



Above: Kyra Nijinsky at age 24 (photo: Cecil S. Thompson), and recently (Photo: Ruth Ziony).

Opposite: "Le Pavillon d'Armide," with choreography by Fokine, was the first ballet on the opening night program of Diaghilev's first Paris season, which took place at the Théâtre du Châtelet. At the dress rehearsal the previous day, May 18, 1909, "le tout Paris" was in attendance, to be introduced to the ballet company which would become the sensation of a generation. The leading roles on the 18th were danced by Vera Karalli and Mikhail Mordkin (from the Imperial Theatre, Moscow); on the 19th, by Fokine and Pavlova (who is seen with Nijinsky in the photo opposite). After "Pavillon" came the Polovetsian act from "Prince Igor" (choreographed by Fokine), then "Le Festin," a suite of dances with variations by Petipa, Fokine, Gorsky, Goltz and Kchessinsky. Benois designed sets and costumes for "Pavillon," the score for which was conducted by its composer, Tcherepnine. Nijinsky had a smallish role, that of Armide's Favorite Slave, inserted in the ballet by Fokine to show off Nijinsky's virtuosic powers. At one point Nijinsky left the stage with a leap (landing out of sight in the wings) the likes of which no Parisian present claimed to have seen before, and his solo received thunderous applause at its conclusion. Overnight, he became a legend.

(Photo: Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts, Lincoln Center; reprint courtesy of Knopf)

portrait of kyra nijinsky by pamela gaye

Nijinsky was once asked, "Is this charming little girl of yours going to follow in your footsteps? Will she become a dancer?"

"Follow in my footsteps? Oh no!" he promptly replied. "Her grandfather could only walk, her father can only dance. She'll have to fly! You'll fly won't you?" The little girl laughed and clapped her hands.

Nijinsky's response to Maurice Sandoz returns continually to my mind as I recall my six-month association with Kyra Nijinsky. Turning right from Nineteenth Avenue onto Ulloa Street, in San Francisco's Sunset district, one can't imagine that the daughter of Nijinsky, who has in her own right merited acclaim for artistic distinction, lives in near obscurity.

A few religious figurines rest in their particular positions in the partitioned room of the small two-story apartment. By her bedside is a picture of her father as he looked at age twenty. The second room of the house served as the kitchen and studio, where Kyra once sketched a portrait of Thomas Merton. She implores me to contemplate for a moment the beauty of the painting. Around his head is a halo. The deep blue, she explains, is the color of the celestial heavens; green, the color of hope and truth.

"I have made his eyes Asiatic," she muses apologetically. "Do you think the painting resembles his portrait closely enough?"

I try to contemplate both artist and painting as a unity. "All my paintings have the eyes of my father," she continues, "and, you see, I have even added the halo." Kyra is a member of the Third Order of St. Francis and had, on one occasion, lectured to me about "the dance and the soul." It seemed natural that she include the halo.

Religious belief as well as artistic creation are the ways in which Kyra most clearly shows herself to be Nijinsky's daughter. As our interviews progressed, although today she remembers little, I realized the profound impression which the first five years of her life with Vaslav Nijinsky in Switzerland and later, those passed in Paris, had made on her.

I first met Kyra at a party. I had often wondered what the daughter of Nijinsky would be like. The host suggested we all drive to Mill Valley from San Francisco. The Kyra I discovered under those circumstances was a small, attractive woman, who, in many ways, seemed child-like. Shyly she explained that she was afraid of crowded freeways and would appreciate my driving with utmost caution. She hated riding trolleys, being in elevators, doing anything that made her feel closed in. Later, I learned these feelings were rooted in her earliest childhood: she was sometimes locked in a room with her father when he had his "spells."

When we arrived in Mill Valley, a group of people were already waiting to pay court to La Nijinsky. One guest, a young writer named Nicholas, arrived late. Kyra, immediately intrigued by his face, asked permission to paint his portrait. She couldn't have known of my previous acquaintance with him and when her lack of this knowledge became evident, along with the fact he would be accompanying us back to San Francisco, she was startled. I immediately sensed the presence of La Nijinsky as she said, "In my sitting book, I have thirty-nine names. Nicholas, you are number forty, and Pamela," she said in a meaningful aside,

"you are number forty-one!"

At this first meeting, Kyra told me that her heritage had endowed her with a "Russian soul," causing her, on occasion, to meditate and thus sense the deeper meanings of life. This, she claimed, was joined with a "Hungarian personality," the paprika which moves her to rush to the record player after having sipped a Gallo Spánada, then dance about the room to gypsy music, striking balletic, Nijinsky-esque poses. Suddenly she will stop dancing and, still bursting with energy, begin singing along with the music.

Yet another Kyra I met was Kyra, Princess of Madagascar, who almost daily calls up Queen Mirage (Mrs. Florine Clark), once billed on Broadway as "the biggest thing in Belly-Dancing."

"Hello, hot-line Cairo?" Kyra would say. "Is this the Queen of Sheba?" From there, the conversation between two friends might continue indefinitely. Queen Mirage was one of her students at the Raouel Pausé school in Oakland in 1955. Since that date, the two have remained close friends. "My title," Kyra explained, "comes from one of Mother's ancestors having married the Queen of Madagascar."

The source of all the Kyras lay in a childhood dominated by a deep love for a beautiful father who later became plagued by sickness and incessant depressions, and clouded by the ugliness of poverty, and of never knowing where home was. She explained that she had known seven homes in her childhood.

She also said many times, "My father is all my childhood fairy tales rolled into one. He is Prince Charming to me. When I first saw him dance on the Metropolitan Opera stage, it was in *Giselle* or *Les Sylphides*. He wore a flowing white shirt with long satin sleeves. I was dressed up in a green velvet coat lined with fur. Stravinsky always wanted to be my babysitter but my father said no. He wanted to babysit for me himself. He used to push my pram and change my diapers.

"When I was born, June 19, 1914, he was interned in Vienna. Then we were prisoners of war in Spain at the Court of King Alfonso." Recalling her mother, Romola, she said, "I first called my mother 'mamita,' which the food vendors of Madrid chanted in the mornings. I went to America with Father and Mother right after Spain. These are my earliest memories."

Many years later Kyra was to record in her diary her unique relationship with her father:

Upon due consideration, I wish to remember how good my father had been to me since my most tender childhood. Later, I wondered why my cravings and my attachments were so great concerning my father. It could not only have been his legend or his illness together with the violent memories which so tragically marked my early childhood. No, the natural love of a child for a parent had been marked by more than blood ties . . . also my spiritual energies which bound us together in a God-given way. It seemed that I had been reared in a hot house with Father by my side. I shall always remember him in all my prayers for I dearly love him, not because of his fame or on account of his inspired deeds or his gifts, but on account of his child-like heart turned as a rose in the direction of God. He drew me very close to him for the sake of his conception of life so that I might share with him his spiritual experiences and

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