrainka.



**Fig. 2:** Theatre maison du Bergonie, Kyiv. From Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinematic Arts of Ukraine, Kyiv.

- movement without anything else;
- movement + text;
- movement + video;
- movement (prepared) + music;
- movement (improvisation) + music;
- video;
- text (lecture or excerpts from it).

In order to implement the above acts, three main types of resource materials were used in the lecture-performance: textual, visual, and acoustic. The textual materials included excerpts from Nijinska's diary and the treatise, her students' memoirs and letters, press articles, the programme of Choreographic Evenings, and research studies. The visual materials consisted of Nijinska's photograph and photographs of her dance costumes, Nijinska's sketches, Meller's sketches, Exter's and Meller's pictures, a dance scheme, and the blueprint of a poster detailing the School of Movement's curriculum. The acoustic materials featured works by Ferenc Liszt, Frederic Chopin, Anatolij Lyadov, Nikolai Tcherepnin, and Nicolas Medtner.

## Description of acts in the lecture-performance

### 'Colours'

This is a study based on the School of Movement's motifs identified through signs of colours: white (introduction), black, orange, red, yellow, blue, and dark blue. Essentially, the act presents a live working process undertaken by the performers through improvisation with colours in their search for movements. Colour as such, when perceived outside the form, was of great importance to Nijinska, and for this particular act it was essential to maintain her vision of colour, the very attitude she had developed towards a substance as abstract as colour.

An entry in Nijinska's diary of 26 May 1920 (NIJINSKA 2014: 334–335), helped the dancers find a proper structure to work with their improvisation. This textual fragment was used in their search for the inner image and spaciousness, as well as for a certain typical form of movement and the quality of what was called the sense of colour. The search began with the dark-blue colour, but other colours – black, white, red, yellow, orange, and light blue – were subsequently used as well. All these colours can often be found in Meller's and Exter's sketches.

After watching the presentation of each of the chosen colours by performers, choreographer-researcher Svitlana Oleksiuk and composer Iana Shliabanska asked the same performers to identify the associations they had felt while working on each of the colours. Based on these associations, the composer created music that allowed performers to enhance their bodily images and feelings that would arise during further improvisations. The colours that appeared, audibly in the music and visually in the projection, were used to highlight the dancing performers on the stage.

### 'Colour Dynamics'

This performance is a dance reconstruction of rehearsals conducted by Nijinska to stage Anton Arenskiy's ballet 'Egyptian Nights', which never premiered. The reconstruction was made on the basis of recollections from studio members Oleg Stalinsky and Olena Kryvinska, as well as related assumptions offered by researchers (KOVALENKO 2014: 297–299).

The performance consists of three parts: trio, solo, and duet. The first part, trio, is a visualisation of movements in the space of the drawing, from the plane of the rug. The second part is designed to reconstruct researchers' visions about the virulence of colour-coded bands falling in the air, while the third part presents an improvisation on oriental motifs through the selection of static positions for two dancers and the formation of bas-relief figures.

In essence, the performance recreates Nijinska's artistic comparison between the human body and the dancer's movement, by putting both into the context of visual art. Viewers are offered an opportunity to see the three moving compositions against



**Fig. 3:** 'Colour Dynamics'. Photo from the project archive, provided by Ruban Production ITP.

the background of the corresponding three paintings. The paintings in question were taken from Exter's series called 'Abstract Composition' (1915–1918) and each is presented on the screen in turn, with a musical accompaniment written by the project's composer.

Importantly, the work on this performance helped the project's authors identify and display some of the key characteristics of movement that Nijinska mentions in her diaries and the treatise. Specifically, these include a bas-relief, the sculptural nature of movement, precision and, what one might call, a certain 'statuesque-ness'.

### 'The First Duet Nijinska-Exter'

This performative act, devoted to a point in time when Bronislava Nijinska first met Alexandra Exter, was presented in the lecture-performance without musical accompaniment. It consisted of three parts featuring:

- an improvised dialogue in movement indicating the moment of acquaintance and communication, as expressed through graphic construction in space;

- a reproduction of the body positions in the photograph and the superimposition of the photograph projections upon each other;
- a gesture-movement composition illustrating the concepts of 'support', 'friendship', and 'mutual respect'.

The presented movements were based on available stories and accounts about Nijinska's relationship with Exter. The intention behind this approach was not so much to recreate the meeting itself in a *mise-en-scène* but rather to give the performers a sense of the connection evolving between the two powerful artists, and thereby show all the complexity of their relationship. This would enable spectators to see for themselves the qualities that could have been present in the artists' interaction, and assess communication characteristics of the artistic community of the time.

More generally, the performance works to maintain an overall dimension of the interaction – which took place in all the acts of the lecture-performance – as an interaction that was attentive and turned-on ('electrified'). It showed openness, respect, and support while maintaining some detachment and a short distance.

## 'Masks'

The dance reconstruction called 'Masks' relied on researchers' assumptions, personal accounts of Nijinska's students and Vadym Meller's sketches. The title and the nature of Meller's sketches indicated the direction of the search – to create four characters united by a common movement, in accordance with what is suggested by the following recollection from one of Nijinska's students, Olena Kryvinska: 'The whole dance was done on half-bent toes, in very big steps. The legs were made non-turnout, they were thrown out high forward' (Kryvinska quoted in KOVALENKO 2014: 298).

Each performer created her own solo by improvising on Meller's sketches. The performers did their solos in turns, while others would form a static constellation and copy the soloist's individual movements, repeating them from time to time.

The performance was accompanied by a Chopin mazurka, which was combined by the composer (Iana Shliabanska) with some electronic music in the manner of 'dialogue with classical music'.<sup>12</sup> The reprises in the musical composition corresponded to the transparent logical structure of the performance: the exposition and four solos with transitions.

By using the aforementioned 'very big steps', the performance made it possible not only to capture elements of the dance lexicon Nijinska had presumably favoured, but also to offer a socio-political dimension of her work. Made in the synchronous performance, those steps resembled a degenerative march.

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12 See <https://youtu.be/-iNni4jkvCI>.



**Fig. 4:** 'Masks'. Photo from the project archive, provided by Ruban Production ITP.

## 'Geometry'

The 'Geometry' performance is a movement-based improvisational play-allusion to a possible rehearsal in the School of Movement. Its aim was to give the audience an opportunity to see Nijinska's innovative approach to the rehearsal process and even immerse themselves into studying how exactly this process used to run. That is why the choice was made in favour of such possible improvisational acts which would help make the performance procedural with an open (in the sense of not hidden) structure.

This work was based on the performers' free interpretation of Nijinska's drawings – her sketches of rehearsals of the 1919–1921 performances, respective findings by researchers, and various accounts pointing to Nijinska's interest in abstract figures. The idea to employ geometry in the search for keys to improvisation was also inspired by Exter's dynamic scenic design for Aleksandr Tairov's *Salome*.

More specifically, the act was created by an improvisational performance of the project's choreographer-researcher Svitlana Oleksiuk in order to:

- build imaginary three-dimensional figures in space according to the principle of a 'train', i.e., 'connecting' each subsequent figure to the previous one;

- move and pull (basic movement in the modern dance technique) three-dimensional figures;
- flipping and juggle figures, having either pre-marked or 'increased-decreased' them;
- build a so-called 'maze of figures', where each subsequent participant adds an obstacle figure to the maze after overcoming all previous ones in space.

Music was created for each part, which helped the performers to carry out the formulated performative tasks in real time.

The overall task was to understand the parallels and intersections with the text of Nijinska's treatise, and what associations arose in the performers' mind while they were working in the group improvisations. For the performers to be able to verbalise their attitude to the treatise and reveal respective reflections during the performance, each improvisational act ended with the expression of the performers' opinion on two proposed excerpts from the treatise. This way, it was believed, the treatise's relevance to artistic practices would become ever more evident even today.

## 'Doll'

This performance was created as a deconstruction of the variation 'Street Dancer' from the ballet 'Petruška' and a solo dance called 'Doll', using provisions of Nijinska's treatise. Nijinska performed 'Doll' at choreographic concerts in Kyiv together with her interpretation of 'Street Dancer'.

Essentially, what the audience is offered here is a large metaphor designed to illustrate the fundamental difference between the two opposing systems of choreography – one that arises from external rules and one that allows a dancer to develop his or her own personality. The main character in the performance is 'Doll', who gradually restores the sequence of movements as captured by the photograph of Nijinska in her role of a street dancer. In her dance, Doll consistently performs required movements, but in the end, no longer following instructions from several 'conductors' who literally pull her by the ribbon-like strings, as Doll 'falls apart'.

The dance also contains performative inserts, during which the performer-instructor quotes Nijinska's principles to provide for a comprehensive understanding of the process of choreographic education. After Doll collapses, a symbolic reassessment of her downfall takes place: Doll 'comes to life' again and starts an independent dance, adding techniques typical of modern work with movements (such as playing with the amplitude of movement and shifting the points of impulse).

As a result, the audience could see how, without breaking the sequence of movements, Doll could gain, metaphorically, more freedom in her movements. That way, it therefore became possible to recreate the transition from the apparent over-regulation in dance – which has been an integral part of classical choreography – to the discovery of possibilities for a new, liberating type of movement.



**Fig. 5:** 'Doll'. Photo from the project archive, provided by Ruban Production ITP.

### 'Horror'

This dance reconstruction of the miniature 'Horror' was carried out according to Meller's sketches of the movement also called 'Horror' and available descriptions of the eponymous miniature-solo. On the instructions of the project's choreograph-researcher, the performers collectively reviewed Meller's sketches and created their own choreography, looking for movements that would express anxiety, restlessness, and creepy feelings.

In the interpretation of the project's authors, the action takes place in total silence, but it is not a solo performance. As a result, the miniature is performed in pairs to follow the principle of 'the mirror of inaccurate synchronicity'. At the end of the performance, the dancers walk down an imaginary 'narrow corridor' of some indefinite path, the latter eventually creating a 'maze of horror'.

That said, the performance was never meant to depict horror just for the sake of it. Rather, the project's authors looked for bodily reactions and gestures that would create a certain general state of body correspondent with the employed descriptions and pictures of the miniature. The main idea behind the search was to highlight and follow Nijinska's postulate that 'one should forget the conditional form to which one is accustomed' in order to 'snatch the viewer's imagination from this conditionality and thus free oneself as an artist' (NIJINSKA 2014: 381).



## 'Medtner' – dance reconstruction of 'The Mourning March'

The act was performed to the music of 'Marche Funèbre' by Nicolas Medtner, as augmented with additions from the project's composer. The reconstruction was made on the basis of descriptions called 'Demons', a sketch by Nijinska herself and memoirs of her contemporaries. The choreography created reflects the motifs of someone's after-life: there are several variants of mourning marches, monumental but moving figures, and 'disappearance-emergence' from darkness into a spot of light.

The main thing here – apart from the reconstruction of some elements of the lexicon of the time – is a joint re-creation of the atmosphere by means of movement and variable compositional solutions. Despite the strong musical accompaniment, the parity of movement with music is maintained; in some parts, the performers move together with the music, sometimes a bit ahead or catching up with it, constantly creating their own landscape of the senses.

## 'Nijinska's Diaries'

This is a static interpretation by the project's performers of relevant texts contained in Nijinska's diaries, written from 1919–1921. The main limitation for the performers was to avoid going into the narrative in order to retell or convey the gist of what was said in the selected four fragments of the diaries. Instead, their task was to try to capture bodily impulses that would arise from the internal repetition of the text and work their way out from there.

The preliminarily set choreography was performed during the rehearsals simultaneously with the voicing of the text. The chosen accents and rhythms of the read-outs determined accents in the score for each performer. All these read-outs were performed separately and in turns – without musical accompaniment, in silence, but with the projection of some excerpts on the screen. This allowed the performance to add an intimate dimension of Nijinska's life to the performers' movement. The viewers could immerse into the circumstances that defined Nijinska's life outside the art of dance, thereby better understanding the context and her inner world.

## 'A Rhapsody to the Music of Ferenc Liszt'

This reconstructed performance contains elements of improvisation and a fixed choreographic phrase as well as performers' own texts and fragments of some notes from Nijinska's diaries, written from 1919–1921. Since no descriptions of her original performance have survived to date, the conducted improvisation was based on an open assumption of how 'it could have been'.

Quite indicatively, the performance begins with the pronouncement of the word 'imagine'. After that, each of the dancers involved describes what they can picture



**Fig. 6:** 'Medtner', or 'The Mourning March'. Photo from the project archive, provided by Ruban Production ITP.

about some fictional, completely imaginary scenery, while all the others spontaneously illustrate this picture via their movements.

The performance also contains a spatial reproduction of graphics from Nijinska's drawings and sketches. That way, with only music added further to the reconstruction process, it effectively invites the viewer to free one's own vision and look at the reconstruction of historical material through the prism of creation – creation that is sufficiently cautionary and definitely balanced but is still creation.

### 'The Second Duet Nijinska-Exter'

The performative act about Nijinska's meeting with Exter – which, as we mentioned earlier, never took place – is inspired by a note Exter left to Nijinska in the spring of 1920; in the note, Exter was clearly seeking such a meeting.

The act is built on the change of positions in the stage space and the change of flood lights, the underlying idea being to place emphasis on the importance of such paused moments against the background of the previous hyper-dynamic movement. For these purposes, the text of the note is also displayed on the screen.

In working on the act, the authors had their attention drawn to the fact that, for some reason, Nijinska had apparently kept a certain distance from Exter. This historic nuance is conveyed through the performers' positions in space and a direction of their gazes, or faces for that matter, as well as the positions of their bodies. While the authors' search for a *mise-en-scène* took into account the available photographs of young Nijinska and Exter, the performers' positions were determined and set through their exercising with bodily movements.

### 'Mephisto Waltz to the Music of Ferenc Liszt'

This short performance is a dance reconstruction of the eponymous musical etude, based on what Nijinska wrote and described in her diaries about the same dance performance of the time (respective notes date to 1 and 26 September 1920).

The performance features a host of consecutively performed dance acts. First, appearing on the stage is a quartet; then, moving out of its ranks is a soloist who takes off the top of his costume to put on the Mephisto tailcoat. What one sees next is the confrontation between the remaining trio and the soloist, followed by the performed waltz and a solo from Mephisto, as if to show that the triumph of the evil force is there.

In creating the choreography, the authors were driven by the general concept of body as a subject, as well as the kind of statuesque-ness, dynamism, and the graphic nature of movements so typical to Nijinska's approach to dance as a whole. In terms of musical accompaniment, the number's score was formed independently of the Liszt masterpiece, based instead on Nijinska's figurative descriptions: '[...] should begin to whirl, spears will fall from above, as if creating something of an umbrella, from there Mephisto falls to the ground' (NIJINSKA 2014: 338).

### Conclusion

Overall, the choreography that was reconstructed in the lecture-performance aptly represented Nijinska's system of dance training, which had originally been built on her own direct teaching experience in Kyiv and developed further in later years. Most glaringly, this system differed from other novel dance training systems of the time in its universalism, with the key point about such universalism to be found in Nijinska's theory of movement. As she acknowledged herself:

I had been working and perfecting my theory of movement in dance. The enrichment of the static mechanics, based on set positions, of the classical dance, by adding a new stream of movements [sic]. I felt that this was the time for me to take the initiative and form artists of a new school and prepare them to work with Vaclav. (Nijinska quoted in GARAFOLA 2011: 119)

A sense of rhythm was fundamental for Nijinska, as well as the actual renunciation of dependence on music, something that had become by then almost a common rule in classical ballet and 'free dance'. Her unwavering desire for dance abstraction – the taste for which she had developed thanks to futurist stage experiments – for ornamentalism in ballet, as well as her clear rejection of the plot and the interaction with light as a separate element-character, are especially noteworthy. All these tendencies directly connect Nijinska's creative search with the practice of modern performative dance.

To the project's credit, the discussed lecture-performance succeeded in conveying the historic significance of Nijinska's dance system. As a result, the courage of her creative search is ever more apparent now, as is the lively but highly complicated artistic and historic context in which that search had to be undertaken.

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