

# The Revolutionary Body, or Was There Modern Dance in Russia?

Irina Sirotkina

After Duncan's performance in Moscow in 1905, the daughter of a baker, Ella Bartels, found a tunic and sandals and started dancing; four years later she performed and taught Duncan dance at Stanislavsky's theatre (Surits 1996). The same happened to the Petersburg girl, Stefanida Rudneva, – she tried to imitate Isadora's unusual, exotic dance by wrapping herself in oriental fabrics (Kats 2007). Although the little Sasha Zyakin (Rumnev) had not seen Duncan (he only heard his parents talk about the performance), the boy «stripped himself of all his clothes, wrapped into a sheet and attempted to reproduce her dance in front of the mirror» (Kropotova 2002: 78). In Russia, Isadora Duncan left a chain of followers. She once scathingly remarked that if her followers were to stand in a line, the line would stretch from Saint-Petersburg to Siberia. Obviously, she did not think much of her imitators. Yet those Russian who followed into her footsteps did something more than just imitating her dance. And above all, they wanted to be as free as Isadora and to create for themselves a way of life in which they could be both artistic and independent (Sirotkina 2010). For a dozen years, from 1913 till the mid-1920s, Russia, from being a country of classical ballet, became a country of burgeoning new dance. This movement was as much about art as about social changes. It coincided with the major turning point of Russia's history, her passage from an empire to a modern democracy. Wanting something new in life, many young adults took dance classes of all kinds perfecting themselves in «the art of movement». After few years of apprenticeship, some opened their own classes offering to teach dance and

«expression», others founded dance studios recruiting like-minded individuals. Their style ranged from lyrical, like Duncan, to expressive, similar to Mary Wigman. This movement paralleled the development of early modern dance in Central and Eastern Europe (Toepfer 1997). By the end of the decade, Russian dancers potentially had something to contribute to the European modern dance.

Yet this development had been abruptly cut by the Stalin's Great Break, and the early dance boom in Russia was intentionally forgotten by the Soviet historians. If they mentioned it, they did so critically and in passing. A close friend of Dmitry Shostakovich and an influential art critic Ivan Sollertinsky condescendingly admitted that modern dance had some influence on education and «produced a few good numbers of no crucial importance for the *estrada* [small stage]» (Sollertinsky 1933: 344). (In Russian, *estrada* is a collective term for music-hall, cabaret and variety theatre).

After *Perestroika* and, eventually, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first historical accounts appeared. The elder dance historian Elizaveta Surits (in English her name is sometimes spelled as Elisabeth Suritz) shared with me her surprise when one of her Western colleagues asked about modern dance in Russian, for she believed that there was none (Surits 2012). Later she did pioneering research on a number of early modern dancers (Surits 1996). Soon thereafter the art historian Nicoletta Misler joined the field organizing several exhibitions and publishing illustrated monograph on what she termed «the new dance» in Russia (Misler 2011). My own history of early modern dance came out the same year, and a second edition followed (Sirotkina 2011, 2012b). In this paper I use the opportunity to introduce some of its themes to an English-speaking audience. Further we will examine local circumstances of rise and decline of early modern dance as well as life trajectories of some of the dancers.

Terminology is another reason for believing that there was no modern dance in Soviet Russia. Isadora Duncan created her choreography in part by imitating poses of classical

Greek statues and figures on vases calling her dance, in French, *danse plastique* connecting it to the *arts plastiques* (Manzano 2010). The Russians translated *danse plastique* as *plasticheskii tanets*. As far as I know, there is no English equivalent of the French term, and 'modern dance' is used instead. Further I will render *plasticheskii tanets* as 'early modern dance' keeping at places the French term, *danse plastique*.

### Early modern dance in Russia

The dance which has been classified as 'early modern' did exist in Russia and, perhaps on a larger scale than in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Starting with the first of Isadora Duncan's visits in 1904 and 1905, more and more individuals stepped on the dance path. Ella Bartels (married names Knipper, Rabenek; stage name Ellen Tels) was one of the first who chose a professional carrier in the new dance, and in 1908 she had already established her Moscow classes.

### Ella Rabenek



Fig. 1. Ella Rabenek

As a young girl, Ella Bartels (1880-1944) sold pastry at her father's bakery in Central Moscow before marrying the opera singer Leonid Knipper. By marriage, she became a relative of Anton Chekhov and entered the Moscow Artistic Theatre circles. After seeing Isadora Duncan perform in Russia in 1905-1907, Ella traveled to the Duncan school in the suburbs of Berlin. When Isadora performed in Moscow in 1908, Stanislavsky became infatuated with her dance. He wanted her to teach dance to his actors, yet for practical reasons hired Rabenek instead. One of the actresses, Alisa Koonen, remembered Duncan dance classes as a real treat:

All exercises, from the simplest to the most complex ones, were organic and natural, and they conveyed a concise idea: we jumped over a rope, chopped imagined wood logs, played leapfrog. Eli Ivanovna [Ella Rabenek] believed that it strengthened muscles and developed dexterity. And it had the beauty of lines which the art of Isadora Duncan was famous for (Koonen 2003: 61).

Koonen praised Rabenek as an excellent teacher. In 1910, Rabenek opened her private dance classes where she and her friends, artists and poets, taught dance, art history and drawing (Griftsov 1988: 3). Every fortnight she invited a selected audience to 'antique dances recitals'. Her choreography matched Duncan dances in themes and style: with her students, Rabenek staged *Tambourine*, *Scythian Dance*, *Bacchanalia*, *Funeral March*, *Narcissus and Echo*, among others. The theatre director, Nikolai Evreinov, wrote: «A beautiful school, attractive and warm. A row of white hyacinths in clay pots along the stage. Grey woolen curtains. The air is aromatized by pine water. It is quiet, far from the noisy street. And Rabenek is quiet, sure of herself, and knowledgeable» (Evreinov in Kulagina I. 2000: 53). The idea of grey curtains she borrowed from Duncan, pine water from Stanislavsky's theatre, and she might have thought up of the hyacinths herself. At one evening, the composer Alexander Scriabin watched in amazement how the opening curtain pushed all the hyacinths pots down in a neat row. Scriabin was intimidated by the relative nudity of the young and attractive dancers clothed in tunics with open arms and legs. He

complained about too much physicality for someone who looked for spiritual revelation (Sabaneev 2003: 131).

From the program of the course which Rabenek's student Natalia Tian gave later, we can guess what Rabenek had taught to her students. The course started with «basic gymnastics» including *raskreposhchenie* (literally, 'liberation from serfdom') which meant loosening and relaxing muscles of the neck, arms and feet, rotating knee joints, swinging the hips, etc. (A.A. Bakrushin State Central Theatre Museum, 517, *The program of Rabenek's classes* 133: 15). Later, students practiced a «harmonious standing position» (the posture for 'harmonious' dance), special walking steps (*plasticheskii shag*), flexion of the upper body and a «silent» (soft) vertical jump. The next year, they studied ballet bar and elementary group compositions, more advanced arm movements including «tremolo of the hand», passive and active torso flexions, skips and a «wide» athletic run. At the third year, students learned «allegro», «elevation», light and high jumps. Some exercises – pulling a rope, pushing heavy objects – imitated physical work. Students also practiced various «timbres» of movement including «sharp, soft, flowing or metallic» and pantomime; they also studied «ancient Greek styles» in art (*ibidem*).



Fig. 2. Natalia Tian

In 1911 and 1912, Rabenek and her students toured Europe with the programs *An Evening of Ancient Greek Dances* and *Danses Idylles* (like the titles of some performances by Isadora). The company performed in Berlin, Paris and London (Kurov 1911: 6). Later some of her successful students, including Liudmila Alekseeva, left the company and subsequently became independent dancers and choreographers. After the Revolution, Rabenek had to close her Moscow classes and in 1919 immigrated first to Berlin (she was ethnic German) and then to Vienna (Markov 1983: 127). Among her students there were the talented Mila Cyrul and Eva Kovač, the latter becoming a founder of early modern dance in Hungary (Dieneš 2005). A German art historian Hans Brandenburg devoted a chapter of his book *Der Moderne Tanz* (illustrated by Dora Brandenburg-Polster) to Rabenek (Brandenburg 1921). The German expressionist choreographer Kurt Jooss used Rabenek's scenario for his *Persian Ballet* (1924). In the late 1920s Rabenek moved to Paris opening classes of «natural movement» on rue Jasmine (Tels 1935; Vaccarino 2004: 178-179). She died and was buried in Nice.

### Francesca Beata

In the early twentieth century the count Aleksey Bobrinsky taught a course of expressive movement, which he called 'ancient Greek *plastique*', at the Moscow Maly Theatre (*Malyi Teatr*). After taking his course (probably based on the Delsarte system), a young actress Francesca Beata (1880s – after 1927) travelled to Italy to study painting and sculpture after the original works of art. In 1908 she also took classes of *eurhythmie* with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze as well as of Swedish gymnastics with Professor Paolli, then went to Munich to study with Alexander and Clotilde Sakharoff finally turning up at the Duncan School in Berlin (Surits 1996: 144). Beata first showed her own dances in public in 1909 at the *Hellenic Evening* in the Moscow Conservatoire. In 1913 she and her company gave performances in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Warsaw and Kyev. Among other compositions, she made choreography to Aleksandr Glazunov's *Four Seasons*. Beata taught dance to theatre actors in Moscow and Petersburg and after the Revolution she worked, often in exchange for bread, at children's institutions. When the Theatre College (*Teatral'nyi Tekhnikum*) named after Anatoly Lunacharsky, the commissar of Enlightenment, opened its Choreography Department, Beata was put in charge. Among her students was the Soviet cinema star Lubov' Orlova (A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, 517, 133: 47). In 1924 Beata was replaced by Vera Maya (see below). She apparently left Moscow, and unfortunately we do not know where and when she finished her days.

## Nina Aleksandrova

Nina Aleksandrova (*née* Geyman, 1885-1964) was born in Tiflis, Georgia (then in the Russian Empire). She studied music and singing in the Geneva Conservatoire. There she met the composer and music teacher Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, the founder of rhythmical gymnastics, and became one of his best students. A licensed teacher of rhythmical gymnastic, she taught in Moscow at the Sisters Gnessins' Music School from 1909 on (Rossikhina 1982). She also gave her private class of *movement plastique* which, with support from Lunacharsky, in 1919 became the Institute for Rhythmical Education under her directorship. When, five years later, the institute was closed, Aleksandrova founded the Moscow Association of Rhythmists (MAR). After the Association was disbanded in 1932, she worked as a choreographer in theatres and also performed as an opera singer. Until her death, Aleksandrova taught *ritmika* (the Russian term for rhythmical gymnastics) at the Moscow Conservatoire and some higher music schools.

## Liudmila Alekseeva

As a young girl, Alekseeva (1890-1964) loved dancing. Seeing her dance, the sculptor Anna Golubkina, her neighbor in the small town of Zaraisk, sent her to Moscow to study with Rabenek. In 1911 Liudmila joined her classes and quickly became one of the company's prime dancers. Two years later she left the company dissatisfied with both the life on the road and Rabenek's way of teaching which appeared to her not too serious. Alekseeva realized that, in order to become professional and to compete with ballet, modern dance had to develop its own training, as efficient as the classical bar. An ambitious dancer, she wanted to combine Anna Pavlova's virtuosity with the performance of tragic actress (Kulagina O. 2000: 20). In 1914, Alekseeva opened her own studio. «She was very young, tall, slim, and ironic, with tomboy manners and a deep hypnotic voice. Her dance had nothing of ballet. It was not even dance in the usual sense of the word. Rather, she taught the art of moving graciously. Every exercise was like a short *étude* of *danse plastique*» (Šeglova-Antokol'skaya [no date]: 5). Her first choreographies were solos: the *Bacchanalia* to music by Saint-Saëns and *The Butterfly* to Grieg (in continuation of both Isadora Duncan and Anna Pavlova's dances). Her choreography including *The Dying Birds* to Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude*, for a group of dancers, was preserved by her students.



Fig. 3. Liudmila Alekseeva

In 1918 Alekseeva quickly realized that the wind had changed. She registered her studio with the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. For the first anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, she choreographed a trilogy, *Darkness. A Break Through. La Marceillaise*, to the music by Schumann, Liszt and her husband, the composer Meerson. Allegedly, the leader of the Soviet state Vladimir Lenin attended one of the performances. Like Isadora, Alekseeva's ambition was bringing dance to 'the masses' and transforming every woman's life with the help of 'harmonious', or 'artistic' gymnastics. Later she became one of the founders of the female sport with the same name, *khudozhestvennaia gimnastika*.

## Aleksandr Rumnev

Rumnev is a stage name of the boy, mentioned at the beginning of the paper, who started dancing after his parents had told him about Duncan. From an early age, Aleksandr Rumnev (1899-1965) dreamt of dancing, yet he could do it only after graduating from high school (Kropotova 2002). In 1918 he took up ballet classes, and a friend brought him to

Liudmila Alekseeva's studio (Ruggiero 1996: 222). For the talented student, Alekseeva choreographed several dances to the music by Rakhmaninov and a dance of the ocean wave to the etude by Carl Czerny. Tall, slim and flexible, Rumnev was a born dancer, and within a year he had already founded his own company. He also performed with other companies including Lev Lukin's Free Ballet (see below). The art critic Aleksey Sidorov found him «stunning»; he believed that «even the West» could be proud of such dancer (Sidorov 1923: 54).

During the Civil War private dance studios experienced hard times for the shortage of rooms with heating. As a matter of survival, Rumnev suggested to create an umbrella-studio, A Search in Dance. The space was provided by Alekseeva who had access to the Proletcult locations in Central Moscow (between 1918 and 1920, the Proletcult was a powerful worker's cultural organization). There Rumnev taught dance and pantomime, and other dancers gave classes of gymnastics, modern dance, rhythmical gymnastics, «expression» and «musicality». Yet in winter it was so cold that, sprayed with water to prevent sliding, wooden floor was quickly covered with ice (Khmelnitskiy 2004: 37).

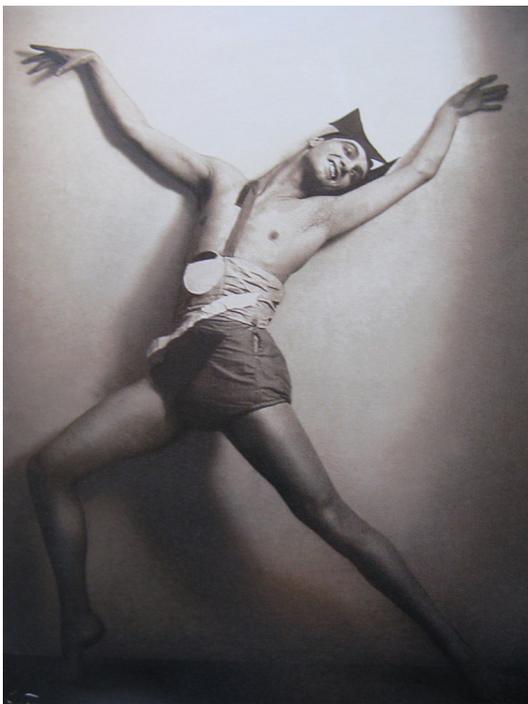


Fig. 4. Aleksandr Rumnev

In 1920 Rumnev joined the Chamber Theatre (*Kamernyi Teatr*) as a pantomime actor and teacher. He also choreographed his own «grotesque» dances commenting that «this was a tragic grotesque» (Rumnev 1996: 230). One of his solos, *The Last Romantic*, to music by Scriabin, was about a «contemporary Don Quixote». Yet, for the new proletarian culture, Rumnev was «too refined, he moved too elegantly, waving with aristocratic narrow hands, striking with broken movement of long arms and legs» (Sheremet'evskaya 1985: 135). Critics found him old-fashioned and 'decadent'. He was also gay which became criminalized under Stalin. In 1933 Rumnev fled Moscow. Several years later he was arrested in the provinces and served a prison sentence. In 1962 he finally succeeded in founding the Experimental Theatre for Pantomime, the genre he had been committed to from the beginning. Sadly, Rumnev died two years later, and his theatre did not survive his death.

### Inna Chernetskaya

Born in Riga, Inna Chernetskaya (1894-1963) moved to Moscow to study theatre. Soon it became clear to her that she was better in dance and pantomime than in declamation. Preparing to be an actress of physical theatre, she went to Germany to study at the Duncan school, the Dalcroze Institute in Hellerau as well as with Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman. Coming back to Moscow at the beginning of the World War I, Inna joined Mikhail Mordkin's private ballet classes (Surits 1996). In 1915 she gave her first recital in the Private Opera Theatre (*Teatr Zimina*). Chernetskaya called her dance 'synthetic' because she wanted to bring together dance, painting, music and drama. Like one of her inspirations, Alexander Sakharoff, she created herself choreography, stage set and costumes.

Later she opened her classes to prepare a «synthetic actor» teaching modern dance, acrobatics and expressive movement (A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, 517, 133: 28). Her first compositions, *The Young Warrior* to Rakhmaninov, *Prélude* to Chopin, and *Danse Macabre* to Saint-Saëns, were considerable successes. Not by chance, her style was close to German expressionist dance. Chernetskaya loved Romantic and Symbolist plots choreographing Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* and *The Medieval Suite* to Wagner's *Rienzi*. Her composition, *Pan*, to Ernő Dohnányi's music, was shown in the Bolshoi Theatre on the jubilee night of the poet Valery Briusov. Chernetskaya said she was proud to perform with Isadora Duncan and the ballerina Ekaterina Geltser. In 1919 she registered her studio as a state school, which helped her when, five years later, the Moscow authorities closed down all private studios and dance

schools. Her students performed, among other venues, at the Moscow Music-hall opened in 1926 (Dmitriev 1977: 18).

While it was possible, Chernetskaya tried to stay in touch with European dancers. In 1925 she went to Germany to see Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban. After coming back to Moscow, she gave a talk about «modern dance in the West». New dance, she claimed, should bring together the depth of German dance with the «decorative» French forms (Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 941-17-11: 10). Yet, in the spirit of the times, she turned to industrial themes staging a «factory ballet» to the music of the avant-garde composer Aleksandr Mosolov. Unfortunately, the Great Break broke also this talented dancer. In the midst of Stalin's terror she published a book on dance, very formal and dry, quoting from «the great scientist Darwin» and mentioning the use of dance for fitness (Chernetskaya 1937: 3).

### Vera Maya

As a student of the Moscow Conservatoire, Vera Bogoliubova (1891-1974) danced with Francesca Beata. In 1917 she started performing in public and adopted the stage name Maya. She also had students, and the first performance of her group was in 1920. Her husband Leonid Seravkin, a lawyer and amateur singer, helped her run the studio. He also took an artistic name, Mayak (in Russian, *the light house*). The classes of expressive movement took place in the couple's large and empty room in an apartment block in central Moscow (Mayak 2002).

Creating her choreography, Maya started with the music. An excellent pianist, she offered her own interpretation of pieces which then suggested the idea for choreography. Her dancers often improvised to her imaginative recitals. She also invited friends to her music evenings to exchange opinions on various interpretations of music and dance performances. Like some of her fellow dancers, Maya created her own work-out different from the ballet exercises (she did not use the bar). She paid special attention to the flexibility of the upper body. Studying anatomy, Maya «discovered» some «forgotten» muscles and developed particular exercises from them. She also introduced acrobatic moves including high supports and «pyramids». Acrobatics was taught by a Meyerhold actor, Zosima Zlobin, a specialist in *theatre biomechanics* (Misler 2011: 305). Although some dancers and critics disapproved of Maya's athletic style, the public loved acrobatic tricks and high supports in her gymnastic dances such as *At the Skating Ring* and *Airplanes*.



Fig. 5. Vera Maya's dance

From 1924 to 1927 she was head teacher at the Choreography Department of the Lunacharsky Theatre College in Moscow. When the Department was closed down, she founded the Vera Maya Ensemble of Dance Art (after 1930 it was called Vera Maya Dance Theatre). Following the changing political wind, one of the first amongst modern dancers, she turned to folk dances and, in 1924, choreographed a large composition, *My Village*. This gave her an advantage in front of the choreographers, like Rumnev and Lukin, labeled 'decadent'. After her dance theatre closed in the late 1930s, several of her dancers went on to perform in variety shows, in circus and folk dance companies. After the World War II, Maya occasionally choreographed for the amateur dance studio of the Railway trade-union and, together with Alekseeva, developed qualification requirements for a new sport, artistic gymnastics.

### Lev Lukin

The son of a lawyer, Lev Saks (1892-1961) refused to follow his father's métier and chose instead music as his carrier. However, after he overstrained his arm, he diverted to theatre



joining the studio of the avant-garde stage director, Evgeny Vakhtangov. After the Revolution, working in Siberia on the construction of a railroad, Lukin (his stage name) organized his first theatre studio. Back in Moscow, he took ballet classes but realized he was too old to do the classics. He found other ways into dance and, in 1918, produced his first choreography, *Harlequinade* (Voskresenskaia 1996; Johnson 2004). Like Maya, Lukin created choreography starting from the music. He believed that dance is naturally musical and that, vice versa, music contains physical movement. Like Vera Maya, he created his choreography while improvising on the piano. His favorite composer was Scriabin, the idol of the entire pre-revolutionary generation. Lukin made numerous choreography pieces to Scriabin's sonatas and preludes, including his *Désir*, *Caresse dansée* and *Le poème de l'extase*.

With a group of young dance enthusiasts, in 1920 he founded the Free Ballet, the very first performances of which made «all Moscow» talk about Lukin's innovative dance. Critics admired an imaginative mixture of ballet, acrobatics and modern dance, as well as the originality and precision of pas (A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, 518-44-1). Lukin introduced movements *par terre* and created patterns out of dancers' bodies similar to those on ancient Greek freezes and vase ornaments. A critic called his choreography «moto-bio-sculpture» (Saradze 1923: 17), that is, a living and moving sculpture. The Free Ballet performances were known as *Evenings of the Liberated Body*. Minimalist costumes were made by the avant-garde theatre artists, Boris Erdman and Sergey Yutkevich. Moscow top musicians, professors of the Moscow Conservatoire, accompanied performances. Coming up to curtain calls in their formal attire, they provided sharp contrast to nearly naked dancers. Unfortunately, blunt accusations of «pornography» put an end to the *Evenings of the Liberated Body*.

In August 1924 nearly all the Moscow private dance schools and studios were closed by the city authorities. Only those, which had state support including the Bolshoi Theatre School and the Duncan School, survived. After years of troubles Lukin worked as a choreographer

with various companies staging politically-themed dances for the Moscow Duncan School.

### Pressure rising

In spite of unfavorable and often catastrophic political and economic situation, modern dance burgeoned in the first decade of the twentieth century, before its growth and proliferation was stopped by Soviet critics, censorship and the authorities. They labeled modern dance «bourgeois», «decadent» and alien to the workers. Dancers were criticized for «salon manners», «weak muscles» and «laxity» ([B.] 1923), accused of «backward» subjects such as love, ecstasy, rivalry for women and even «pornography» (which, in the Soviet penal code, was criminal offense) (Abramov 1922, 1923). In the summer of 1924, the Moscow City Government inspected private schools and studios of dance and discovered «anti-hygienic and anti-sanitary conditions», «amoral atmosphere which corrupted proletarian children», the «spirit of commerce» and «hack-work» ([Anon.] 1924). It was reported that head teachers abused their right of access to locations provided by the city, using the locations for personal reasons (to put things simply, they lived in the rooms they hired from the city for teaching purposes). In the poverty of the early 1920s, different theatre companies often fought for space, and the victory was often decided on the basis of ideology.

When the city nearly closed studios down, they received unexpected support from the Russian Academy of Art Sciences. The academic secretary Aleksey Sidorov and the head of the Choreological Laboratory Aleksandr Larionov suggested bringing studios together under the Academy's roof and combining dance teaching with physical culture. They believed the latter move would be popular with the Bolsheviks and could save modern dance as an art form. Larionov and Sidorov diplomatically argued that the «old-fashioned intimate aesthetic» of modern dance ought to give way to a more up-to-date, that is, proletarian, dance style much more in common with gymnastics, physical exercises and sport (A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, 517, 133: 13; Sidorov 1923). As the first practical step they suggested opening the Higher Workshops of Artistic Physical Culture at the Academy's headquarters in the centre of the city. They argued that gymnastics would make dance more accessible to the masses and, reciprocally, dance would make physical exercises more attractive to the users. The workshops would have four departments: gymnastics, rhythmic (*ritmika*), ballet and modern dance (*plastika*). The Higher Workshops were also to combine teaching and research (Larionov 1925). The ultimate aim

was to accommodate dancers of every style. For instance, Alekseeva would teach her artistic gymnastics, Aleksandrova rhythmical gymnastics, etc. (Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 941-17-6: 1-4).

The Moscow intelligentsia supported the project. One of the leaders of the *Left Front in Art* organization, Ossip Brik, argued that «in the country of workers, dance should become a kind of sport, a recreational activity which restores physical and spiritual energy after a hard day of work» (Brik 1923). The choreographer Kasian Goleizovsky advertised performances of his company Chamber Ballet (*Kamernyi Balet*) as «physiologically energizing, instilling cheerfulness into spectators» (Li 1924: 6).

Yet dancers were not very pleased at the prospect. In spite of renaming her style «artistic gymnastics», Alekseeva did not want it to become a sport preferring to stay «on the dance path» (Alekseeva in Kulagina O. 2000: 46). Yet sport and physical culture matched the working class ideology better than modern dance. Even the application for a dance-and-gymnastics school was rejected (Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 941-17-5: 57). Dance studios were left to survive on their own. Some lasted longer than others. Vera Maya and Valeria Tsvetaeva (The Art of Movement Studio) often used their own living quarters for classes. Chernetskaya succeeded in obtaining state support, and Alekseeva was hosted by public organizations (the Scientists Club). Rumnev, Lukin and some others taught and choreographed at theatre schools. Aleksandrova and her colleagues collaborated with the National Academy of Art Sciences until the Academy was closed down in 1930.

### Can modern dance be Soviet?

Before the Iron Curtain cut the country off from the rest of the world, Russian dancers tried to stay in touch with their Western counterparts. Till the mid-1920s, Russian dancers travelled abroad occasionally, especially if they had state employment, like Aleksey Sidorov, the scientific secretary of the Academy of Art Sciences and a big promoter of modern dance in Russia. In 1927, however, he came back from Germany and France disappointed claiming that the art of dance was lost there, too (Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 941-17-15: 9). His skepticism might have been exaggerated, for everything coming from the «bourgeois West» had to be downplayed. The art critic Sollertinsky feared that «the unbound emotionality» of German expressionist dance had been replaced by formal experiments, «the symmetrically moving masses» (he might have meant Laban's *Bewegungschor* – a group of people moving and dancing in coordination which each other,

«as one piece») (Sollertinsky 1973: 63). Yet, in 1927 the critic V. I. Avdeev reported favorably on Laban claiming that his *Bewegungschor*, or mass dances, were an attempt to «restore ancient folk games and festivities, to immerse into the flow of motion, and to revive the culture of the body». Modern dance, the author concluded, resonated «with the rhythm of nature, with new culture and new man» (Avdeev 1929: 131). The editor of journal where the paper was published tried to distance himself from the claims, and he marked the paper as «polemical» and commented that modern dance in Germany was «asocial», «abstract», and that dance in Soviet Russia took a different direction (*ibidem*).

In April 1928 the Choreological Laboratory received invitations both to the Dance Competition (Championship) which the French Union of Dance Teachers organized in Paris, and to the International Dance Congress in Essen hosted by Kurt Jooss and his school. The first invitation was not considered. Yet the second one had to be answered because Jooss was known as a person with socialist sympathies. Inna Chernetskaya, Vera Maya, Valeria Tsvetaeva from Moscow, Maria Ulitskaya and Militsa Burtseva from Leningrad as well as other dancers wanted to showcase their works in Essen (Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 941-17-16: 1). Critics however argued that their choreography was not Soviet enough. Sidorov withdrew from the conflict and refused to lead a national delegation to the congress. He believed that Soviet dance did not exist yet (A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum 517-137: 48). Two weeks before the congress (when it was too late to do anything), the dancers finally assembled for the first time in order to decide who would go to Essen and which works they could present. Vera Maya finally refused to go, Chernetskaya doubted it was either needed or possible, and Ulitskaya claimed that there were no dances which would represent «our Soviet face». The party bosses labeled modern choreography «mystical» and «aesthetic» expressing doubts that it can be shown to the working audiences in the Ruhr mining district (Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 941-17-15: 39). Last but not the least, there was no

budget for the trip, and this brought the discussion to an end.

The dancers' assembly decided, first, to call for an international dance congress next year in Moscow and, second, to found a national association for dance. Yet both suggestions were dropped. Although several Western dancers including Valeska Gert (Gert 2004) and Janette Anton from the Hellerau-Luxemburg School were invited and eventually came to the Soviet Union, the congress was not realized (Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, 941-17-16: 49-52). Russian dancers also wanted to found a Society for the Art of Contemporary Dance which would include both ballet and modern dance (A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum 517-136: 1-4) and to open a public discussion of contemporary choreography – neither had happened.

The administration of dance became more bureaucratic. In 1929 the Society for Cultural Exchange with Foreign Countries established a section for choreography and a jury, to select dance companies which could travel abroad in order to showcase 'Soviet dance'.

The closure of the Academy of Art Sciences which between 1924 and 1929 provided home to choreographers put a final end to modern dance in Russia. From then on, it could only hide under the titles of 'physical culture' and 'folk dance.' Alekseeva and Maya contributed to the new sport for women, artistic gymnastics, Aleksandrova staged physical culture parades and pageants, Rumnev taught drama actors, and Chernetskaya helped in Stanislavsky's opera studio. By the mid-1930s modern dance had become invisible, and only very few dancers continued their style by teaching it to children.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu links the idea of the «expressive body» to a new variety of bourgeois ethics propagated by certain fractions of the upcoming petite bourgeoisie. A new ethics had replaced the previous strict and ascetic views on child upbringing and sexuality with more liberal ones (Bourdieu 1993). Thus, Duncan dance is widely seen as expressive, passionate and Dionysian, embodying Isadora's own «will to dance». Her audiences came to see in her performances the very affectivity and subjectivity, «the dancing

self», «dancing subject-in-process» (Daly 1995: 121). Improvised and deeply personal, dance became a dream, a utopia of the revolutionary intelligentsia. They put their energy in the Russian Revolution but deeply suffered from it (Stüdemann 2008). Taking up Bourdieu's argument, one may add that the fall of upper and middle classes in Soviet Russia brought about the opposite passage, from liberalism to ascetics (Soviet style). Prior to the Revolution, gymnastic and athletic societies restricted their membership to the well-to-do classes. By contrast, the new regime opened sport and physical culture to the masses (Grant 2013). Similar in its character to the disciplined army exercises, organized physical culture in Soviet Russia rejected the expressive body culture.

Once in Moscow Isadora Duncan had to witness a collapse of her hopes for a liberated body culture. She came to see Lunacharsky at the Commissariat of Enlightenment and waited at reception. The doors opened and a rather large and stately woman came out and proudly crossed the room:

– Who is she? – Isadora asked.

– Deputy Commissar Yakovleva, the left communist. She is in charge of all the finances.

Isadora quickly rose from her chair:

– Let's go! We have nothing to do here. This lady wears a corset. Would she fund a school of Isadora Duncan who abolished corsets in the whole world? (Kurth 2007: 675).

The observant Isadora immediately realized that in the Commissariat of Enlightenment the body was, as before, restricted by the corset of the soul. The soul which had failed to free itself. By mid-1920s, dance in the Soviet Union was dominated by the proletarian ideology. Vsevolod Meyerhold introduced his biomechanics, the theatre director Nikolay Foregger staged «machine dances», the poet Ippolit Sokolov created «the Taylor theatre», the choreographer, Evgeny Yavorsky suggested a «physical culture dance», and the dancer Maria Ulitskaya thought up «industrial dance» (Sirotkina 2012b: 113). Competing with other studios of modern dance for meager economic resources, they appealed to administrative pressure and used politicized rhetoric. Yet, even the successful ones did not survive the Great Break. By the 1930s all experiments in the art of movement were criticized as 'formalist' and ceased. The Soviet dance landscape had narrowed down to the academic ballet and stylized folk dance.

## Bibliography

### Unpublished works

- A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, Moscow, f. 517 (*State Academy for Art Sciences*).
- A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, f. 518 (*Rumnev Aleksandr Aleksandrovich*)  
Russian State Archive for Literature and Art, Moscow, f. 941 (*State Academy for Art Sciences*).
- Sirotkina, Irina, An interview with Elizaveta Surits, 2012a.

### Published works

- Abramov, Aleksandr, *Tantsuiushchaia degeneratsiia*, «Teatr i Muzyka», n. 10, 1922: 174-175.
- Abramov, Aleksandr, *Erotika ili pornografiia?* «Zrelishcha», n. 41, 1923: 4-5.
- [Anon.] *Reorganizatsiia i zakrytie khoreo-shkol v Moskve*, «Novaia Rampa», n. 12, 1924: 6-7.
- Avdeev, V. I., *Novyi svobodnyi tvorcheskii tanets*, *Iskusstvo*, nn. 5-6, 1929: 131-134.
- [B.], *Kakoi tanets nuzhen rabochim?*, «Zrelishcha», n. 42, 1923: 11.
- Brik, Osip, *Sud'ba tantsa*, «Zrelishcha», n. 23, 1923: 10-11.
- Brandenburg, Hans, *Der Moderne Tanz*, Georg Müller, München 1921.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, "How Can One Be a Sports Fan?", *Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Ed. Simon During, London and New York, Routledge, 1993: 339-360.
- Chernetskaya, Inna, *Osnovnye Elementy Iskusstva Tantsa*, Dom Narodnogo Tvorchestva, Moscow 1937.
- Dieneš, Gedeon, *A Mozdulatművészet Története: A History of the Art of Movement*, Orkesztika Alapítvány, Budapest 2005.
- Daly, Ann, *Done into Dance, Isadora Duncan in America*, Indiana U.P., Bloomington 1995.
- Dmitriev, Yury, "Muzik-kholly", *Russkaya sovetskaya Estrada 1930-1945*, Ed. Elizaveta D. Uvarova, Moscow, *Iskusstvo*, 1977: 15-54.
- Gert, Valeska, *Ich bin eine Heixe. Kaleidoskop meines Lebens* (1968), trad. franç. par Philippe Ivernel, *Je suis une sorcière. Kaléidoscope d'une vie dansée*, Éditions Complexe, Bruxelles 2004.
- Grant, Susan, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s*, Routledge, New York 2013.
- Griftsov, Boris, *Psikhologiia Pisatelii*, Khudozhestennaya literatura, Moscow 1988.
- Johnson, Lorin, *Early Russian modern dance: Lev Lukin and the Motobio-skul'ptura*, «Experiment/Эксперимент: A Journal of Russian Culture», vol. X, 2004: 11-27.
- Kats, Andrei (ed.), *Vospominaniya schastlivogo cheloveka*, Glavarkhiv Moskvy, Moscow 2007.
- Khmel'nitsky, Yury, *Iz Zapisok Tairovskogo Aktera*, GITIS, Moscow 2004.
- Koonen, Alisa. *Stranitsy Zhizni*, Kukushka, Moscow 2003.
- Kropotova, Kseniya, "Aleksandr Rumnev. Esteticheskie idealy", *Iskusstvo Dvizheniia. Istorii i Sovremennost'*, Ed. Tatyana Klim, Moscow, State Theatre Museum, 2002: 77-84.
- Kulagina, Inessa, *Kto ona – Ella Rabenek?*, «Balet», n. 108, 2000: 52-53.
- Kulagina, Olga S. (ed.), *Dvigat'sia i Dumat'*, [no publ.], Moscow 2000.
- Kurov, Nikolai, *Večer antichnykh tantsev*, «Teatr», n. 934, 1911: 6.
- Kurth, Peter, *Isadora: A sensational life* (2001), russ. transl. by Sergei Losev, *Aisadora Duncan*, Eksmo, Moscow 2007.
- Larionov, Aleksandr, "Khudozhestvennoe dvizhenie", *Teoriia i Praktika Fizkul'tury*, Moscow, Fizkul'tizdat, 1925: 72-82.
- Li [A. A. Cherepnin], *Ekstrennyi večer Go-leizovskogo*, «Zrelishcha», n. 74, 1924: 5-6.
- Markov, Pavel, *Kniga Vospominanii*, *Iskusstvo*, Moscow 1983.
- Mayak, Ida, "Vospominaniia docheri", *Iskusstvo Dvizheniia*, Ed. Tatyana Klim, Moscow, State Theatre Museum, 2002: 131-147.
- Manzano, Jean-Philippe (ed.), *Isadora Duncan 1827-1927: Une sculpture vivante*, Musée Bourdelle, Paris 2010.
- Misler, Nicoletta, *Choreological Laboratory*, «Experiment/Эксперимент: A Journal of Russian Culture», vol. II, 1996: 169-200.
- Misler, Nicoletta, *V Nachale Bylo Telo: Ritmo-plasticheskie Eksperimenty Nachala XX Veka*, Klassika-XXI vek, Moscow 2011.
- Rossikhina, Vera P., "Nina Aleksandrova i ritmika Dalcroza", *Iz Proshlogo Sovetskoi Muzykal'noi Kul'tury*, Ed. Tamara Livanova, vol. III, Moscow, Muzyka, 1982.
- Ruggiero, Elisabetta, *Alexander Rumnev and the new dance*, «Experiment/Эксперимент: A Journal of Russian Culture», vol. II, 1996: 221-228.
- Rumnev, Aleksandr, *Before me moves the past*, «Experiment/Эксперимент: A Journal of

Russian Culture», vol. II, 1996: 229-240.

Sabaneev, Leonid, *Vospominaniia o Scriabine*, Klassika-XXI, Moscow 2003.

Saradze, Georgy, *Lukin*, «Zrelishcha», n. 20, 1923: 17.

Sheremet'evskaya, Natalya, *Tanets na Estrade*, Iskustvo, Moscow 1985.

Sidorov, Aleksei, *Sovremennyi Tanets*, Pervina, Moscow 1922.

Sidorov, Aleksei, *Novyi tanets*, «Krasnaia Niva», n. 52, 1923.

Sirotkina, Irina, *Dance-plyaska in Russia of the Silver Age*, «Dance Research. The Journal of the Society for Dance Research», vol. XXVIII, n. 2, 2010: 135-153.

Sirotkina, Irina, *Svobodnoe Dvizhenie i Plasticheskii Tanets v Rossii*, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, Moscow 2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2012b.

Sollertinsky, Ivan, "Muzykal'nyi teatr na poroge Oktiabra", *Istoriia Sovetskogo Teatra*, Ed. Aleksei Gvozdev, vol. I, Leningrad, Khudozhestennaya literature, 1933: 290-356.

Sollertinsky, Ivan, *Stat'i o Balete*, Muzyka, Leningrad 1973.

Surits, Elizaveta, *Studios of plastic dance*, «Experiment/Эксперимент: A Journal of Russian Culture», vol. II, 1996: 143-167.

Stüdemann, Natalia, *Dionysos in Sparta: Isadora Duncan in Russland. Eine Geschichte von Tanz und Körper*, Transcript-Verlag, Berlin 2008.

Tels, Ellen, *Le système du geste selon François Delsarte*, «Archives Internationales de la Danse», vol. V, 1935: 6-7.

Toepfer, Karl E., *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910-1935*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997.

Vaccarino, Elisa, *Enrico Prampolini and avant-garde dance: The luminous stage of Teatro della Pantomima Futurista, Prague-Paris-Italy*, «Experiment/Эксперимент: A Journal of Russian Culture», vol. X, 2004: 171-186.

Voskresenskaia, Natalia, *Lev Lukin and the Moscow Free Ballet*, «Experiment/Эксперимент: A Journal of Russian Culture», vol. II, 1996: 201-220.



## Webgraphy

Šeglova-Antokol'skaya, Natalia, *Iz byvshikh*, [no place or date], <http://www.pahra.ru/chosen-people/antokolsky/natali/index.htm>, web (last accessed 10/9/2018).