

Choreographer
Bronislava Nijinska in Revival:

The Exemplary Daughterhood of Irina Nijinska

by Lynn Garafola

The DTH revival of
Rondo Capriccioso, Nijinska's
last ballet, is her daughter
Irina's latest project.



Martha Swope

Irina Nijinska, daughter of
Bronislava Nijinska and niece of
Vaslav Nijinsky, is "that ballet
anomaly—a chosen daughter."

Even before her birth in 1913, Irina Nijinska was making history. Her uncle, Vaslav Nijinsky, was choreographing *Le Sacre du Printemps*, with her mother, Bronislava Nijinska, as the Chosen Maiden. But Irina was on the way, and Bronislava had to withdraw. If *Sacre* lost a great performance, Bronislava gained an heir. Thanks to Irina, Nijinska's long-neglected career has finally received the critical and public recognition it deserves.

From the start Irina was that ballet anomaly—a chosen daughter. Under her mother's tutelage, she did her first pliés. At six, she stayed up late for lectures at the Ecole de Mouvement, Nijinska's revolutionary studio in Kiev. In Paris, where the family settled in the 1920s, Irina studied with her mother's student Eugene Lipitzki, graduating at fifteen to her mother's own class for the Ida Rubinstein company, where she also sat in on rehearsals.

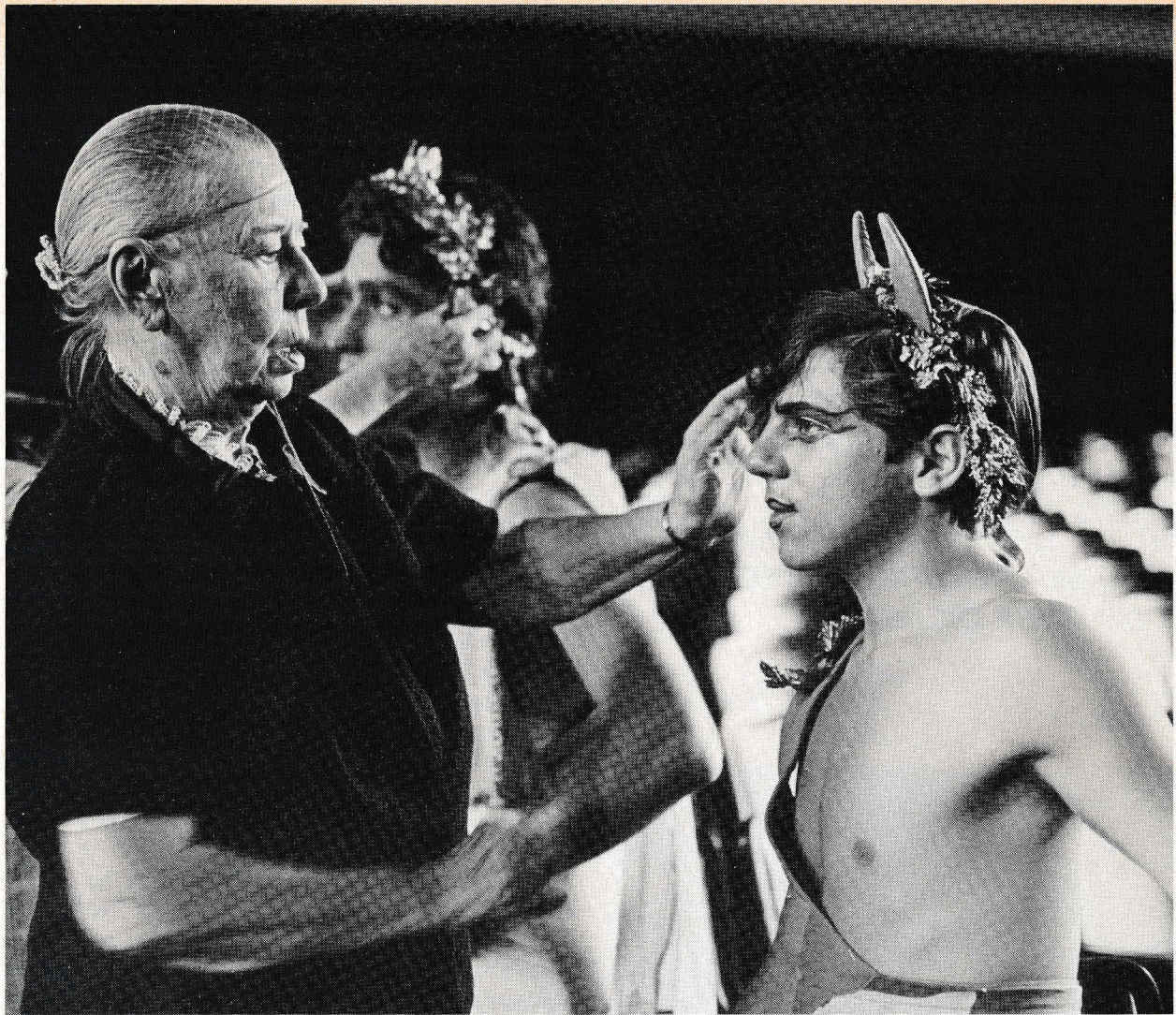
Irina made her professional debut in London in 1930. The company was headed by Olga Spessivtzeva, and Irina danced under the name Istomina, the ballerina beloved by Pushkin. That year, too, she toured with the Opéra Russe à Paris, one of many ensembles associated with her mother in which she performed. These included the Rubinstein company, as well as Théâtre de la Danse Nijinska, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, and the Polish Ballet. All told, Irina appeared in about twenty-five of her mother's ballets, mostly in character roles.

Even before the injury in a car accident that permanently limited her ability to jump, Irina preferred rehearsing to performing. In 1936 Nijinska made Irina her personal and professional assistant. That year Irina accompanied her mother to New York, where Nijinska staged *Les Noces* for the Ballet Russe, and then, after a week-long trip by plane, to Buenos Aires, where she revived *Le Baiser de la Fée* for the Teatro Colón. Irina has never staged *Baiser*, but she has set *Les Noces* on more than a dozen companies. And she has never forgotten the thrill of that whistle-stop flight and the dozen Caribbean and South American cities it visited.

In 1940 the family settled in Hollywood, where Nijinska opened the Bronislava Nijinska-Hollywood Ballet School. Irina took charge of the children's classes, and when Nijinska was away choreographing, Irina taught her classes as well. Irina married Gibbs Raetz in 1946. The following year, when she became pregnant, Adolph Bolm and Nathalie Krassovska (the godmother of Irina's two children) helped out at the studio. Only in 1950, when her second child was born, did Irina retire from teaching, although she continued to give private lessons to ballerina Tamara Toumanova and a few others.

Irina's third career began in 1968 with the death of her stepfather, Nicholas Singaevsky. For the next four years, she was her mother's constant companion. Although Nijinska's health was failing (she had had a

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Jack Mitchell

Bronislava Nijinska works with junior dancers from the Buffalo Ballet on her Brahms Variations.

stroke in 1967), the years were packed with activity. She taught, coached some Kirov dancers in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, and revived *Aurora's Wedding*, *Brahms Variations*, *Les Biches*, and *Les Noces* for companies in Buffalo, Venice, Florence, and Rome.

Irina's first assignment after her mother's death in 1972 was a revival of *Les Biches* for the Düsseldorf Ballet. Since then she has set the work on nearly a dozen companies in Europe and the United States. Her first *Noces*, for the Stuttgart Ballet, was followed by productions in Paris, Oakland (the first in America since 1936), Montreal, Mexico City, and New York. With both works performed so widely, Nijinska's presence in the international repertoire—to say nothing of her stature as a choreographer—is finally assured.

Before her death Nijinska was at work on an autobiography. In 1981 the first part, which followed her career and Nijinsky's up to 1914, was published as

Early Memoirs. For Irina, who edited and translated it in a four-year collaboration with writer Jean Rawlinson, the critically acclaimed book marked a turning point in her campaign to draw public attention to her mother's career. The 1986-87 exhibition "Bronislava Nijinska: A Dancer's Legacy," organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with rare family treasures, sealed the choreographer's reputation among the broad dance public.

The revival this season of *Rondo Capriccioso* (1952), Nijinska's last ballet, for the Dance Theatre of Harlem is Irina's latest project. For the future she talks of reviving the *Aurora's Wedding* her mother staged in Buffalo in 1968 and readying the sequel to *Early Memoirs* for publication—no easy task, as the manuscript is incomplete. In an art that too often looks casually on its past, Irina Nijinska's exemplary daughterhood has led her down a path of quiet heroism. □