

Doc Chat Episode Forty-Six Transcript

The Remarkable Career of Bronislava Nijinska (March 3rd, 2022)

JULIE GOLIA: Welcome, everybody, to Doc Chat. I am Julie Golia. I am the Curator of History, Social Sciences and Government Information here at the New York Public Library. And Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections, and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into their class. In this episode, Linda Murray, Curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the New York Public Library, is joined by Lynn Garafola. Garafola is Professor Emerita of Dance at Barnard College and the author of several books, most recently, *La Nijinska: Choreographer of the Modern*, published this year by Oxford University Press. So today, Lynn and Linda will explore photographs and drawings that illuminate the life and career of the ballet dancer and choreographer, Bronislava Nijinska, highlighting the outsized and understudied impact that Nijinska had on the development of 20th century ballet choreography. So our guests are going to speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation to everybody. During the program, you should feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. So make sure that you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so that everyone can participate. And once we begin the question and answer segment, you -- we'll ask you to use Zoom's Question and Answer module rather than the chat one to pose your questions. If you want to remain anonymous, make sure you click that before submitting your questions, and with that, I'm going to hand it over to Linda.

LINDA MURRAY: Thank you, Julie, and thank you so much, Lynn, for joining us today and chatting with me about one of our shared passions, Bronislava Nijinska. You and I are very well versed in her life and work, but for those who are coming to Nijinska for the first time, can we do a little bit of scene setting? So who is Nijinska? What is she born into? And then, you know, where is the main focus of her career?

LYNN GARAFOLA: Well, Nijinska was born in 1890, in Minsk, in Belarus, the part of the world that we're hearing a little too much about these days. She was trained at the Imperial Ballet School of St. Petersburg. She joined Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in 1909, and then after the Revolution, after 1914, with World War I, she spent seven years in Russia. But actually, many of those years were in Kyiv, another part of the world, that alas, we're hearing too much of. And it was there that she encountered this -- the revolutionary energy that was transforming the arts in every idiom. She then returned to the -- to Europe in 1921, worked for the Ballet Russes, and then in the future, worked for numerous companies on -- in the United States, in Europe, in South America, and became a very, very prolific choreographer. She was one of these people who was displaced several times, and after living in Paris during the late '20s and 1930s, she then arrived in the United States in 1940, where ultimately, she stayed for the next umpteen

years and died in 1972, in Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles.

MURRAY: And I just want to explain the discrepancy in the date. You're absolutely right. She was born in 1890, but there is -- it depends on whether you're following the Roman or the Julian calendar, which is why it says 1891 --

GARAFOLA: Yes.

MURRAY: -- so I just -- in case people were like, "Wait, it says 1891, and Lynn just said 1890."

GARAFOLA: Yes. She was born --

MURRAY You are correct, 1890. [brief laughter].

GARAFOLA -- she was born two days after Christmas, 1890, by the old calendar, which is in early January 1891 --

MURRAY Exactly.

GARAFOLA -- the new calendar.

MURRAY Exactly. [brief laughter].

GARAFOLA But she died in one year.

[Laughter]

MURRAY 1972.

[Laughter]

GARAFOLA That is correct.

[Laughter]

MURRAY And so I think if anybody knows her name, there might be two ways they know her name. On the screen right now, we see her with her brother, Vaslav Nijinsky, and so that's obviously one way people might have heard of Nijinska. And then as you were saying, she was a central part of the Ballet Russes, and when we talk about the Ballet Russes, American audiences might have various different configurations or names of Ballet Russes in their mind. We're specifically talking about the years of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, which is 1909 to 1929. And for those outside of the dance field, it's sometimes hard to really understand just how revolutionary that period in dance history was, the Ballet Russes. Can you just give the audience just a little bit of an understanding of their impact in our particular field?

GARAFOLA I would say that the impact was huge, not only in -- both on dance, because it was a moment where the various choreographers who worked for Diaghilev including Vaslav Nijinsky, and including Bronislava Nijinska but also George Balanchine, a very young George Balanchine, that these choreographers, very, very radically transformed ballet language. In fact, many of the things they choreographed didn't really look like ballet, including what we see here on the screen, Nijinsky's first ballet, Afternoon of a Faun, where the dancers have their legs turned in, or in parallel, the port de bra, the way they're facing. All of this is completely different. And the following year, when Nijinsky choreographed the Rite of Spring, it seemed as though ballet were very, very far away. So all of these things transformed this but there were other things. We mentioned Stravinsky. Stravinsky was not a traditional ballet composer. He didn't sound like Diaghilev and he didn't sound like Tchaikovsky, he sounded very, [brief laughter] very different. And the ballet we're going to be focusing on today, Les Noces also had a score by Tchaikovsky -- sorry, now I'm getting my Stravinsky's and Tchaikovsky's confused.

[Laughter]

MURRAY Stravinsky. [brief laughter].

GARAFOLA [multiple speakers] by Stravinsky which was extraordinarily rhythmic, extraordinarily dynamic, and seemed, in many ways, to be a major sign of the modern. There were also -- there was also a very big impact on costuming. As you see, Nijinsky is in a bodysuit, closer to something we saw in the 1960s than what we -- you would see in the 1890s except in the circus. Nijinska is in a tunic, a Grecian tunic. This is a far cry from a tutu, where she would have been corseted and laced in order for her body to be molded to look a certain way. We're going to see costumes that are quite different, even from these, so that it opens up the -- the Diaghilev period opened up the dance and it's -- to artists of the modern in many different idioms.

MURRAY So let's actually move ahead and take a look at some of what we're going to chat about today. So this is an image of the Ballet Les Noces. That's what we're going to be chatting about. And, Lynn, yesterday I asked you why particularly as the entire canon of [inaudible] did you want to talk about Les Noces, and you rightly pointed out, well, next year is a centenary and it's an incredibly important work. Though, I mean, you just referenced the fact that there were some other choreographers in the Ballet Russes, there were in turn Mikhail Fokin, then Vaslav Nijinsky, then Leonide Massine, then Bronislava Nijinska, and finally, George Balanchine. They are the five choreographers of that 20-year period. Nijinska is the only woman in that back, you know, cadre of choreographers. And in your mind, what is it about Les Noces that makes it such a special ballet and worthy of our attention nearly 100 years on?

GARAFOLA Well, I would just like to say before we get into Les Noces, that something about the title. Les Noces is a French title, and originally, the ballet was called Svadebka, which in Russian means little wedding. When it was premiered in 1923 in Paris, it was called Les Noces,

which means the wedding in French, so we'll be using the French term. Why? I think it's Nijinska's masterwork. Next year will be the 100th anniversary. The library has some wonderful materials. Also because *Les Noces* is an early example of a plotless ballet. It has no fully developed characters, it doesn't really have a plot, nothing really happens. It's also with an immense sense that, oh, it's part of a trend that becomes increasingly important in 20th century ballet, but also the arts generally, abstraction. It's also an early example of neoclassicism, by which I mean a way of looking at ballet vocabulary through the lens of the modern. So it doesn't look like what Nijinska studied in 1900 in St. Petersburg. It looks very, very different, even though she may be using point, and we'll see examples of that. Finally, *Les Noces* is incredibly dynamic, and also incredibly moving, and that seems, to me, a pretty good reason also to include this on this list.

[Laughter]

MURRAY I know we're going to talk mainly about the long gestation period about -- of the ballet and the collaboration between the visual artist Natalia Goncharova and Nijinska. But just while we're on this photograph, I would be remiss if I did not draw attention to the braiding motif that is happening with the female heads. It -- there's lots of different ways in which you can interpret this image, but braiding is a recurring theme in *Les Noces*, and so I just want to draw the attention of the audience to what looks like ropes falling down are actually long braids that are attached to the head of the dancer at the top of the pyramid, that's Felia Doubrovskaya, who played -- who danced the role of the bride. And there was a braiding motif in the footwork that recurs in the ballet as well. Right, Lynn?

GARAFOLA Yes, and this architectural form also recurs again in the ballet. The thing about these braids is if this were a normal folkloric ballet about a wedding, everyone would be in braids, and then they would cut the bride's braids when she got married. But here, at some point, the friends, the other girls, wrapped the braid around the neck of the bride. So it's almost as though she's being decapitated by her own womanhood. So it's very striking. Also notice here, even though the dancers are in practice wear, they actually are wearing something that looks very much like the costumes. They're all dressed uniformly.

MURRAY Yeah.

GARAFOLA Soberly. Almost workmanlike, but we'll see a little more of that when we get to the [multiple speakers].

MURRAY Yes. I think we have one more photo. Yes, we do. This is another photo you selected, and this is of the men dancing. And there's a huge contrast in the dynamism of the movement of the men compared to the positioning of the women, which is more supplicant. And then our next photos, our next images take us directly into the costumes in the profession.

GARAFOLA What is very interesting too about this photo, it was -- it's one of the very few

performance photos we know. And it was also taken in New York, when this was -- when this ballet was revived for three performances only in New York in 1936. So it's a sort of moment. [brief laughter].

GARAFOLA And you're drawing attention to something really important when we talk about Nijinska is that for a choreographer of her stature, her work is not often seen in repertory and is rarely remounted, and this work, in particular, is very difficult to actually remount properly. It's got a very complicated -- for such a sparse and austere ballet, there's a lot of moving parts. There's pianos, there's a choir, there's the dancers. It's a complicated undertaking to produce this ballet. So as we mentioned, we're going to chat about Natalia Goncharova, an important artist in the Russian avant garde. She was originally conceived of as a primitivist, and then also did work in the Rayonist movement with her partner Mikhail Larionov, but a really beautiful artist, and she and Nijinska went through a long collaborative process to sort of come to an understanding about how *Les Noces* should look. So can you, -- I believe, it's actually Stravinsky who's certainly the first person to work on *Les Noces*. He starts the score as early as 1912.

MURRAY He starts -- yes, he begins to think the score comes to him very, very early on, and he begins to work on it. Goncharova had first done a piece for Diaghilev in 1914. And critics loved her work. It was so -- well, it was --

MURRAY It was *Le Coq D'Or*.

GARAFOLA -- it was the Golden Cockerel.

MURRAY Yes.

GARAFOLA Yes. And it was an opera ballet. And so this seemed to be a perfect match. This is folkloric, it's a wedding, joyous, and we have costumes like this. And do you want to show the next slide as well?

MURRAY I will.

GARAFOLA Yes, and this was a curtain design. Very often, they would have front curtains so that the regular, the stage curtain went up you saw this front curtain which then opened and you were sort of drawn into the world of the ballet. And as you see, once again, all the reds and the yellows. This is a very, -- this is Russian folklore at its best. However, by 1922, when Nijinska first was brought into the collaboration, she took one look at these designs and said [foreign language].

[Laughter]

GARAFOLA Yeah, you laugh, in no uncertain terms. She loved the score, she had just heard it played. And she said, "These designs are for a Russian opera. They are too heavy. They don't,

-- there's no concordance with the music." Her idea was to have something very plain, very spare, and at first, Diaghilev said [foreign language], but eventually he came around to it. And then in the spring of 1923, when Nijinska began rehearsing day after day after day after day, hours and hours of rehearsal, some of that material has survived and we know how long it took. It started creating the ballet, then Gonchorova began to work with Nijinska to try to create designs in accordance with Nijinska's vision.

GARAFOLA So let's look at the next image.

MURRAY Mm-hmm.

GARAFOLA Here we go.

MURRAY Totally different. [brief laughter].

GARAFOLA Exactly.

[Laughter]

So this is sort of a rehearsal image. Do you want to --

GARAFOLA Yes.

MURRAY -- take us through it, Lynn?

GARAFOLA Well, they're trying to figure out where people are going to be, where are the four pianos going to be? Et cetera. Maybe we should take the next one, because I see we're talking to -- here's if -- I always think of this image as kind of a leftover from the early -- earlier sets of designs with their wonderful colors, but the color went very rapidly and -- do you want to take the next one?

MURRAY Yeah.

GARAFOLA And this came very close to what the final design was, with that blue background, very spare, the floor. Of course, you see a couple of the pianos there. The pianos couldn't fit into the pit of the Gaitre Lyrique Theatre where the ballet opened in Paris. Today, they're usually put in the pit with the singers and the percussion instruments. But you see the spareness of this. So that's the next one, so that everyone can see. And, along with this spareness came the spareness of the costumes. These are not quite the final resolution. The final resolution would use, instead of blue, which was almost a blue blouse, or an everyday workmanlike color, they decided to use brown as being something closer to the soil. And also the men's top would end up looking more like a simplified Russian peasant shirt or Ukrainian peasant shirt.

MURRAY And I'll say that the brown renderings of the costume are actually on display at the moment in the treasures exhibition at 42nd Street if people want to go and see those in person. But it shows that there's this large journey that's happening in kind of the idea of the ballet. And it's moving from, I think, kind of a prerevolutionary Russia in conception to a postrevolutionary Russia as well, both in the way in which women are being perceived in society, and then also, as you said, Lynn, earlier, just the modernism, like that there's works out there like Ulysses that are changing the way in which people express ideas and art, and you're seeing all of that seeping into the ballet as well.

GARAFOLA And yet, at the same time, this is a ballet, which is not quite -- I wouldn't call it feminist, but it is a work about female trauma, the trauma of the bride who's getting married and doesn't know what's going -- what's -- lies in the future for her, the trauma of the mother, who is losing her daughter, and all of this as perceived by a female artist.

MURRAY Yeah. And she, -- this is -- we love this photo. It's of Felia Doubrovskaya. And I often refer to *Les Noces* as a feminist ballet and I understand why you don't see it that way. But it was the first ballet I ever encountered where I felt that there was a woman's perspective --

GARAFOLA Yes.

MURRAY -- in a ballet that I saw, and that was a very powerful statement for me. And when we have all of these conversations nowadays about where is the place of the female choreographer in ballet and where is the female voice and perspective, it's hard for me to think of a ballet that's been made in recent years that compares to the power of *Les Noces* in really sort of radically presenting a female perspective in dance. I believe we now need to move [brief laughter] to -- Lynn and I could talk forever about Nijinska.

GARAFOLA [brief laughter] Yes.

MURRAY But I think there might be some questions that we need to feel to the last few minutes of this Doc Chat.

GOLIA Well, I have to tell you, it's very hard for me to even begin the question and answer, because I want to hear this conversation continue. It's such a viral one. And actually, I mean, if I can just pose the first question that draws on this question of what it means to be a feminist choreographer. I love the fact that we have this kind of wonderful debate here. I think a lot of people who are attending this know a bit about the history of the dance, many may not -- the history of dance, many may not. Can we start to put a definition or give people a better sense of understanding of how we might define feminist choreography?

MURRAY Define feminist --

MURRAY Choreography.

MURRAY Feminist choreography. Ooh, Lynn, that's a [brief laughter] complicated question.

GARAFOLA I think what is very -- is key is that it's something -- it is a choreography, which indicates a female point of view, that comes from a female perspective. And this is -- was usually not the case. The vast majority of works, especially in the most privileged theatres, were by men. There were women choreographers, but they tended to work in music halls on the variety stage, they staged works for their students. In other words, they were almost like considered the minor genres. So this was incredibly important to be there in Paris, at a season where -- that was almost a festival to Stravinsky, as well as a festival to her works and Fokin's works, to music by Stravinsky, and to have this ballet presented there. And to have the debates about -- there were debates about -- many debates about it. There were jokes. If you want to get married, don't go and see this ballet.

[Laughter]

MURRAY And I think, -- sorry, Lynn, go ahead.

GARAFOLA No, no, no, please.

MURRAY No, I was just going to say I think a lot of people often query why is Nijinska special or different from somebody like, say, Martha Graham? And I just want to make the distinction that if you think about the early roots of modern times, yes, it's women choreographers who immediately come to mind, but to have a woman work within the construct of the vocabulary of classical ballet, which is traditionally based on a lot of assumptions of gender partnering, it's incredibly difficult to pull off what she did, to use that same language, break it apart and put it together in a way where there's female agency on stage. And I think that that's -- she's explored -- she explores gender a lot through her work. The ballet she made the following year, *Les Biches*, had a character called *La Garconne* so that like there's playing with gender identity there, and the gray girls are often perceived as being the perfect couple. And then in *Les Facheux*, she's putting on [inaudible] and pointe shoes. So she's querying ideas of gender in her work in a consistent way. And for me, that's part of her appeal.

GARAFOLA I also think it's important to say it's not only that she worked within ballet vocabulary, although she did all kinds of things to it, but that she was also working within institutions that are ballet institutions. That's what's different. Martha Graham and the modern, -- the early, -- the classic moderns in the United States, and also in Germany, is that they were not working within ballet institutions or within opera houses, maybe a little tiny bit in Germany, but they were fundamentally working outside and very often in conjunction with female-centered institutions such as women's colleges, teacher training schools, and things that were heavily feminized, so it has other gendered components that are a little different. One of the things that was so hard about writing [brief laughter] this book was to really figure out how sexism was operative within the world, the slights, the things that were promised and then suddenly taken

away, not taken away to the man. I mean, being underpaid, consistently. The remarks about her body, the remarks about her looks. Even though no one was hiring her, if they were hiring her to choreograph, they weren't hiring her for her looks. But this again and again and again. And also, her toughness, which I relate to her -- the difficulty she perceived in establishing her authority in the studio. When she first rejoined the Diaghilev company, she was working with people she'd been in school with since she was eight years old, [brief laughter], you know? And suddenly she's their boss. And that -- -- and very often, there were difficulties with men and this persisted into the 1930s and '40s. Some of the oral histories, some of the memoirs I'd read, written by men, they were just terrific. One, I practically threw the book across the room, [brief laughter]. I got so furious with what I was reading.

GOLIA Well, and what a great way, I think, for those people here thinking about teaching around interiors, to introduce students to the idea of historiography, and reading historiography from a femme or a feminist lens, the different ways that her work was dismissed by male scholars over the years. Lynn, I want to pick up on a couple of themes that you have mentioned. I would love to hear a little bit more about how *Les Noces* was received. What was the audience reaction? What was the critical reaction? I think you got a little bit into the latter.

GARAFOLA Okay, well, first of all, it was a week long season that the Ballet Russes played in Russia. There were three or four ballets on every evening, and everything was sold out. Much of the audience, -- I mean, there were -- much of the audience were Russian emigres. This was this large number of people who had left Russia after the revolution, and were beginning to settle in the West, many at that point had begun to settle in Paris. So there was that. There was an international crowd, there was also a society crowd, there was a music crowd because this was a brand new Stravinsky score, which meant all your music critics were there, all the musicians, and Paris was a major center for music, new music. There were a couple of critics, most notably, Andre Levinson, who was a Russian -- who was Russian born, had left after the revolution, was completely bilingual, and immediately started [brief laughter] writing reviews in French. Was a very influential critic. He denounced it. He denounced it again and again and again, mainly because he saw it as a Soviet ballet, because in -- I mean, he called it, "This is electrification applied to the ballet."

GOLIA Oh.

GARAFOLA He saw it -- yes, he saw this as a work that was Soviet, and because she had been in Kiev during that post revolutionary period, because she had a school, because she had a studio, because she had gotten a little money from the regime that was there. Now, a little money meant she got food and firewood for her dancers. There was no money [brief laughter] at that point. And he kept at it for the next 10 years.

GOLIA Wow.

GARAFOLA He was also saying certain things about how she used Stravinsky's music. And it's

very interesting to hear some of the debates that were going on among the critics, so that there was another Russo-French critic who was more of a music critic, who completely attacked Levinson on the grounds of how she was using music and said, "This is a really brilliant way of using music. It's not Mickey Mouse in the music, it's taking all kinds of different approaches to what is a very difficult score." But Levinson would not, you know, never lost an opportunity to either not mention her name in print, or just attacking her completely.

GOLIA Thank you so much for that. Thank you to both of you for this remarkable talk. I cannot wait to read this book. So Lynn, thank you so much. We actually put a link to it in our chat today. Audience, thank you so much for attending today. I'm putting some links that our regular Doc Chatters will be used to seeing in the chat. So links to the collection items we examined today, and other resources along with the video and transcript of today's episode will be published shortly in a post on the NYPL blog, which we'll send out to all registrants, and all previous episodes can be found there as well. The easiest way to find these blog posts is by subscribing to the Doc Chat channel on the NYPL blog, and you'll find a link for that in the chat today. Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30, and our next episode, NYPL's Amanda Siegel, and performance studies scholar, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett will be exploring the world of judicial books published by food companies.

[Laughter]

GOLIA It's a good one, [brief laughter] featuring products like matzah, peanut oil, baking powder, Kasha and Crisco. You can register at the link I put in the chat, and you can look for future Doc Chat fan pages on NYPL's calendar, research letter and social media. Linda, Lynn, thank you so much.

MURRAY Thank you. Thank you to you.

GARAFOLA Thank you so much.

GOLIA Have a great day, everyone. See you next week.