

Michel Fokine and Vera Fokina in Fokine's *Schéhérazade*. As Garafola writes in *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, "*Schéhérazade*, the seraglio tale that thrilled Paris in 1910, was pure orientalist fantasy" (page 13).



BY RONALD MEYER

LYNN GARAFOLA

AND HER JOURNEY AS A DANCE HISTORIAN

This past academic year Lynn Garafola, professor of dance at Barnard College, held fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and New York Public Library's Cullman Center to support her research for a biography of Russian choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, sister of Vaslav, the legendary dancer of the Ballets Russes. For the Guggenheim Fellowship she was among 175 artists, scholars, and scientists chosen from a group of almost 3,000 applicants.

Prior to sitting down with Garafola in April 2013 to talk about her work in progress on Bronislava Nijinska, I had observed her guest teach a class on Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and its place in Russian art. The low-tech presentation (color Xerox handouts of stage sets and costumes, VHS tapes instead of PowerPoint) did not get in the way of the polished delivery of a capsule history of Diaghilev's innovations in ballet (for example, that it was Diaghilev who established the prominence of the choreographer, which we take for granted today, or that he hired easel painters to design costumes and décor)—with unscripted asides on a wide assortment of topics ranging from the first production of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1890 to the Joffrey repertoire in the 1970s. It was quite a performance!

A native New Yorker, Garafola studied ballet as a child with a Russian teacher, who ultimately turned out to be of Armenian descent—but of course the premium, then as now, was on ballet as a Russian art. Later, as a Spanish major at Barnard College,

Garafola took classes in modern dance and jazz, but there was still no connection between “a practice I enjoy and the larger question of dance.” That connection would come when Garafola enrolled in the graduate program in comparative literature at CUNY. She was struck, for instance, by the startling coincidence that two towering figures of modernism, Joyce and Proust, met for the first time after a performance of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in 1922. Garafola started going to a great deal of ballet while a grad student and says that she truly discovered ballet in the 1970s, which, as it happens, was a golden age for ballet and dance in general in New York. There seemed to be an endless supply of downtown dance, modern dance and ballet—and tickets were relatively cheap, which was important for a graduate student earning her keep translating legal briefs and documents from the Romance languages.

Mikhail Baryshnikov defected in 1974, following in the steps of two earlier Soviet dancers: Natalia Makarova and Rudolf Nureyev. With Baryshnikov and Makarova at American Ballet Theatre, and across the plaza at Lincoln Center another Russian émigré, George Balanchine, creating American ballet for the twentieth century, set to music by his fellow Russian Igor Stravinsky, among others, the Russianness of ballet was not in dispute. A few blocks south, the Joffrey Ballet, the resident ballet company at City Center, presented an interesting repertoire for the future historian of the Ballets Russes, with good



Portrait of Lynn Garafola by Daria Rose Foner

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productions of *Petrushka*, *Afternoon of a Faun*, and eventually the reconstruction of *Rite of Spring*—works that were not being mounted by ABT or in the repertoire of the touring Soviet companies. All this served to engender a real interest in the Diaghilev period and Garafola's desire to understand that sensibility.

Upon realizing that all her free time seemed to have very little to do with her graduate work, it became clear to Garafola that perhaps a study of the picaresque was not what she should be doing. The Joyce-Proust meeting at the Ballets Russes prompted her to rethink her subject. A close friend suggested over a glass of wine that perhaps she should consider working on something about dance and literature, and, in Garafola's words, that marked the "beginning of my journey as a dance historian." Her dissertation was to be an influence study, typical of comp lit dissertations at the time, that would focus on responses by English and French writers and intellectuals

to Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. She began reading broadly among the writers of the period and came to the conclusion that the writers most influenced by the Ballets Russes, for example, Jean Cocteau and the Sitwells, were not the ones she wanted to write about.

She then managed to get a grant to travel to England and France to conduct research in archives and libraries. She read deeply in the Bloomsbury Group and other circles that were a part of the Ballets Russes world, including a serious reading of a number of British writers on ballet, and discovered that what we in the West perceive as the Diaghilev wisdom, in fact comes from this group of British writers on ballet that had become something of a coherent group in the 1930s. Having installed herself in the British Library, she read the *Dancing Times*, an extraordinary monthly magazine published from 1908 until 1930, that is, a year after the collapse of the Ballets Russes. The magazine consisted of a potpourri

of all matters dance: concerts, the ballet stage, revues, performances in the West End, letters from New York and Paris, and even advertisements—all of which taken together gave Garafola an idea of what was happening in the world of dance and the place of the Ballets Russes in that world.

After her initial research in Paris, London, and New York, Garafola came to the realization that a new history of the Ballets Russes was called for—not the influence study she had originally proposed to her dissertation committee. She was faced with constructing a new edifice and realizing new limitations; in other words, to realize the utter inadequacy of the story as it had always been told. She began her work in the important dance archives, including the Dance Division of the New York Public Library, but since she had no training as a historian, she did not quite know how to cope with an archival collection. She read newspapers on microfilm—and still refers to these copies that are now approaching their half-century. Garafola was moving into uncharted territory about which there were no secondary sources. Her reading helped to broaden the story, yet at about the same time she realized that she was up against a brick wall—the Russian language. Taking time out to learn Russian was not an option—that would come later. Meanwhile, she was already reviewing



Left to right: Posed group of dancers in the original production of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*, showing costumes and backdrop by Nicholas Roerich (1913); Vaslav Nijinsky in *Afternoon of a Faun* (1912) by Leon Bakst; portrait of Serge Diaghilev by Valentin Serov (1909)

and writing about dance to have a bit of an income, not to mention that she was already quite far along in her dissertation. But in order to understand where all this was coming from, she could do the next best thing: read the publications of Slavists who had themselves researched in the Russian archives, and in that way fill in the background and give herself a sense of “other stories.”

One of the great new pieces to the puzzle was Bronislava Nijinska’s *Early Memoirs*, interesting both as the last memoir of a major figure from the Diaghilev circle and as a life story penned by a woman. Here was an absent voice that came to light during the height of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, which Garafola now was in the position to incorporate into her history of the Ballets Russes.

Garafola’s dissertation committee, seeing how far removed her work was from the usual comp lit dissertation, was hesitant to let her go forward to the defense stage. But she was wisely counseled to stick to her guns, and indeed she defended her thesis and “the next day was off and writing about the Futurists.”

Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (Oxford University Press, 1989), the book based on Garafola’s dissertation, at once established her credentials as a dance historian, with equal emphasis on both parts of that label. It is



Bronislava Nijinska, upon graduation from the Imperial School of Ballet, St. Petersburg (1908)

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005)

Dance for a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet, editor (with E. Foner) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)

José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir, editor (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1999)

The Ballets Russes and Its World, editor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999)

Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet, editor (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1997)

“Of, By, and For the People: Dancing on the Left in the 1930s,” editor, *Studies in Dance History* 5(1) (Spring 1994)

“The Diaries of Marius Petipa,” editor and translator, *Studies in Dance History* 3(1) (Spring 1992)

André Levinson on Dance: Writings from Paris in the Twenties, editor, with J. Acocella (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1991)

Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

AWARDS AND HONORS

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellow, 2013–14

Cullman Center Fellow, Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, New York Public Library, 2013–14.

Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2005)

Kurt Weill Award, for *The Ballets Russes and Its World* (2001)

Independent Publishers Book Award, for *Dance for a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet* (2000)

CORD Award for Outstanding Scholarly Dance Publication, for *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir* (1999)

National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship (1993–94)

Scholar in residence, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities (1991–92)

De la Torre Bueno Prize, for *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (1990)

Social Science Research Council Fellowship (1978–79)

Fulbright Fellowship, Ecuador (1968–69)

characteristic of her approach to dance history that Garafola begins her study by setting the scene in Russian history—the striking workers converging on the Winter Palace, on January 9, 1905, Bloody Sunday—and then moves to the student strikes at the Conservatory of Music. The critics were not slow in recognizing Garafola’s historical approach: “At last, the muse of history tests all her modernized apparatus on Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets” (Alastair Macaulay, *New York Times*); “breathtaking array of new documentary materials, . . . a breakthrough, an epoch-maker” (Richard Taruskin, *New Republic*).

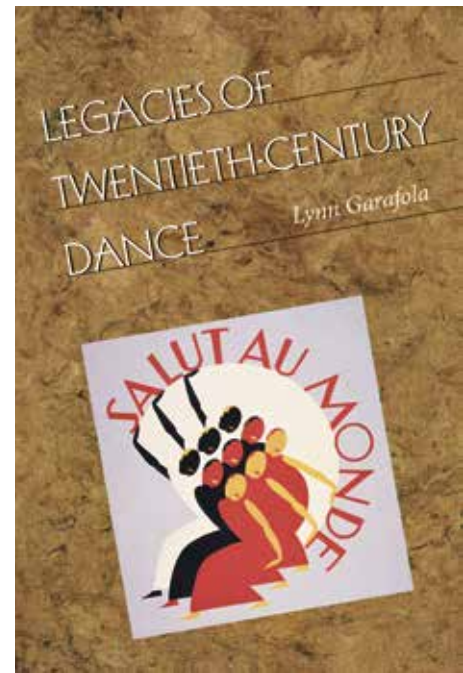
Six books followed *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*. I will mention only a few. *Dance for a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet*, edited with her husband, historian Eric Foner (Columbia University Press, 1999), was published in conjunction with a major exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, for which Garafola served as guest curator. Garafola has also curated exhibits on Jerome Robbins, Diaghilev, and Italian dance for the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She is the editor of *José Limón: An Unfinished Memoir* (Wesleyan University Press, 1999), for which she received the CORD Award for Outstanding Dance Publication. Garafola’s most recent book, *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance* (Wesleyan University Press, 2005), gathers together her essays and reviews. And while the topics are wide-ranging, there’s a certain underlying sense of mission that holds the disparate pieces together. As *Legacies* makes clear, while she never left the Ballets Russes far behind, she became equally well known for her work on American dance and the intersection of politics of the Left and dance, in particular, as well as the issue of women and gender and ballet.

In connection with the centennial celebrations of the ballet, Garafola has recently made a special study of *The Rite of Spring*, lecturing in both the United States and Europe on “A Century of Rites: The Making of an Avant-Garde Tradition.” In spring 2013 she took part in the Bolshoi Theater’s “Century of the *Rite of Spring*—Century of

New Art.” The festival presented different versions of the ballet on stage and published a lavishly illustrated volume on the cultural impact of Nijinsky’s ballet, to which Garafola contributed an essay on the century of “Rites.”

Which brings us back to Nijinska and Garafola’s current work in progress. Though it is a new project, it represents a return to a figure that piqued her interest in the 1970s, but then the timing had not been right and Nijinska’s papers were still in family hands—they are now housed in the Library of Congress.

In her article “Bronislava Nijinska in Revolutionary Russia,” Garafola quotes Carolyn Heilbrun’s observation that well into the twentieth century “it continued to be impossible for women to admit into their autobiographical narratives the claim of achievement, the admission of ambition, the recognition that accomplishment was neither luck nor the result of the efforts or generosity of others” (*Writing a Woman’s Life*). Nijinska wrote herself into ballet history through her famous brother, and she presents a varnished version of their relationship. It is well known that Nijinska was originally cast by her brother as the Chosen Virgin in his *Rite of Spring* and that she was removed from the cast because of her pregnancy. What is not generally known is that she danced during that same period in other ballets—just not in her brother’s work. It was not Nijinsky’s concern for her health that motivated her dismissal. It is Garafola’s intention to tell the real story and to recognize properly the extraordinary achievements of one of the twentieth century’s great choreographers, the creator of *Les noces* and *Les biches*, ballets that are still performed today. □



Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance
Lynn Garafola
Wesleyan University Press (2005)
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