

## Reflections on Volynsky

While reading Vera Volkova's biography, who was the teacher of Margot Fonteyn, Rudolf Nureyev and Erich Bruhn to name a few, I was inspired to research some of Akim Volinsky's writings. Volkova was deeply influenced by the Russian historian and well known critic, who perceives Ballet in a broad way with an interesting philosophical approach.



*"She never forgot the Kantian ethical imperative that Volynsky had impressed on her: of one's own volition to make the most of every second of every day and fulfil the obligations of an innate talent."\**

Volynsky directed the first School of Russian Ballet in Saint-Petersburg (see photo above). The famous A. Vaganova taught at his school. He was killed by the Bolsheviks for not surrendering to their views of Ballet as political propaganda. He was in love with Ballet as a pure art, its almost Apollonian lines which should not be corrupted by anything else that is not classical. But what is classical? I found this an interesting question even today as we experience so much fusion and confusion amongst choreographers recreating classical ballets with new steps, settings and costumes that have nothing to do with the original. Surely if Volynsky could be here and see all this he would be shocked and die a second time!

His concept of classicism was totally based on the Ancient Greek art. From the way a body should be sculpted in dance and decorated for the stage. Even from a scenographic point of view, he saw dancers as Caryatids the maidens of Caryai. These were the sculptures present on the pillars supporting the temples in the Acropolis!



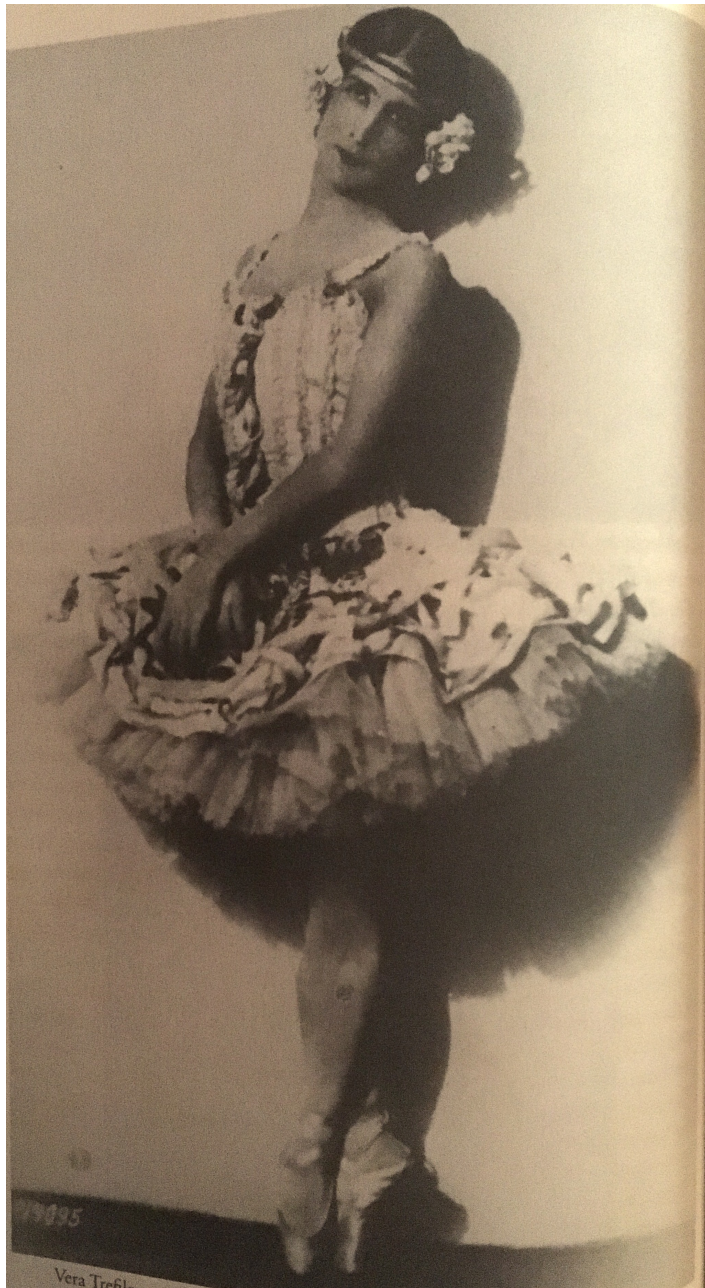
He was devoted to Spesivtseva (above right) but could not accept the fact that in order to survive, she left Russia, like many other dancers of her time. He kept his ideas alive, dying because of them. Another of his favourite dancers was Trefilova (in the photo below), a very technical ballerina, but above all Pavlova. Of the latter he explains that she didn't have much flexibility but a strong stage presence and great ability at conveying emotions.

In "The book of Exaltations", translated in English by Stanley J. Rabinowitz, Volynsky describes Ballet in a way that really fulfils the entire concept of steps; not only technically but I would say almost spiritually. It makes you feel Ballet is a sacred art form, a perfect mirror of Mother Nature.



His love and description of a woman dancer is beautiful and reminds me of some of Balanchine's choreographies, "Apollo" to mention one.

*"From its initial flight, everything in a woman's dancing is geared to creating and adorning her plant-like essence and to providing the corresponding choreographic exaltations."*



The concept of woman as “plant-like essence” is central in his writing. When talking about arms in Ballet he suggests:

*“ The port de bras is intended primarily for women, for the psychology of a botanical creature who is also magical...”*

When he describes “Rond de jambe an l’air” he pictures it as :

*“ A flower twisted and untwisted by a light wind.”*

When he comes to “*pas de Basque*” he describes the two actions involved in the execution of this step as ornaments of a Corinthian capital. The classical choreography is seen like ancient Greek architecture. The aim for both is the Exaltation of the Cosmos. All this gives a sense of universality and allows to manifest both joy and sadness in the choreographed movements of a dancer as well as in the designs of an architect. I have always felt the two arts are very akin to each other.

Talking about “*coupé*”, after technically explaining it , he goes on to compare it with a poetic “*coupé*” in Aeschylus’s immortal tragedies:

*“The joyful impulsive act of Agamemnon as a result of a long chain of external effects brings about transgression and death...  
From Ballet as from any great art, as we expand our interpretation of the subject, we enter into the infinite realm of being.”*

When he describes “*pirouettes*” he quotes Kshesinskaya’s words which, considering that historical moment, are very striking. Italian ballerinas like Virginia Zucchi to name one, were the biggest inspiration to this new generation of Russian dancers of the beginning of 20th century. Italian dancers were very talented in pirouetting and more versed than the Russians:

*“Italian women are born with pirouette....and those remarkable Etruscan maiden filled not only with volatility of the roman Latin race but also with innate devotion to wholeness and roundness which characterises the nation that created the arch and the vault...”*

Astonishing how it has changed in today's women dancers this aspect of roundness, both physically and mentally! Now the fashion of the women dancers' body asks for flat and square lines. Dancers are like puppets and athletes with limited culture, with rare exceptions of course.

He goes to the point of finding that for pirouetting well one has to have a centred and focused mind , a monolithic character, exultation of the infinite and faithfulness to the guiding centre. This feature of depicting a step starting from the technical aspect and slowly expanding to a wider reference, Ballet evolves into literature, poetry, painting and sculpture. All this makes his book a fascinating and holistic vision of Ballet.

He reaches the peak of the concept of the plant like essence of the woman dancer when he talks about “*Adage*” or Adagio:

*“ The chimes continually beat and stop, small bells ringing die out. These bells sing in the garden and are constantly drowned out by the grass and flowerlike rustlings of the surrounding flora. This is exactly what adagio is in classical Ballet.”*

His work is full of references to Nature. He describes the dance of the Earth and the Sky. All dances done on the floor (earth) are repeated in the air (sky).

*“The sky here is only the aerial reflection or transformation of the earth.”*

The symbol of vitality in the air is the “*ballon*”, which he considers the basic aspect to execute in jumps. It means a rotation of the leg during the movement. Ballon means ball, something round. This roundness is the relationship between earth and sky and our way

to express, in jumps and raising steps, the contact to the upward world.

As far as jumps are concerned he explains how Petipa, in some of his choreographies, uses the “*entrechats*” and “*cabrioles*” for characters like satyrs and fauns, because of their goat like effects. By executing all these aerial steps a person is transformed.

*“The earthly movement is transferred into supernatural one, into poetic exaltation.”*

Even though women resemble plant and flora while men are heroic and acrobatic, the two aspects are both present in a dancer as femininity and masculinity but in different ways. Some women are extremely good jumpers better than some men...the only difference is in the strength.

Finally he comes to the point of stating that a person was born a unisexual being and with the development of the human race there has been an evolution to a bisexual being but:

*“In the creative process of the world man has appeared primarily as a bisexual being, and the feature of androgyny is inescapable in him as an image of a past perfection and as a supreme goal for the future.”*

With these lines we are exactly witnessing what is happening today both in the art circles and in the world. Whatever societies we belong to, they are trying to force social rules upon us. It seems evident that things are changing towards the androgynous future that Volynsky had foreseen.

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\* Alexander Meinertz, Vera Volkova A biography, 2005.

*(Vera Volkova teaching Margot Fonteyn)*

