

# Fokine's *Paganini* Resurrected

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IN TULSA, OKLAHOMA, one night last winter, the curtain rose for the first time in nearly forty years on Fokine's *Paganini*. Staged by Vladimir Dokoudovsky, the production is the latest in a series of Ballet Russe revivals by Roman Jasinski and Moscelyne Larkin, the husband-and-wife team that directs the Tulsa Ballet Theatre. Incredibly, Fokine's reputation today rests on a handful of works—*Schéhérazade*, *The Dying Swan*, *Petrouchka*, the Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor*, *Le Spectre de la rose*, *Les Sylphides*, *Carnaval*—created in his salad days as a choreographer. With the exception of *The Dying Swan*, all were done for the Ballets Russes or given their definitive form by Diaghilev; none date from after 1911. Tulsa's *Paganini* (seen 8 February) is thus the sole work of Fokine's maturity in repertory anywhere.

The idea for the ballet came to him in 1937. Visiting Rachmaninoff in Switzerland, he heard, apparently for the first time, the composer's Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra on a Theme by Paganini, op. 43. The lush, romantic music intrigued him and, typically, sent him rummaging about for material. The more he read about Paganini, the more "he discovered a clear parallel between his own destiny and that of the great musician."<sup>1</sup> Fokine saw Paganini as an artist cursed by genius, a victim of jealous competitors who aped his style, critics who found fault with it, and slanderers who attributed its virtuosity to the Devil. The same demons haunted Fokine. In *Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, he wrote with bitterness of a life's work imitated, mutilated, reviled, ignored, uncompensated, gone up in smoke. *Paganini* reiterates the pain and paranoia that recognition entailed. In the ballet we also learn of the doubts — of his potency as an

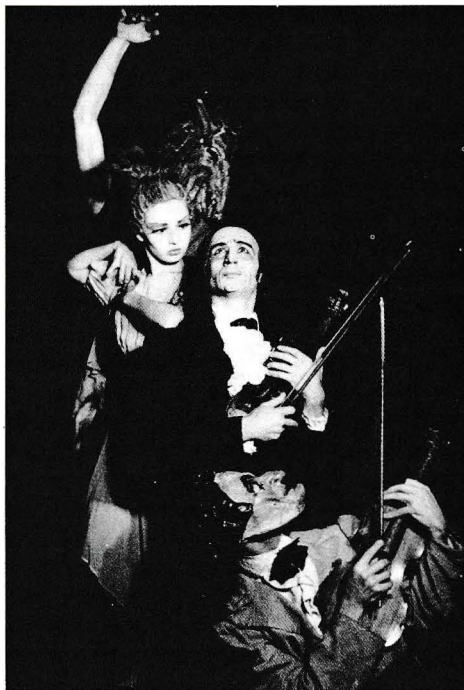
artist, of roads taken and not taken — that darkened Fokine's years in America.

Produced by the Original Ballet Russe, *Paganini* opened at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 30 June 1939. The reviews were generally enthusiastic (Haskell's being an exception); the audiences more so. In New York, where the first performance took place at the Fifty-first Street Theatre, 8 November 1940, the notices were rhapsodic. John Martin in the *New York Times* hailed the ballet as an "an unmistakable masterpiece." Irving Kolodin in the *New York Sun* praised "Fokine's superlatively imaginative realization of the essence of Paganini in terms of dance," concluding that "there is no substitute for genius." Only Henry W. Simon, the music-cum-dance critic of the left-wing tabloid *P.M.*, did not fall into line. "The obscure and rather fatuous philosophical ideas the program says underly [sic] *Paganini* are hard to forget and forgive."<sup>2</sup> Soon afterward, a devastating critique appeared in the *P.M.* letter columns. It was signed by Lincoln Kirstein, who unsheathed for the occasion not a rapier but a pair of brass knuckles:

"In the present *Paganini* the atmosphere is the green spotlight, and hobble-goblins, that at best is like a gifte-booke edition of Poe. No one credits that kind of evil today, but because it is equipped with steps and platforms, it represents a 'production.' The angels of the finale look like Red Cross nurses, the sole contemporary touch, which was certainly unintentional. The music is kitsch, and the dancing, with the exception of a brilliant danse d'école variation for Riabouchinska, is of a piece."<sup>3</sup>

Fokine's "fantastic ballet in three scenes" presents the violinist in as many

guises: the concert virtuoso beset by devils of malice; the evil genius who sows terror in simple hearts; the composer struggling to create. The opening scene, which shows Paganini (persuasively mimed in Tulsa by Art Reasonover) on the concert platform, swarms with figments of a



Vladimir Dokoudovsky as Paganini and Moscelyne Larkin as Guile in the Fokine work at the Original Ballet Russe. (Photo: Hermi)

waking nightmare — looming shadows of a fiddling hand, slithering black-veiled furies, mocking doubles, quill-armed critics, personifications of Envy, Scandal, Gossip, Guile. There is little extended dancing: the episode gathers force from the circles drawn like a vise around the gaunt musician on the podium at center stage. By contrast, the second scene, Paganini among the people, is nearly all dancing. In this fête champêtre, set in the hills around Florence, Fokine gives us a vision of earthly delight

— of maids paired in gracious harmony, of guitar-strumming swains, of joy, youth, innocence, and love. With Paganini's entrance, a blight falls over the scene. Grabbing a guitar from one of the youths, he reveals the dark side of his genius. For the Florentine Beauty mesmerized by Paganini (originally Riabouchinska's role, danced in Tulsa by Ena Naranjo), Fokine has crafted a dazzling solo — a whirlwind of chaînés, renversés, and turns in arabesque that ends in sudden stillness; then long drifts of bourrées, willed fore, aft, and into arcs by Paganini's satanic power. The last episode, Paganini in his solitude, is a Manichean struggle of light and dark, the first personified by Divine Genius (Baronova in the original production) and a corps of ministering angels, the latter by a pride of masked Paganini doubles and baton-wielding furies, Evil, Guile, Scandal, and Gossip. In the dance for the angels, Fokine plaits his sisterhood into images of harmony — long delicate chains, Botticellian threesomes, double rounds in which the outer circlet opens like a corolla into backbends. The flawless line of the arabesques in the solo for Divine Genius reiterates this luminous vision, as do the bourrées that carry her backward offstage. As in *Les Sylphides*, *Carnaval*, *Firebird*, and *The Dying Swan*, these steps invoke the poetic idealism that links Fokine to his classical forebears and neoclassical successors.

Tulsa Ballet Theatre may lack artists of the caliber of Riabouchinska and Baronova, but its *Paganini* conveys throughout the spirit and intent of the choreography. In large measure, this achievement rests with Jasinski and Larkin, who have schooled their dancers in the all-but-lost art of épaulement. Arms, Fokine believed, were “horizons,”<sup>4</sup> a piece of wisdom Tulsa's codirectors have also passed on to their dancers. Toward the beginning of her solo as Divine Genius, Kimberly Smiley opens her arms, turning her palms upward, a gesture that conveys the infinite bounty of divine goodness and succor. Neither here nor elsewhere does Fokine's movement



Art Reasonover as Paganini and Ena Naranjo as the Florentine Beauty in Tulsa Ballet's revival of *Paganini*. (Photos: Tulsa Ballet Theatre)

seem incomplete, the case when many of today's virtuoso performers grapple with his anti-virtuoso idiom.

The production, of course, differs from the original. The cast has been pared — from forty-four to thirty-four — but as in the old days the dancers double up on roles. The sixty-by-fifty-foot platform that originally dominated the first scene (and took up a whole boxcar on the Ballet Russe train) is gone, but then it had been jettisoned on tour in the 1940s. The green

lights sunk in the violins of the Paganini doubles in the third scene have been extinguished, as they were after the ballet's early performances. The Soudeikine designs, carefully reproduced by George Verdak, are mediocre, except for the pastel-bright Florentine scene. The "hobble-goblins" do look dated and occasionally silly, but the pure dance passages do not. They speak their truth classically. For allowing us to see this, Dokoudovsky and the Tulsa Ballet Theatre deserve our thanks.

#### NOTES

1. Michel Fokine, *Memoirs of a Ballet Master*, trans. Vitale Fokine, ed. Anatole Chujoy (London: Constable, 1961), p. 282. The chapter on *Paganini* was written by Fokine's son, Vitale.

2. John Martin, "'Paganini' Ballet Has Debut Here," *New York Times*, 9 Nov. 1940, p. 20; Irving Kolodin, "Ballet Presents New Fokine Work," *New York Sun*, 9 Nov. 1940, p. 30;

Henry W. Simon, "The Roundup Shows Who's in the Groove...And Ballet Adds Two New Numbers," *P.M.*, 11 Nov. 1940, p. 13.

3. Lincoln Kirstein, letter to the editor, *P.M.*, 1 Dec. 1940, p. 47.

4. Quoted in Dawn Lille Horwitz, "A Ballet Class With Michel Fokine," *Dance Chronicle*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1979), p. 43.