

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 45

### “The God of Dance”

#### Transcript

[music: fanfare]

In the year 1909, Vaslav Nijinsky, not yet twenty years old, would burst onto the scene as the most remarkable ballet dancer of the time. He had a grace and a power that were breathtaking. His leaps appeared to defy gravity.

In an age when mass media and instant communication were just beginning to make celebrity possible, Nijinsky became one of the world’s first celebrities. In Paris, they called him “*le dieu de la danse*,” the god of dance. He was destined to become the greatest male ballet dancer of the twentieth century.

Welcome to the History of the Twentieth Century.

[music: opening theme]

Episode 45. The God of Dance.

The greatest male ballet dancer of the twentieth century was an ethnic Pole born in the city of Kiev, probably in 1889, although no one’s completely sure. He always thought of himself as a Pole, although Russian was his first language, and his Polish was never polished. His parents, Thomas and Eleanor Nijinsky were themselves professional dancers who eked out a precarious living traveling across the Russian Empire performing in opera houses, theatres, carnivals, circuses, whatever.

Vaslav was the middle child in a family of three. His older brother Stanislav was three years older and his sister Bronislava was two years younger. All three children began performing with their parents while still very young.

Tragedy struck the Nijinsky family when Vaslav was still a toddler. Stanislav fell out of a third story window onto a cobblestone street. He suffered a traumatic brain injury that left him mentally impaired, and, in adolescence, Stanislav became so violent he had to be institutionalized. By then, their father had become involved with another woman and had left the family. Vaslav was now the man of the house at the age of ten.

But by that age, it had already become clear that he was a gifted dancer. You have to start training early in life to become a truly great dancer, and fortunately, Vaslav's parents knew exactly what to do and how to train him. He was also an unruly and rambunctious little boy, fond of climbing trees and swinging from the branches, or climbing onto rooftops and balancing on the edge. I can just imagine how his parents, who had already seen one son experience a terrible fall, felt about Vaslav's little parkour hobby.

His mother got him into the Imperial Ballet School at the age of nine, the age when ballet training has to begin. By all accounts, Vaslav was a poor student, headstrong, undisciplined. With his exotic looks and Polish accent, he was teased by the other boys. But, oh, could he dance, and, oh, could he jump.

When he was twelve, he suffered a serious injury when some of the other boys at the school dared him to jump over a wooden barricade they had set up. Vaslav was never one to shy from a challenge. He went to the far end of the room and ran flat out toward the barricade, preparing for his jump, but the other boys had soaped the floor as a prank. Well, boys will be boys, but in this case, the prank went very wrong. Vaslav's feet began slipping just as he needed to jump, and he ended up crashing headfirst into the barricade, so hard that he was unconscious for four days afterward. He suffered internal bleeding and a lacerated liver, and was hospitalized for months. Whether he suffered any brain trauma, and whether this would have anything to do with his later mental illness, is a matter of speculation. But it's safe to say the experience must have been psychologically traumatic, at least, both for Vaslav and his family.

And speaking of his family, his sister Bronislava entered the Imperial Ballet School a year after he did. She would grow up to become an acclaimed ballet dancer and choreographer in her own right.

As we saw back in episode 34, Vaslav Nijinsky was present on the street in St. Petersburg on Bloody Sunday. He was apparently not a protester; just someone who happened to get caught up in the mob and was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was struck in the head by the flat of a Cossack's sword. Happily, he was not seriously injured.

Vaslav was a prankster himself, and he was often disciplined for it; at one point he was almost expelled from the school. His marks in reading and writing, history, science, and mathematics were poor, but oh, could he dance. Even before his graduation, he was being singled out as one of the greatest dancers of his age. He never danced in the *corps de ballet* which is where most graduates of the Imperial Ballet School start out; no, he was a soloist almost immediately. Before he was 18, he danced a *pas de deux* with Anna Pavlova, and ballet enthusiasts declared him the eighth wonder of the world. Matilde Kshessinskaya, whom you may remember from episode 29 as Emperor Nikolai's one-time mistress, was now perhaps the most prominent female ballet dancer in Russia, with great Imperial connections, and she got Nijinsky a prestigious summer

position at an aristocratic resort. He was also much sought after as a ballet instructor, as you might imagine, which supplemented his income.

He was not making a tremendous amount of money at this point in his life, although he was doing pretty well for a teenage ballet dancer. Most of the money went to support his mother.

Now when I told the story of Emperor Nikolai and Matilde Kshessinskaya, I said that the Imperial Ballet was also the Imperial brothel. That was a bit of an exaggeration, but only a bit of exaggeration. The Imperial Ballet was where the nobility of St. Petersburg went to find their mistresses. Or misters, as the case may be. Since they didn't have Tinder back then, older and more experienced dancers filled that role, accepting finder's fees from aristocrats in exchange for matching them up with a compatible young dancer, typically someone just starting out, who didn't have very much money and desperately needed a rich patron with connections to help advance their careers. One such aristocrat, a Ukrainian noble named Pavel Dmitrievitch Lvov plunked down his rubles and got paired up with Vaslav Nijinsky.

I wanted to insert a joke here about Lvov's luck, but I can't decide if I want to call it good luck or bad luck. On the plus side, being seen all over St. Petersburg with the eighth wonder of the world as your constant companion has to do wonders for your social standing. On the other hand, were talking about a lover whom even his closest friends and family consistently describe as shy, impatient, moody, tongue-tied, awkward, temperamental, even irrational. And that's when he was a grown man. Now ask yourself what he was like when he was 17. Probably all of those things times 10.

Vaslav's mother was pleased by the relationship, and not just because Lvov sent her money and boxes of chocolates and tins of caviar and bottles of French wine and baskets of fruit. She had been afraid that Vaslav would get married, which was the death knell for a ballet dancer's career, so she was overjoyed to see him involved with a man.

Now, the idea of these kinds of relationships is that they're supposed to benefit both partners. We know what Lvov is getting out of the relationship, but Nijinsky is supposed to be getting something, too. By all accounts, he did. During the year that he was involved with Lvov, he started paying more attention to his hair and his clothes and his appearance. He developed some poise and rubbed elbows with some of the most important people in Russia, even the Emperor.

Most important of all, it was Lvov who took Nijinsky along to those dinners with Serge Diaghilev and his circle of Mirisskusniki that I described in last week's episode. And that brings us back to Sergei Diaghilev himself, who, you may recall, has just returned to St. Petersburg in triumph following his acclaimed Paris production of Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*.

Some of Diaghilev's artist friends had been pushing for years to get a new ballet, *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, produced. Based on a French story and with music by the young and relatively

unknown Russian composer Nikolai Tcherepnin, and costumes and sets by artists of the Mirisskusniki. *Le Pavillon d'Armide* would be choreographed by the up-and-coming young dancer Mikhail Fokine, who had been wowed by Isadora Duncan and who had come to Diaghilev for advice and support back in the days of the 1905 revolution.

*Le Pavillon d'Armide* is the story of a nobleman caught in a storm, who spends the night in a mysterious castle. A tapestry of Armide, the Saracen sorceress, catches his eye. He falls asleep, and dreams that he has entered the tapestry and spends the night amid wild adventures with Armide, only to wake in the morning and realize it was all a dream. Except that he is holding Armide's scarf. It's a perfect story for a ballet. The production was to star Pavel Gerdt and Matilda Kshessinskaya, two of the Imperial Ballet's principal dancers, as the nobleman and Armide, with Vaslav Nijinsky as Armide's slave. But the Mirisskusniki didn't get along so well with the stuffy bureaucrats at the Imperial Ballet, and then Kschessinskaya walked out of the production shortly before the premiere. I guess she thought she was going to show them, but what happened instead was that the young up-and-comer Anna Pavlova got the part, leaving Kschessinskaya seething.

Diaghilev saw the Imperial Ballet production of *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, and chose it as one of the ballets he would take to Paris in 1909. And although Vaslav Nijinsky had made no impression on Diaghilev at the dinner table, it was shortly after Diaghilev saw him dance that the two of them became lovers. And, as was typical for Diaghilev, Nijinsky would be his partner both in love and in art. And for the next five years these two men would reshape ballet.

They would have to do it without Imperial support. The Russian Emperor, Nikolai II, had supported Diaghilev's project of bringing Russian ballet to Paris with money and the loaning of costumes and sets and the provision of rehearsal space, because it was all in the interest of building and maintaining good relations between Russia and France, which was especially crucial after Russia's humbling in the Russo-Japanese War. But after Kschessinskaya was replaced with the younger Anna Pavlova, she took her revenge on the production by turning the Emperor against Diaghilev, and he lost all Imperial support.

But Diaghilev forged ahead with his plans in spite of this setback, and presented his ballet company in Paris in 1909. They were dancers from the Imperial Ballet on their off-season, and Diaghilev billed them as "The Imperial Ballet," even though it was not an official Imperial Ballet production. The opening night, May 19, 1909, is the stuff of legend. The writer Anna de Noailles, who attended that night, described it afterward by writing, "it was as if creation, having stopped on the seventh day, now all of a sudden resumed. It is something completely new in the world of the arts." The German writer and diplomat Harry Kessler wrote "Nijinsky and Pavlova, both extraordinarily young and beautiful, light and graceful; not the slightest trace of sentiment. Both beguilingly elegant. Nijinsky virile, but as beautiful as a Greek god. These women and these men seem to have descended from another, higher, more beautiful world. We are truly

witnessing the birth of a new art.” Marcel Proust said that Paris had succumbed to a fever more intense than anything it had experienced since the Dreyfus affair.

It was as if the Russians were now teaching ballet back to the French. What was so special about these ballets? Well, there were a few things. These ballets focused more on virtuosoistic individual performances, with genuine acting and discrete characters rather than an emphasis on the *corps de ballet*. And of course, the distinctive Russian cultural influences. Most important, though, these ballets were genuine collaborations between forward-looking modern artists: the music, the libretto, the choreography, the sets and the costumes, these things were all created together, influenced one another, and expressed a unified, modern theme.

And then there was Nijinsky. He became the face of Diaghilev’s ballet. Parisians began calling him “the god of dance.” Male ballet dancers were all but extinct in France. It had become customary for the male roles in ballets to be danced by women. Nijinsky brought the male ballet dancer back into fashion. His expressive face, his innovative movement, and most of all his soaring, powerful leaps wowed the audiences. Sad to say, Diaghilev never permitted Nijinsky or any of his other dancers to be filmed, so we have to rely on verbal descriptions from audiences of the time. Motion pictures were in their infancy in this day, and Diaghilev thought the technology too primitive and jerky; he feared it would make his dancers look silly.

As Diaghilev and his ballet company were basking in the glow of their success in Paris that spring, Alexei Mavrin moved out of Diaghilev’s hotel room, and Vaslav Nijinsky moved in. Diaghilev bought Nijinsky a platinum ring with a large sapphire as a token of their relationship. Mavrin got back at Diaghilev by running off with Olga Fyodorova, one of Diaghilev’s dancers. But once again, Diaghilev was in a relationship that was both personal and professional. This one would last five years, and during this period, these two men would reinvent ballet.

Their relationship has been much discussed and much analyzed. What’s interesting about this is you get three very different pictures, depending on which sources you look at. To Diaghilev partisans, Nijinsky is an ambitious schemer who used Lvov to get to Diaghilev, and slept with both men to further his dancing career. Nijinsky partisans almost always depict Sergei Diaghilev as a middle-aged seducer, manipulating an awkward and naïve teenager confused about his own sexuality, for the sake of Diaghilev’s personal gratification and public glory. And then there are the romantics, who simply see it as the love affair of the century. I don’t know that I can add anything to this argument, except to note the fact that these three possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Human relationships can get complicated. And it’s not so strange to think that two people might stay together for five years for a complex mixture of personal and professional reasons.

[music: *Shehérézade*]

The 1909 season had been a huge success critically, but it lost £80,000. Undeterred, Diaghilev's next step would be an even bigger 1910 season, in which the ballet would tour more cities, put on more performances, and capitalize on its success and fame.

You may recall that Diaghilev's Russian art exhibitions and operas were well received in Paris, but after he had shown the best Russia had to offer, there was nothing left. He was facing a similar problem with ballet, so he would make an important decision: henceforth, his ballet company would shift away from being primarily a Russian repertory ballet company, to being a modern ballet company, premiering new works every season, and commissioning works from the best composers and artists in Europe.

The other problem that Diaghilev was facing was that his success had made Russian dancers a hot item, very much in demand across Europe, and it's not like he had a monopoly on them. Russia has no shortage of talented and underpaid dancers willing to moonlight in Paris or Berlin or London in some theater or music hall. His new approach would solve this problem as well. He would be offering original, cutting-edge ballet that you couldn't get anywhere else. A new art for a new century.

And it wasn't going to be exclusively Russian, either. One of his first moves was to commission new ballet suites from France's two leading composers, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. To Ravel, he proposed a ballet based on the second century Greek romance, Daphnis and Chloe. It was Fokine's idea, something he'd been trying to get off the ground since 1904. He was Diaghilev's only choreographer, and he could be temperamental, so Diaghilev worked hard to keep him on the team. Ravel would accept the commission, and composed a beautiful suite, but he would deliver it two years late, and it would not be produced until 1912.

To Debussy he proposed a ballet set in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venice. Debussy and Diaghilev did not get along, and Debussy scoffed at the idea of a Russian ballet set in Venice, calling the idea "rather contradictory." Perhaps Diaghilev agreed; he eventually dropped that idea, which, of course, only left Debussy hanging and annoyed him further. Diaghilev will eventually commission a ballet from Debussy, but that will come later.

Diaghilev turned his attention instead to another project, a Russian project, because there was still a place for distinctively Russian art in his new vision for the ballet company. His creative team of Miristkusniki put together a libretto based on a couple of Russian folk tales, and it was called *Firebird*.

He sounded out a composer named Fyodor Akimenko for the commission, but decided he was a "slow-witted bumpkin," and moved on. His second choice was Anatoly Lyadov, a well-established composer and instructor with a reputation for procrastination. He accepted the commission, but a few weeks later, it is said, when asked how the *Firebird* project was coming along, he replied, "Oh, excellently. I've already bought the music paper."

So Diaghilev started shopping around for a backup composer, just in case. He knew a young man, 27 years old, a former student of the now deceased Rimsky-Korsakov. Diaghilev reached out to him, describing the proposed ballet, although he did not actually offer the commission, and the young man said he was interested. A couple of months later, having given up on Lyadov, Diaghilev telephoned the young man to formally ask him if he would take the commission, and was surprised and delighted to be told by the young composer that he was already hard at work on it. That young composer's name is Igor Stravinsky.

Diaghilev was hoping that his success in Paris would bring him acclaim in St. Petersburg, but the opposite happened. The Russian art community resented him, seeing him as no more than a flamboyant salesman. It didn't help that Diaghilev's business partner in Paris was writing scathing letters to the Imperial theater bureaucracy in St. Petersburg complaining about the losses they had sustained and Diaghilev's sharp business practices, including presenting himself and his dance company as being somehow officially representing the Imperial Ballet, which they certainly were not. And then there was Matilde Ksessinskaya, still jealous, still resentful, still using her Imperial connections to make sure Diaghilev got no support from the Emperor. Diaghilev would continue to dream of bringing his ballet company to St. Petersburg in triumph from now until the October Revolution in 1917, but it would never happen.

When Diaghilev and Nijinsky were on vacation in Venice, in between seasons, they had dinner with the American dancer, Isadora Duncan. Just to give you an idea of what it would have been like to hang out with Vaslav Nijinsky and Isadora Duncan, they sat together at dinner, and at one point, she casually turned to him and proposed that they should get married, because they would produce children who would be amazing dancers. Nijinsky calmly replied that he would not want his children to dance like Isadora Duncan, and anyway, he was too young to get married.

In 1910, Diaghilev and his ballet company, including Nijinsky and now also his little sister Bronislava, would return to Paris for another triumphant season. Only now, the company was called the "Ballets Russes," the Russian Ballet, since Diaghilev couldn't pretend to be associated with the Imperial Ballet anymore. As a gesture of gratitude to the French for receiving them so warmly, the company put on a production of a French romantic ballet standard, *Giselle*, with Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky. And then they performed *Scheherazade*, based on one of the tales of the Arabian nights – which was Nijinsky's idea – with music by Rimsky-Korsakov and starring Nijinsky as the Golden Slave. One of Diaghilev's friends noted that this was the third time in two seasons that Diaghilev had cast Nijinsky in the role of a slave, and added, "I hope, Sergei, that one of these days you'll emancipate him."

And then there was *Firebird*. During rehearsals, Diaghilev had pointed Stravinsky out to the dancers and musicians and told them, "Mark him well, he is a man on the eve of celebrity." Too true. It was the composer's first major composition, and it made him a name. Even Debussy grudgingly acknowledged that "in certain respects, it's quite good." It premiered with Tamara Karsavina and Mikhail Fokine dancing the principal roles, and Fokine also choreographing.

Diaghilev wanted to grow his ballet company into a full-time company, one that toured all year round. It costs a lot of money to commission a new ballet, build sets, design and sew costumes, and it would take more performances to properly amortize those costs.

But most of his dancers were still working in the Imperial Ballet and were only available in the off-season. In particular, Nijinsky. He was Diaghilev's biggest star, and to go on tour without him would be next to impossible. But as a graduate of the Imperial Ballet School, Nijinsky was under obligation to dance in the Imperial Ballet for a certain number of years. This problem solved itself one night in December 1910, when Nijinsky danced *Giselle* for the Imperial Ballet. And took it upon himself to wear his costume from the Ballet Russes' Paris production of last May, rather than the officially sanctioned Imperial Ballet costume. That costume had him in tights, and over them a jacket that went down to the middle of his thigh. Earlier in Paris, Diaghilev had insisted that the jacket be shortened until it only came down to his hip, all the better to reveal Nijinsky's... charms. The costume raised eyebrows in Paris. In St. Petersburg, it apparently went way too far. The Dowager Empress, Maria Fyodorovna, Emperor Nikolai's mother, was in the audience along with the Grand Duke Sergei, the Emperor's cousin, and another of Matilde Kschessinskaya's lovers. The Dowager Empress was offended by the costume, and at intermission sent Grand Duke Sergei backstage to ask whether Nijinsky was going to wear that same costume in the second act. The grand Duke demanded that Nijinsky appeared before him in his costume. Nijinsky initially refused, and appeared before the Grand Duke wearing a long black overcoat over his costume. He then opened the overcoat just long enough to let the Grand Duke see that he would indeed be wearing the same costume, then turned and stalked away.

Nijinsky was fired from the Imperial Ballet the next day. Diaghilev was delighted; his problem was solved. This worked out so well for Diaghilev that some people accuse him of engineering it, although it's hard to see how even Diaghilev could have managed all that. More likely it was the doing of Matilde Kschessinskaya, in a misguided attempt to sabotage the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev sent out press announcements at once, and the Paris newspapers were full of stories describing how the dancer who had been the toast of Paris was now being treated with appalling shabbiness in his home country. Diaghilev couldn't have asked for better publicity for the coming 1911 season.

The Russian government was so embarrassed by the publicity that the Imperial Ballet reached out to Nijinsky and suggested they could take him back if he would only write a letter of apology to the Grand Duke. Nijinsky replied that he was the one who was owed an apology. His sister Bronislava also left the Imperial Ballet, in solidarity with her brother.

1911 was another good season for the Ballets Russes. There was another Stravinsky ballet, *Petrushka*, the story of a puppet come to life, with Nijinsky in the title role. *Petrushka* is the Russian version of the puppet character known in Italy as Pulcinella, or in England as Punch. Nijinsky was acclaimed, not only for his dancing, but for his expressive miming. He would later

say that this was his favorite role. And then there was the *Spirit of the Rose*, a short ballet meant as a showpiece for Nijinsky to the music of Carl Maria von Weber. This piece was *Amide* in reverse: a happy girl comes home from her first ball, holding a rose. She falls asleep, and the Spirit of the Rose, Nijinsky, leaps in through her bedroom window and dances with her. At the end of the piece, Nijinsky takes a dramatic leap out of the window and out of view of the audience, as if soaring away into space. Actually, there were men backstage and out of sight who caught him. For this piece, Nijinsky wore tights with silk rose petals stitched onto them. The silk rose petals would often come off, and became a popular black-market item that the stage crew could sell for a hefty markup to Nijinsky's many female admirers.

1911 saw the Ballets Russes perform in London for the first time, which was very lucrative for the company. They appeared as part of the festivities surrounding the coronation of the Russian Emperor's English cousin, George V. Dancing with the Ballets Russes in London that season was none other than Matilde Kshessinskaya. Diaghilev invited her to come dance with them in London as a way of burying the hatchet. The British press fawned over her, and she delighted in showing off her million-ruble collection of jewelry.

Diaghilev had other good reasons to want to make peace with Kshessinskaya. Russia had conscription at this time, and Vaslav Nijinsky was liable for military service. Military service would end Nijinsky's dancing career. Ballet dancers have to practice every day, and to miss practice can destroy a dancer's ballet skills in a matter of weeks. Exemptions from military service were given as a matter of course to dancers in the Imperial Ballet, but, hey, Nijinsky isn't dancing with the Imperial Ballet anymore. Diaghilev hired lawyers and filed petitions, but even with Kshessinskaya on their side, or at least not actively hostile anymore, they were not able to get Nijinsky an exemption. He was now technically a draft dodger, and could not safely return to Russia.

All of the Ballets Russes new works were choreographed by Mikhail Fokine, who had proved he was able to turn out successful choreography over and over again on short notice. But a sense began to grow, in the company and among critics, that Fokine had lost his edge. His ballets didn't seem as fresh and original anymore. But Diaghilev was cultivating a new choreographer in secret: Vaslav Nijinsky, who was already hard at work on his first project, a ballet danced to Claude Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*.

No one other than Nijinsky and Diaghilev knew about this project at first. Fokine was temperamental, and Diaghilev couldn't afford to alienate him. Yet. In the beginning of 1912, when the company was performing in Berlin, Fokine did not come along, which afforded Diaghilev the opportunity to begin rehearsing Nijinsky's first ballet. Diaghilev was crafty; this Debussy piece was 18 years old by 1912, and the rights to use it could be had for much less money than a new commission. And it's only about ten minutes long, which means that if Nijinsky's first ballet flops, well, who's gonna remember one short failure in a season that includes many other works? Fokine was assigned choreography for Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*

suite, which he had finally finished, two years late. The Ravel piece was an hour long and contains some of the best music Ravel ever wrote. Between the two, there's no question that Fokine got the more prestigious assignment, so he's got no reason to feel jealous of Nijinsky, does he?

It became a source of great strife within the company. Fokine had gotten used to being *the* choreographer of the Ballets Russes. And then there were the rehearsal problems. Nijinsky's ten-minute ballet required over a hundred rehearsal sessions, a tremendous investment for such a short piece. There are few reasons for this. One is that Nijinsky's choreography was breaking new ground, with movements outside the accepted vocabulary of ballet. Many of the dancers are recent graduates of the Imperial Ballet School, and Nijinsky is asking them to up and forget everything they just learned, and dance in an entirely different way. To accomplish that requires a lot of patience, a lot of tact, and good communication skills; three qualities Vaslav Nijinsky was notably lacking.

The many rehearsals of *Afternoon of a Faun* became a source of friction with Fokine, and it was cutting into rehearsal time he needed for his much longer *Daphnis and Chloe*. It was a stressful time for Nijinsky, too. Now at the age of 23, he was about to premiere his first ballet with the world's greatest ballet company, in front the world's most discriminating audience: Paris. Some of the company's more conservative supporters didn't like the new ballet and told Diaghilev so. Bronislava intervened to help mediate on her brother's behalf.

The company continued their tour, to Dresden and Vienna and Budapest, and then to Monte Carlo to continue rehearsals for the new season. When the Ballets Russes performed in Budapest, in the audience was a young woman named Romola Pulszky. She had just turned 21 years old, and was recently engaged. Her father had been a Hungarian politician who fled the country after a political scandal and killed himself when Romola was still a child. Her mother was Emelia Markus, an acclaimed Hungarian actress. After seeing Nijinsky dance, Romola called off her engagement and announced to her family and friends that she was going to marry Vaslav Nijinsky. As her family was wealthy, she began to follow the Ballets Russes on tour, looking for ways to get close to him. And she did.

The 1912 season turned out to be disappointing at first, increasing the pressure on *Afternoon of a Faun* to succeed. Diaghilev knew he needed a hit. He was an expert at manipulating the press, and one of the ways he did it was by inviting the right people to attend rehearsals, people who would then go out and create what we would now call buzz for the new ballet. He pulled out all stops for *Afternoon of a Faun*.

One of the things he was worried about was the ending. The story of the ballet is a faun alone in the woods. A group of nymphs appears and teases him. Nijinsky's costume consisted of flesh colored tights over his lower body, with large brown spots on them. His bare upper body also had brown spots painted on it, so that from a distance he looked like a naked, piebald, half man,

half animal. A cluster of grapes hung in his crotch. Apart from Nijinsky's daring costume and choreography, the ballet ends with the nymphs departing, one of them leaving the faun her scarf. The faun then lays the scarf on the ground, lies on top of it, and, well, since this is a family podcast, I'll just say he does something with the scarf that he probably would rather have done with the nymph.

One of the Miriskustniki came up with the idea of inviting the famous French sculptor Auguste Rodin to a rehearsal. Rodin was a celebrity, an artist of undeniable greatness, and was known to be broad-minded about eroticism in art. So Diaghilev prepped him to help defend the piece. There were a couple of problems with this. One was that Rodin was now 71 years old and was showing signs of dementia. The other was that he had never seen a ballet before in his life, and hardly qualified as an expert in the field. Still, he was Rodin.

*Afternoon of a Faun* premiered on May 29, 1912. The audience was polite during the ballet, but when it was over the applause was mixed with boos and hisses. Diaghilev was flustered at first, but then calls of "encore" were heard. Actually, "bis," which is French for encore, go figure, but either way, Diaghilev seized the opportunity and ordered the company to perform the piece again.

[music: *Prelude to Afternoon of a Faun*]

The next day, *Le Figaro* published a scathing review, describing the ballet as lecherous, filthy, bestial, crude, and indecent. But the same day, *Le Matin* published a piece, ostensibly by Auguste Rodin, praising the ballet. "Nijinsky has never been so remarkable as in his latest role. Form and meaning are indissolubly wedded in his body, which is totally expressive of the mind within." It was actually written by Diaghilev.

In subsequent performances, the company would soften the eroticism of the ending. But even so, it was something totally new in the field of ballet, a piece that sealed the reputation of the Ballets Russes as the most innovative dance company in the world. Nijinsky was hailed as a genius, and Diaghilev hailed as the genius who cultivated him.

I found a YouTube video of *Afternoon of a Faun*, danced by Rudolph Nureyev with reconstructions of the original sets, costumes, and choreography. The resolution is low, but it's pretty close to re-creating the experience of being there in 1912, so I recommend watching it. It's on the website at [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com).

Ah, but what about *Daphnis and Chloe* you ask? The premiere of that piece got pushed back to June 8, meaning there would only be two performances in Paris. Diaghilev thought about dropping it altogether, but kept it in the schedule out of respect for Ravel, who had spent years on the score. A few days later, Fokine quit.

Okay, so Nijinsky has one short successful ballet under his belt, successful albeit controversial – and make no mistake, Diaghilev was delighted by the controversy. Still, could the now 24-year-old principal dancer carry the company's choreography by himself?

Diaghilev was going to try. For the 1913 season, the company would premiere three new ballets, two of them choreographed by Nijinsky. The third would be choreographed by a Russian named Boris Romanov, based on the ever popular story of Salome, and intended as a vehicle for Tamara Karsavina, who didn't like very much to dance Nijinsky's choreography.

Meanwhile, Romola Pulszky continued to follow the company wherever it went, making her one of history's first groupies. She was frustrated by the fact that Nijinsky was hardly ever seen except at Diaghilev's side. And, when Diaghilev wasn't with him, his sister Bronislava was. Several of the dancers and crew of the Ballets Russes took notice of her, and some of them figured out that she had a romantic interest in someone in the company. When asked, she would always name some other dancer, never admitting it was Nijinsky. A few figured it out anyway, and eventually one kind soul took her aside and quietly explained to her that Nijinsky and Diaghilev were a thing, and yes, that is a thing. The devoutly Catholic Romola was not willing to accept this; instead, she began to pray every night that God would make Nijinsky heterosexual, and offered herself as God's instrument.

Nijinsky's two choreographic projects for 1913 were *Jeux* and *Rite of Spring*. The latter was a project that Igor Stravinsky had been working on for two years now. *Jeux* was a ballet conceived by Nijinsky and Diaghilev, to music commissioned from Claude Debussy. When Diaghilev initially proposed the project to Debussy, Debussy cabled him back SUBJECT BALLET JEUX IDIOTIC—NOT INTERESTED. But Debussy got more interested when Diaghilev doubled the proposed commission. *Jeux* is set in the year 1920, I don't know, does that make up the first ever science-fiction ballet? The word *jeux*, by the way, is the French word for "games." It is set in a park, in the evening with electric lights. Diaghilev originally wanted airplanes and zeppelins passing back and forth in the sky above the dancers as a way of making the scene look futuristic, although this idea was dropped for budget reasons. It begins with a tennis ball bouncing across the stage. The three dancers – a man and two women – dressed in tennis clothes enter, looking for the ball. The man dances with one of the women. The scorned other woman mocks them, attracting the man away from the first woman. Melodrama ensues. The three dancers were given androgynous looks, and Nijinsky would later say he was actually envisioning the ballet as the tangled gay relationships among three men.

*Jeux* comes across as kind of dry and sterile, and it was not a success. Which is a shame, as it was Debussy's last major composition. But two weeks later, the company would premiere *Rite of Spring*, and *Jeux* would quickly be forgotten.

The production of *Jeux* suffered because *Rite of Spring* was sucking up everyone's attention. It was a much larger work, with many more dancers. The work was inspired recent archaeological

finds in Russia, and was meant as a sort of half-realistic, half-fantastic reconstruction of ancient Russian peoples. The ballet depicts a primitive tribe undertaking their rituals to welcome the spring, rituals that culminate in the selection of a young virgin who is then charged to dance herself to death. Stravinsky's score for *Rite of Spring* is a *tour de force*; with its irregular, savage rhythms, it was like nothing heard before. Nijinsky's choreography looked like no ballet ever seen before. Instead of the graceful, refined movements we associate with ballet, this one was jumping and stomping to the irregular beats of the music. While the choreography fit the music and the scenario, the dancers hated it. Stravinsky himself would play the piano at rehearsals, pounding the instrument like he was about to destroy it. Nijinsky would call out counts, yell and scream, and make the dancers do it over and over and over again.

The theater was packed for the premiere, and the harsh rhythms and the primitive dance movements sparked a riot in the audience. They were divided between those who thought they were seeing something innovative and sublime and amazing, and those who booed and hissed, because they felt they were being insulted, and that calling this a ballet amounted to false advertising. Diaghilev had the theater turn the lights on and off to try to calm the audience; Nijinsky was forced to stand backstage and shout out the counts to the dancers: "16, 17, 18..." Because the commotion in the theater was so loud that no one on the stage could hear the music.

Surely this was the first and last time ever that a ballet started a riot. It garnered international headlines. Again, Diaghilev was delighted. Clearly he was of the "any publicity is good publicity" school. But how was a ballet that was too avant-garde for Paris going to play in places like London or Vienna or Budapest? In London and Vienna, the musicians laughed when they were handed their scores, and balked at playing the crazy rhythms.

I posted a video of a modern reconstruction of the Nijinsky *Rite of Spring* at the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), if you'd like to see for yourself what all the fuss is about.

It appears that by the summer of 1913, the relationship between Diaghilev and Nijinsky was getting strained. The now 24-year-old dancer and choreographer was an international celebrity in his own right, and was becoming increasingly stubborn, headstrong, and independent-minded. There is evidence that by August they were no longer living together.

That month, the company went on its first tour of South America. Diaghilev did not go along. He had a phobia about drowning, or so he claimed. He liked to tell people that a fortune teller had once told him he was going to die by drowning, but that sounds like a typical Diaghilev story. But for whatever reason, he did not like to travel by sea. No doubt the *Titanic* disaster was still fresh in his mind, and that wouldn't help any. Bronislava didn't go either. But Nijinsky did go. Most of the company traveled to South America in second-class cabins, but Nijinsky went first class. Romola Pulszky followed the company to South America, traveling on the same ship, and buying herself a first-class cabin, within sight of Nijinsky's. This was the first time in Vaslav Nijinsky's life that he was not under the watchful eye of either his parents, his teachers, his

sister, or Sergei Diaghilev. Here was Romola's chance at last. She got time alone with him, and in spite of the fact that they did not have a language in common, well, they must've figured out some way to communicate, because when the tour reached Buenos Aires in September, they got married.

Vaslav Nijinsky was an international celebrity, and one of the world's most eligible bachelors. His unexpected marriage was front-page news from around the world. Sergei Diaghilev, vacationing in Venice, learned of the wedding from a newspaper. He reportedly howled and wept when he read the story. Nijinsky's mother and sister were also stunned. You may recall that this is exactly what his mother did *not* want to happen.

Nijinsky seemed not to understand that his marriage was going to change his relationship with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. When he and his wife returned to Europe, he was puzzled that Diaghilev made no attempt to contact him. He sent Diaghilev a telegram, inquiring about scheduling the 1914 season. He received a telegram in reply, not from Diaghilev, but from a subordinate, informing him that he was dismissed from the Ballets Russes. It was company policy to dismiss any dancer who got married, but one suspects that was not the only reason.

Diaghilev had commissioned a score from Richard Strauss for the 1914 season, *The Legend of Joseph*. Nijinsky was to choreograph and star in it. Now Diaghilev turned to Mikhail Fokine for the choreography; Fokine agreed to return to the Ballets Russes on the condition that the company never again perform choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky. To star in his new production, the now 41-year-old Diaghilev found a new dancer in the Imperial Ballet, 17-year old Leonid Myasin, who replaced Nijinsky, both in the Ballets Russes, and in Diaghilev's bed.

Myasin would go on to make a name for himself as a dancer and a choreographer in his own right, and Diaghilev would plug along with the Ballets Russes. Nijinsky would go looking for a new ballet company, and explored the possibility of starting his own. But the events of 1914 would interrupt the careers of both of these men. And, it is said, because of those events, Richard Strauss would never get paid for his composition.

We'll have to stop there for today, because after this point the story gets tangled up in the Great War. Both Diaghilev and Nijinsky would attempt to carry on with their careers, and we'll check in on them again, although neither of them will ever again reach the stellar heights of those amazing years from 1909 to 1913.

Next week is the Labor Day holiday weekend in the United States, so I am going to take a break. As usual, you can trust that I will continue reading and researching upcoming episodes. If you get really bored during the break, you can read a short story of mine that I've posted on my personal website, [markpainter.us](http://markpainter.us). Click on the link that says "free stories." A few years back, the Pennsylvania Bar Association had a short story contest for members, with the only condition being that the story had to be about a lawyer. This was my entry in the contest, entitled "The

Secret Life of Matthew Smythe.” It didn’t win the contest, for some reason, but you’re welcome to read it anyway, on my website, [markpainter.us](http://markpainter.us).

And I hope you’ll join me in two weeks’ time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we check in again at Great Britain. When last we stopped by, the Liberal Party had won a landslide victory after ten years in the political wilderness. How is that new Liberal government doing? We’ll find out in two weeks’ time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1980, an American film entitled *Nijinsky* was released. *Nijinsky* tells the story of Vaslav Nijinsky, Sergei Diaghilev, and Romola Pulszky during those pivotal years of 1912 and 1913. It was directed by Herbert Ross, who had previously directed *The Turning Point*, also ballet-themed, and stars George de la Peña as Nijinsky and Alan Bates as Diaghilev. Its reception has been mixed, but I like it. It is an immersive film, which very much goes for the romantic interpretation of the relationship between the two men, and depicts their falling out as the sad result of a series of misunderstandings.

[music: closing theme]