

## ‘Nijinsky’ by John Neumeier: Present, past and even earlier time

Anelia Yaneva

**Abstract.** In search of general directorial and choreographic techniques, two of John Neumeier’s step-by-step works are analysed - “Nijinsky” and “The Lady of the Camellias”, in which the author makes intriguing references between different time layers - present, memories, roles in the ballet “Nijinsky”; the novel of Alexander Dumas *films* and “Manon” by Abbé Prévost in the ballet “The Lady of the Camellias”. Through the interactions between past and present, between the protagonist and his visions, Neumeier builds a new model of choreographic directing.

**Keywords:** choreography, ballet directing, dance, ballet, dance theatre

American artist and choreographer John Neumeier (born February 24, 1939) works mainly in Hamburg.<sup>1</sup> He is an artist with a very wide range. On the one hand, he stages *drama ballets* related to literary works by Shakespeare, Molière, Cervantes, Tennessee Williams, Chekhov, Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Alexandre Dumas *films*, to mention a few. On the other hand, he also creates his own author versions of well-established classical ballets<sup>2</sup> (Koegler 1987; Siegel 1985). Neumeier’s productions disprove the thesis that only “current” events can be presented in the art of ballet and that it is impossible to show events from the past<sup>3</sup>. Neumeier not only succeeds in bringing the present and the past together on stage, but also goes back even further - to the even earlier time, building his ballets in three planes, which are the present, the past and the even

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<sup>1</sup> He is the one to be credited with Hamburg Ballet’s top ranking both in Germany and across Europe.

<sup>2</sup> “The Nutcracker” (1971), “The Swan Lake” and “The Sleeping Beauty” (1978) by Tchaikovsky; “Giselle” (1983) by Adam and a new version (2000); “Sylvia” (1997) by Léo Delibes; “A Cinderella Story”, with music by Prokofiev (1992).

<sup>3</sup> In very rare instances, past actions are presented as a flashback - a memory of the protagonist, framed at the beginning and end of the action by his “reflections” monologue, an example of which is the case of “The Fountain of Bakhchisarai” by Rostislav Zakharov (with première in 1934 in Leningrad and in 1936 in Moscow).

earlier times. Moreover, he manages to do it not in the chronology of the actions performed, but as fragmentary memories of the protagonist, with this further complicating the dramaturgical and directorial construction of his ballets.

The story of Vaslav Nijinsky<sup>4</sup> (Grigoriev 1993; Krasovskaja 1972; Gaevski 1981; Balet. Jenciklopedija 1981) is a thrill for Neumeier, which is why he would return to Nijinsky's tragic fate on a number of occasions<sup>5</sup>.

In his latest production titled "NIJINSKY", with subtitle "WEDDING WITH GOD"<sup>6</sup> Vaslav Nijinsky<sup>7</sup> is performed by the Ukrainian artist Alexandre Riabko<sup>8</sup>. His associates that *really existed* in his past are his wife Romola Nijinsky (performed by Carolina Agüero), his partner Tamara Karsavina (performed by Silvia Azzoni), his sister Bronislava Nijinska (performed by Patricia Friza), his brother Stanislav Nijinsky (performed by Aleix Martínez), who went mad in his early years and died, their mother Eleonora Bereda (performed by Anna Laudere) and their father Thomas Nijinsky (performed by Carsten Jung), who left his family over a love affair, Leonid Massine (performed by Jacopo Bellussi) - a dancer in the troupe of Diaghilev who subsequently became a choreographer. And, of course, Sergei Diaghilev (performed by Ivan Urban), who was the personality to whom Nijinsky owed his career and stardom status as a performer and his early stage as a choreographer. Nijinsky's intimate relationship with Diaghilev is a known fact<sup>9</sup>, but Neumeier interprets it differently<sup>10</sup>.

In parallel with the real characters, *Nijinsky's roles*, performed by his doppelgangers - *Harlequin* and the *Spirit of the Rose* (performed by Alexandr Trusch) from the eponymous ballets, *Petrushka* (performed by Lloyd Riggins) from the eponymous ballet, the *Golden Slave* from "Scheherazade" and the

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<sup>4</sup> Vaslav Nijinsky (1889, Kiev - 1950, London) was a Russian artist and choreographer, the star of the "Season of Russ" by Sergei Diaghilev, where he dances mainly in the ballets of Mikhail Fokine, however he also staged three author's choreographies of his own and those were: "L'Après-midi d'un faune" ("The Afternoon of a Faun") (1912) and "Jeux" ("Games") (1913) from Debussy, and "Le Sacre du printemps" ("The Rite of Spring") by Stravinsky (1913). It was thanks to Nijinsky the male dancer became the centre of the ballet work in the 20th century. Nijinsky remains in history with the unexpected, still unsolved, tragic madness.

<sup>5</sup> "Variations on the theme of "Petrushka" (1976); a new version of "Petrushka" (1982); "Vaslav" (music by Johann Sebastian Bach) as part of the "Vaslav Gala" (1979); "Nijinsky" (2000), to the music composed by Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Dmitri Shostakovich. The ballet was filmed in 2016 and broadcast in 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Music by Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov ("Scheherazade"), Dmitri Shostakovich (Sonata for viola, Op. 147, Symphony No. 11, op. 103), choreography by John Neumeier, realized in 2000, filmed in 2016 with Hamburg Ballet, broadcast in 2017.

<sup>7</sup> In my description I will call him the "Fading" Nijinsky.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandre Riabko - a Ukrainian ballet dancer - born in Kiev in 1978 and trained at the Kyiv Ballet School under Vladimir Denisenko, and later at the Hamburg Ballet School under Anatoli Nisnevich and Kevin Haigen. Premier soloist of the Hamburg Ballet.

<sup>9</sup> Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) (Fig. 1) from 1906 until his death in 1929, annually organized in Paris a demonstration of various forms of Russian art, united by the general name "Season of Russ". He presented exhibitions (1906), symphony concerts (1907), operas (1908), and from 1909 to 1929 focused mainly on ballet performances. Diaghilev would stimulate the creativity of a number of Russian composers, choreographers, artists, and performers.

<sup>10</sup> And this will become visible in the course of the analysis exposed in the lines to follow.

*Faun* from “L’Après-midi d’un faune” (“The Afternoon of a Faun”) (performed by Marc Jubete) act on the stage. The public having a professional background would recognize the *roles*<sup>11</sup> due to memorable gestures, poses and reference movements from the original choreographies of Mikhail Fokine and of Vaslav Nijinsky himself - those of “L’Après-midi d’un faune” (“The Afternoon of a Faun”), “Jeux” (“Games”), “Le Sacre du printemps” (“The Rite of Spring”). The costume of the respective role also helps to the recognition of the roles. The “Fading” Nijinsky could interact with his *roles* as a bystander, and often his loved ones perceive him more in his role than in his life.



Fig. 1. Sergei Diaghilev

A rather complex canvas of the performance is created, which I will comment on with my author’s description of the stage action<sup>12</sup>, and that one will be divided into *episodes* (I separate them in square brackets with consecutive No.), where it will often happen that *one episode* would contain *a number of parallel events* interwoven. Only a detailed description of the action can make visible the complex interactions between present, past, and even earlier time that Neumeier uses.

The “Fading” Nijinsky is present in all episodes except episodes 11-16. While the second, the third and the fourth scenes look as if they are in the memories of Sergei Diaghilev, the fifth scene seems to reflect the memories of Romola Nijinsky.

Each act starts with video wall text. Before the first act, the following text is written in German and in French [No. 1]: “*Le 19 janvier 1919 a 17 heures: Vaslav Nijinski danse pour le dernière fois en public dans la salle de bal de l’hotel Suvretta House a St. Moritz*”<sup>13</sup>.

The first scene juxtaposes the noisy worldly audience<sup>14</sup> arrived for Nijinsky’s last performance with his worried wife Romola Nijinsky<sup>15</sup> [No. 2]. Here appears the text “*Famille, amis et admirateurs attendant l’entrée en scene de Nijinski*”<sup>16</sup>. Vaslav Nijinsky who appears [No. 3] is unusually calm and distant from what

<sup>11</sup> Those are formatted as *italic*.

<sup>12</sup> As the score is commented.

<sup>13</sup> “On January 19, 1919 at 5 p.m., in the ballroom of the Suvretta House Hotel in St Moritz, Vaslav Nijinsky danced publicly for the last time.”

<sup>14</sup> His sister (with a turban on her head); his father (an older man arguing with the sister), friends and guests who noisily gather in the ballroom, talking to each other in German and English. This is how a stronger contrast is obtained between the speaking and gesturing guests, on the one hand, and the dancing Nijinsky, memories, roles.

<sup>15</sup> Romola Nijinsky is wearing a red dress.

<sup>16</sup> “Family, friends and fans alike wait Nijinsky’s appearance.”

is happening, dressed in a long mantle like a Roman god. Nijinsky's first solo [No. 4] addresses the real audience; that solo is deranged, with unexpected flights and falls, and expressing suffering - it is his SELF and his sensations at that precise moment on January 19. The second solo [No. 5] is facing the invited guests (at the bottom of the stage) and this solo is ironic and jester - intended to amuse them, but also ironic to their needs. Here the wonderful classical form of the artist Nijinsky is already evident. Starting from [No. 6], the memories started to enter into the main stage action: two *sailor boys*, with whom he dances a trio (apparently a part of him since his childhood), he tries to hug them, but they escape his arms; *Harlequin* (from the production of Fokine of "Carnaval") and the way Nijinsky repeats Harlequin's movements shows that this is his former role, that he remembers what he danced [No. 7].

In the ballroom, a man in a tailcoat and a top hat (Sergei Diaghilev), with a loud applause, actually interrupts the memories of Nijinsky's, Chopin's music abruptly stops, and the theme from Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade" can be heard [No. 8]. As Nijinsky addresses Diaghilev, a boy wearing a straitjacket rolls onto the stage. This moment is very important for the production. According to the title page, the boy is Vaslav Nijinsky's brother, Stanislav Nijinsky, who subsequently goes mad. However, when you look at the production, you get the impression that this is the soul, the inner SELF of Vaclav Nijinsky himself. The boy is also present in other scenes, and his behaviour always betrays the feelings of Vaslav Nijinsky himself. It is the same here when he appears, tied up in a straitjacket. The "Fading" Nijinsky leans over to him and, together with their mother (Eleonora Bereda), both hug him. The mother takes the Boy away, and during this time his sister (Bronislava Nijinska, as she was dressed as a guest at the celebration) dances on the stage - she performs the role of Scheherazade (to the music from "Scheherazade" by Rimsky-Korsakov). Nijinsky tries to touch her, but she passes away (like a memory). Nijinsky then runs to the man in the tailcoat (Sergei Diaghilev), who hugs him like a baby and carries him outside.

The second scene portrays the memories of Sergei Diaghilev, focusing mainly on Nijinsky's star roles. The stage fills with the girls in white dresses and the boys in black pants and white shirts, reminiscent of pupils the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet School<sup>17</sup>. They dance performing a fragment from "Chopiniana"<sup>18</sup> [No. 9], although the music from Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade" continues to play.

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<sup>17</sup> The ballet training was credited to the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet School, whose disciple was Nijinsky himself.

<sup>18</sup> The history of the ballet "Chopiniana" is quite complicated. For his first revision, the choreographer Mikhail Fokine chose five works by Chopin to the orchestration of Alexander Glazunov and included them in a charity concert of the Maryinsky Theatre; its premiere took place on February 23, 1907. The second revision was titled "Rêverie romantique" ("Romantic Reverie") and was staged at the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet School and played at the Maryinsky Theatre on March 21, 1908. After nearly a year, Fokine was invited to re-stage his work at the Maryinsky Theatre. For the premiere (February 19, 1909), Fokine added two numbers from the first revision to the second revision of the "Romantic Reverie" and those were the opening Polonaise (A-dur), which serves as an overture to the action, and the Seventh

Diaghilev introduces Nijinsky in this scene<sup>19</sup> [No. 10], kisses him on the cheeks and turns him to the dancing couples. Nijinsky is now dressed in black trousers and a shirt with long, wide sleeves and is performing the *Young Man* from the “Chopiniana” - there he dances in a *duet* with a girl with a white crown (Tamara Karsavina)<sup>20</sup>. Neumeier’s choreography also includes movements that are quotes from the “Chopiniana” authored by Mikhail Fokine: how she whispers something in his ear while he is on his knees (“Scheherazade” music plays). Diaghilev watches their dance sitting on a chair in the centre of the stage. The dance of the remaining couples is reminiscent of an exam performance at the end of the school.

This is how three line-ups are formed: the couples from the test production, Nijinsky together with the Female Dancer in the dance of the “Chopiniana”, and Diaghilev, who observes what is happening and seems to remember it too.

What also appears on the stage is the *Spirit of the Rose* (a further Nijinsky’s role choreographed by Mikhail Fokine to the music by Weber). The *Spirit of the Rose solo* [No. 11], including Diaghilev; initially he repeats the movements of the *Spirit of the Rose*, then the dance turns into a *duet*, with Diaghilev dancing the female part, and then dancing the same as the *Spirit of the Rose*. There is a sense that Diaghilev is recalling Nijinsky’s performance of the *Spirit of the Rose*. The “Fading” Nijinsky is not present.

Behind them, actors dressed in Turkish trousers (from Fokine’s ballet “Scheherazade”) begin to arrive - the music from “Scheherazade” continues to play. Diaghilev performs their movements because they are born in his imagination.

Diaghilev himself brings over to the stage the *Golden Slave* (Nijinsky’s role from “Scheherazade”, as choreographed by Mikhail Fokine - Fig. 2) and it looks as if he makes the *Golden Slave* move [No. 12]. The *Golden Slave*’s seductive *solo* [No. 13] against the background of the men and women in Turkish trousers attracts both Diaghilev (who is watching his performance on the left of the stage) and Romola Nijinsky (on the right in the audience), who, intrigued by the *Golden Slave*, repeats some of his movements and joins the action.

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Waltz (cis moll). In the poster, the title chosen for of this work was “Chopiniana”. However, the numbers still lacked a clearly established order and were performed in a variety of orders depending on the artists’ rest schedules. When Sergei Diaghilev invited Fokine to choreograph the “Season of Russ”, the “Chopiniana” was shown at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris (June 2, 1909) under the name “Les Sylphides”. Especially for the soloist Vaslav Nijinsky, Fokine set another variation (Mazurka), and Chopin’s music and the order of the numbers was finally determined (to the orchestration by Glazunov, Taneyev, Lyadov). Thus, in Eastern Europe, ballet is performed with the name “Chopiniana”, while in the West it is known by the name “Les Sylphides” (Yaneva 2009). Hereinafter in this text, the ballet will be noted as “Chopiniana” because in the memories it dates from the time when it was not yet shown in the West by the name “Les Sylphides”.

<sup>19</sup> Symbolically, it looks as if Diaghilev introduces him to the theatre.

<sup>20</sup> They perform a fragment of the so-called Seventh Waltz (cis moll, op. 64, No. 2) from the “Chopiniana”.



**Fig. 2.** Nijinsky as the *Golden Slave* in the ballet “Scheherazade”

Romola Nijinsky’s *duet* (as Scheherazade) with the *Golden Slave* [No. 14]<sup>21</sup> turns into a *trio* between the *Golden Slave*, Romola Nijinsky and Diaghilev [No. 15], who removes Romola from the *Golden Slave* (the *trio* actually marks a real love triangle between Diaghilev, Romola and the *Golden Slave* (Nijinsky’s role), although the “Fading” Nijinsky is not present at this point. The subsequent *duet* between Diaghilev and the *Golden Slave* [No. 16] asserts the dominance of Diaghilev, who embraces the *Golden Slave* like a baby (as he had embraced the “Fading” Nijinsky at the beginning) and carries him off the stage.

The third scene is from an even earlier time: it shows Nijinsky’s training and his ideas for productions. Also present is Diaghilev, who remembers Nijinsky’s initial steps. The “Fading” Nijinsky participates, although dressed in rehearsal clothes<sup>22</sup> - short black pants and a white T-shirt (as during his studies at the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet School). *Solo* of the “Fading” Nijinsky [No. 17], who performs movements from the daily ballet exercise and rehearses. Diaghilev’s *duet* (he is dressed in a linen suit and wears a straw hat) with the “Fading” Nijinsky. Diaghilev runs his hand from Nijinsky’s left foot to Nijinsky’s thigh<sup>23</sup> [No. 18] - it is clear that Diaghilev has sexual intentions, while Nijinsky is obsessed with his dance and is happy to have someone to show it to. Nijinsky continues to dance his impressions and at the end embraces Diaghilev with gratitude [No. 19].

The fourth scene abruptly changes the mood. The relationship between Diaghilev and Nijinsky is changing. The wall at the bottom of the stage falls. A woman in black appears from behind the fallen wall, it is the time of her *solo* [No. 20], while Nijinsky and Diaghilev stand in each other’s arms. Nijinsky cannot stand it and goes towards the woman, but Diaghilev imperiously stops him. Second *duet* [No. 21] between Nijinsky and Diaghilev, who is increasingly possessive of Nijinsky. A second woman in white appears from behind the scenes. Nijinsky begins to dance with her - it is a *duet*. Then another woman in white appears. The *trio* composed of Nijinsky and the two women - you get the impression that Nijinsky is making them up because the women are

<sup>21</sup> The two do a memorable roll through crossed legs. The same roll towards the end of the ballet is made by the “Fading” Nijinsky and Romola Nijinsky.

<sup>22</sup> He comes out from a glowing circle at the bottom of the stage.

<sup>23</sup> He will then do the same with Massine, also his favourite, however later on.

repeating his movements - as if this is his choreography in "Games" by Debussy<sup>24</sup>. Diaghilev sits at the bottom, looks at them and waves his hat.

From behind the scenes, someone throws a tennis ball [No. 22], Massine jumps out with a tennis racket (another confirmation that this is a memory of the ballet "Games" by Debussy). Diaghilev picks up the ball; Massine caresses the handle of the tennis racket. Massine intrigues Diaghilev. The *trio* between Nijinsky and the two women continues, but their profile movements are reminiscent of Nijinsky's staging "The Afternoon of a Faun"<sup>25</sup>. Diaghilev hands over the ball to Massine. In his *duet* with Massine [No. 23], Diaghilev repeats the same movements as with Nijinsky - the stroking from the sole of the left foot up the thigh, some supports are also repeated. Diaghilev woos Massine, while in his *solo* Nijinsky performs the profile movements of the *Faun* regardless of the duet played behind him. *Trio* between Diaghilev, Nijinsky and Massine. In the finale, the two boys embrace Diaghilev, but then Diaghilev continues his *duet* with Massine, and Nijinsky leaves with the profile movements of the *Faun* (Fig. 3). One gets the impression that Diaghilev ignores Nijinsky<sup>26</sup>.

In the fifth scene, Romola Nijinsky seems to remember. There is music from Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade", but the movements act out a situation from "The Afternoon of a Faun". Romola Nijinsky (lying on a couch and wrapped in a scarf with geometric motifs) recalls the *Nymph* - a role of Tamara Karsavina in Nijinsky's ballet "The Afternoon of a Faun" (Fig. 4). The "Fading" Vaslav Nijinsky is at the bottom of the stage (dressed in black trousers and a black jacket, with a black fan in his hand). Behind Romola Nijinsky appears the *Faun* with the movements from Nijinsky's production "The Afternoon of a Faun" [No. 24].

Here is also one of Neumeier's important readings of the trio between Romola Nijinsky, the *Faun* (role of Vaslav Nijinsky - Fig. 3) and the "Fading" Vaslav Nijinsky [No. 25]. The sequence builds upon *duets* and *trios*. Romola is



Fig. 3. Nijinsky as the *Faun* in the ballet "The Afternoon of a Faun"

<sup>24</sup> Première 1913.

<sup>25</sup> Première 1912.

<sup>26</sup> After the duet with Massine, Diaghilev extends his hand to Massine and the latter responds. So in a couple, holding hands, the two leave the stage.



**Fig. 4.** The *Faun* (performed by Nijinsky) and the *Nymph* (performed by Bronislava Nijinska) from the ballet “The Afternoon of a Faun”

captivated by the *Faun*, by his sexuality, which she attributes to the performer of the role of the *Faun* and choreographer of the production, i.e. Vaslav Nijinsky. *Duet* of Romola with the *Faun*, then with Nijinsky; and again a *duet* with the *Faun* and again a *duet* with Nijinsky. Of course, the *Faun* is imaginary because he only moves in profile with the same movements (these movements Nijinsky invented at the end of the front scene); Nijinsky’s *solo* with the fan, he seems to be wooing her and she repeats his movements. *Duet* of Romola and Nijinsky: she takes off his jacket; *trio* of Romola, Nijinsky and the *Faun*; and again a *duet* between the *Faun* and Romola; the *duet* between Romola and Nijinsky, while the *Faun*, lying on the ground, holds the fan as a whistle. At one point, Nijinsky also goes to him and stands in his position on the floor. Romola comes to them. A *trio* again, with both men performing the same actions with Romola. It ends with a happy *duet*

between Nijinsky and Romola, and the *Faun* with his profile movements passes and goes away, although Romola looks after him to the last.

In the sixth scene, Diaghilev in a tailcoat (as in the beginning) pushes the rest of the walls and leaves the stage. On the right [No. 26] a *duet* between the *Faun* and the *Nymph* (performed by Tamara Karsavina); on the left, the “Fading” Nijinsky begins to hear noises and tries to hide in Romola’s lap, then goes to Diaghilev, but he leaves the stage. Romola leads the “Fading” Nijinsky off the stage. As the *duet* between the *Faun* and the *Nymph* continues, men (in tailcoats) and women (in long white dresses) - the high society - come out. They dance [No. 27]. Nijinsky appears amongst them. He reads a score (Bach), Romola stops him, he kisses her hand, the society applauds them.

In [No. 28] the *Faun* appears again, and Nijinsky hides at the back of the stage. A *duet* of Romola with the *Faun*; a *duet* of the *Faun* with the *Nymph* (Tamara Karsavina), and behind them there is an ensemble wearing Turkish trousers from “Scheherazade”. On the right stands the high society. After which everyone mingles, including the newly appeared performer of *The Spirit of the Rose*. Dancers in Turkish trousers and ladies in evening gowns and gentlemen in tailcoats pass by as duets or trios in this high society. Finally, Nijinsky (also in a tailcoat) and Romola Nijinsky (in white with a wedding bouquet) appear in society. *Solo* of the “Fading” Nijinsky.

In the background of the general dance of the people with the Turkish trousers, a *duet* between the *Faun* and the *Nymph* takes place, but at one point

Romola Nijinsky (already in a long red dress, as she was at the beginning of the ballet) replaces the *Nymph*. A *duet* between the *Faun* and Romola, a *trio* - the “Fading” Nijinsky, Romola, the *Faun* - against the background of the other ensemble performances. At one point, the “Fading” Nijinsky seems to finally realize the connection between Romola and the *Faun* and withdraws from them. He walks to the bottom of the stage and runs into Diaghilev (in a tailcoat), who applauds him.

Nijinsky wanders between Romola and the *Faun* (left), Diaghilev (centre), high society (right). A variant of a triangle.

Diaghilev goes to him. A *duet* of Nijinsky and Diaghilev (a literal repeat of their first duet when Diaghilev was seducing him). Romola on her knees as if repentant. Finally, Diaghilev throws Nijinsky out and leaves.

The seventh scene is the climax of the first act [No. 29] - the scenography from the first scene returns - the guests, the roles. The “Fading” Nijinsky sits in his chair in the centre of the stage. Behind him are the roles. His mother also stands behind him. Romola walks towards them.

Second act (after Symphony No. 11 by Shostakovich) begins with text in German and French languages, projected on a video wall: “*La folie de Nijinski le mene au plus profonde de son être. Souvenirs d'enfance, de famille, d'école et du théâtre Mariinsky sont mêlés à des visions cauchemardesques de la Première Guerre mondiale et à l'infidélité de sa femme. Pour Nijinski c'est le monde qui l'entoure qui est fou, pas lui*”<sup>27</sup>.

The eighth scene represents memories that are even more distant. The family.

The “Fading” Nijinsky dances with his memories [No. 30] - the Mother (Eleonora Bereda), the Father (Thomas Nijinsky), the Sister (Bronislava Nijinska) and the Boy (Stanislav Nijinsky, but according to his actions on the stage, he depicts rather the soul of Vaslav Nijinsky himself). The men are in short boxer shorts and white T-shirts, the women are in white dresses. The Boy is nervous with sudden chaotic movements, while the Father tries to calm him down. Nijinsky watches them.

A *quartet* between Nijinsky, the Boy, the Mother, Bronislava, who seem to care for the Boy [No. 31]. The Father is with another woman. Bronislava and Nijinsky go to school<sup>28</sup>. The Mother is left alone with the Boy.

Father's *solo*. A *duet* with another woman. Then the Father returns to the Mother. She drops the Boy and he falls to the ground unsupported. A *duet* between the Father and the Mother. At the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet School, Bronislava and Vaslav perform movements from the classical exercise [No. 32].

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<sup>27</sup> “Nijinsky’s madness leads him to the depths of his SELF. Memories of childhood, family, school and the Maryinsky Theatre intertwine with nightmarish visions of the First World War and his wife’s infidelity. For Nijinsky, it is the world around him that has gone mad, not him.”

<sup>28</sup> When the father leaves the family, the mother is forced to place her two older children, Vaslav and Bronislava, in the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet School, where they are trained on full board, and so take care of their food.

[No. 33] presents the interrelationships within the family. A *duet* of Bronislava and Vaslav Nijinsky - as learning material for the course of Duet Dance. In parallel, the Mother and the Father repeat the same movements in a *duet*. The Boy walks between them. As the Boy convulses again, Nijinsky, the Mother, and Bronislava crowd around him. Nijinsky then continued his ballet exercises. The boy runs among the people, falls, no one comes to his aid.

*Solo* of the “Fading” Nijinsky. The Boy lies face down on the floor [No. 34]. Tamara Karsavina (with a costume from “Chopiniana”) joins in a *duet* with Nijinsky - quotations from the Seventh Waltz (cis moll, op. 64, No. 2) from the “Chopiniana”, however what continues to sound is the music by Shostakovich. Behind them are the men with military jackets over their T-shirts and boxers underneath. There is a sense of impending danger.

For the third time, Nijinsky has his arms outstretched like a crucifix [No. 35]. The Boy also stands in front of him with outstretched arms - the two seem to merge in their movements. A *duet* - Nijinsky and the Boy, the Boy repeats Nijinsky’s movements. The Boy looks as if he is Nijinsky’s self, as if he is his soul. Nijinsky tries to protect the Boy by tearing him away from himself. However, the Boy always comes back to him. (Very technical performances by both.)

In [No. 36] the parallel actions increase - a second *parallel duet* - Romola (in the red dress) with the man who played the Father, but dressed in a white coat as a doctor; Nijinsky sees Romola’s infidelity, falls and starts beating the ground with his fists<sup>29</sup>. The Boy comforts him - a second *duet* between the Boy and Nijinsky; the Mother realizes the Father’s infidelity; Romola takes off the Father’s white coat, just like in episode No. 25 when she was taking off Nijinsky’s jacket.

The Boy remains alone. He retires to the back of the stage. A common circle of men in military jackets. All fall to the ground as if dead.

In addition, it is then that appears one of Nijinsky’s most expressive roles, that of *Petrushka* (from the ballet “Petrushka” (Fig. 5), choreographed by Mikhail Fokine). The movements of *Petrushka* (*solo*) remind both the ballet “Petrushka” and the movements of the Boy as they are chaotic and uncoordinated [No. 37]. When the Father, Mother, Bronislava and Vaslav gather, the Boy is missing. And *Petrushka* is desperately beating his fists on the stage (as in No. 36, Nijinsky is beating his fists on the floor).

The ninth scene recreates both scenes from the war and the relationship between the Boy and Nijinsky. Music: Symphony No. 11 by Shostakovich.

A *solo* of the Boy wearing a military jacket - moving more and more inappropriately. The Boy starts going mad. Nijinsky starts making the same moves as the Boy (separated only by the glowing circle). The Boy convulses as Nijinsky shouts. The soldiers capture Nijinsky. The Boy is on the ground. Nijinsky runs around the soldiers and finally falls next to the Boy [No. 38].

The war is also connected with the staging of Nijinsky’s “The Rite of Spring”.

The men wear military jackets, and in front of them, there is a woman in a flesh-coloured leotard, looking as if giving birth. *Petrushka* dances just like the men. Nijinsky climbs on a chair and shouts at the soldiers - giving the impression

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<sup>29</sup> *Petrushka* - one of Nijinsky’s roles - will also fight with fists in the same way.



**Fig. 5.** Statue of Nijinsky at his grave in the Cemetery of Montmartre, Paris, depicting him as *Petrushka* - his role in the ballet of the same name

that these are the dancers from the ballet “The Rite of Spring”<sup>30</sup>, to whom Nijinsky counts down the musical measures and is angry that they do not grasp the rhythm. *Petrushka* and the Woman in a flesh-coloured leotard dance together with them. (A climax in the even earlier time, which looks very cruel.) Everybody falls on the ground, while Nijinsky collapses off the chair by the Boy [No. 39].

[No. 40] - the *Ballerina* from “*Petrushka*” (Tamara Karsavina) appears. Diaghilev enters from the right, in top hat and tailcoat. *Petrushka* and the Woman in Beige are on the left. The Father, dressed as a doctor in a white coat, places Nijinsky in the chair and changes his clothes.

A *trio* composed of *Petrushka*, the *Ballerina* and instead of the *Moor*<sup>31</sup> is Diaghilev in tailcoat and top hat. The *Ballerina* and Diaghilev behave like a couple - *Petrushka* feels cheated by them and leaves. His place is taken by Nijinsky (already dressed in trousers and a jacket), with the same pained smile

<sup>30</sup> Production by Nijinsky from 1913.

<sup>31</sup> The *Ballerina*, *Petrushka* and the *Moor* are protagonists from the ballet “*Petrushka*” choreographed by Mikhail Fokine.

as *Petrushka*, Nijinsky intermittently takes either the *Ballerina* by the hand or Diaghilev. He feels cheated, the same like *Petrushka*.

The rest of the protagonists also return. Two *duets* - that of the *Ballerina* and Diaghilev; then that of Romola and the Doctor (the Father dressed as a doctor). Nijinsky stands in the centre. And again a *duet* - Nijinsky with Diaghilev, but this time Nijinsky takes Diaghilev like a baby in his arms and sits with him on the chair [No. 41].

Two concomitant *solos* - that of Romola and that of Nijinsky [No. 42], who is going mad (some of the movements from his first solo are repeated during the performance in the ballroom). Nijinsky writhes on the floor.

[No. 43] - a *duet* of Romola and the distraught Nijinsky where she puts him on the sleigh and begins to ride him. He gets angry with her, pushes her, stomps on her, and here repeats that cross-legged tumbling that she did with the *Golden Slave* at the beginning. She hides by the chair; Nijinsky's *monologue* - the military are walking slowly behind. (A climax in the past, an incredible *monologue*.) Nijinsky collapses to the floor. She puts him on the sled again, drives him to the centre and leaves him there. She leaves... But she returns to him, pulls him to her - a *duet* of Romola and Nijinsky - they repeat that part of the Seventh Waltz (cis moll, op. 64, No. 2) from the "Chopiniana", with the whispering (for the third time this part is wedged into the action - the first time at the beginning, in the early memories of the school; the second time with Tamara Karsavina - during Diaghilev's "Season of Russ" and now - with Romola Nijinsky).

And the war again. The soldiers are shouting. Romola, embracing Nijinsky leads him. Behind, the soldiers stamp their feet on the floor in an exalted march. All are dressed in military jackets, and under them - the costumes from the roles: the *Golden Slave*, the *Spirit of the Rose*, and the *Player* with the tennis racket from "Games", *Petrushka* and *Harlequin*. Everyone screams, and Romola pulls Nijinsky onto the sled, total chaos [No. 44].

In the tenth scene, the decor from the beginning returns, that of the ballroom.

All Nijinsky's roles from his past and the elite audience from the beginning of the performance gather on stage [No. 45]. The walls are parting, everything is collapsing, someone is swinging on the ledge, and others are running with chairs in their hands. Everyone is like crazy. The artists are screaming. The elite audience is shouting and clapping. (A climax in the present.) Romola (now in the red dress) brings Nijinsky to the hall and to his chair. She makes him sit on the chair. Diaghilev puts his hand to his own mouth and then touches Nijinsky's mouth - this is how he passes the kiss to Nijinsky and leaves. Romola also moves away. (A denouement in the past.)

His mother stands behind him (as a memory). She kisses his forehead. And goes to the past (left), where Bronislava and the Boy are. They start to make an exercise. Nijinsky joins them [No. 46]. He tries to hug them. They languish behind the scenes. (A denouement in the even earlier time.)

Last *monologue* of the "Fading" Nijinsky [No. 47]. At the bottom is the elite audience, as at the beginning. He is getting more and more insane. He takes out two pieces of cloth on the stage, a red one and a black one. He spreads them in the shape of a cross on the floor. The soldiers walk behind him, and he imitates with his hands the ever faster moving time. At the bottom are the Mother, the

Boy, Romola, the *Faun*, the *Sylphide*, the girls in Turkish trousers and the elite audience. Nijinsky wraps himself in the pieces of cloth as if in a mantle (the soldiers fall to the ground). The rest are motionless. In the finale, Nijinsky opens his arms and remains like a crucifix. (A denouement in the present.)

Three lines operate independently of each other on the stage:

*The actual stage action* (which is bound to the main plot line, that of Nijinsky, dancing for the last time) starts from the end (the “Fading” Nijinsky) and in the form of memories (the *unreal stage action*), it goes back to the beginning, i.e. to the family, training, first appearances, stellar career and ascension. Then it ends again with the ending - with the protagonist going mad and dying. During all this time, the “Fading” Nijinsky is also present in the memories, that is, a *real* and the *unreal stage action* becomes entangled. At the same time, the *real action* does not follow the chronology of events: it is confused, chaotic, as is the consciousness of the protagonist.

The *roles* (*proper stage action*) mark another path that is, as it were, the opposite of the first. Nijinsky’s *roles* in chronological order represent the growth of Nijinsky the man and his metamorphoses from a boy to a seductive man and finally to a dancing doll whose soul no one cares about.

The beginning contains the roles of the *Young Man* from the “*Shopiniana*”<sup>32</sup>, *Harlequin*<sup>33</sup>, and the *Spirit of the Rose*<sup>34</sup>. They look as if they are disembodied and sexless. They themselves are Nijinsky as a youth - ecstatic and “disembodied”.

After that comes the *Golden Slave*<sup>35</sup> - seductive and erotic, it is more like the memories of Diaghilev and Romola Nijinsky.

Then appears the *Faun*<sup>36</sup>, who is very sexual (a remarkable *trio* between Romola Nijinsky, Vaslav Nijinsky and his role, the *Faun*). Neumeier’s idea is very clearly visible here - Romola is captivated by the *Faun*, she is looking for sexuality, and Vaslav Nijinsky is the disembodied spirit, he is the spirituality. Romola sees and chooses the *Faun*’s sexuality, but does not discover the spirituality of Nijinsky (who was in fact the *Faun*’s performer).

Finally comes one of his last roles, which is *Petrushka*<sup>37</sup>, remembered mostly for the fact that it exposes the mental torment of both the role and its performer - the lonely doll with human feelings that nobody cares about. It also hints at the relationship and dependence (also foreseen by Mikhail Fokine - Fokine 1981) between *Petrushka* (Nijinsky) and the *Magician* (Diaghilev).

It is through the *roles* that Neumeier traces the gradual illness in Nijinsky’s personality. Through the *roles*, Neumeier’s idea that Nijinsky has no interest in sex, that he is possessed by visions of his performances and he is entirely spiritual (he is the *Spirit of the Rose*) comes to the fore, while Diaghilev and Romola Nijinsky expect only sex from him, they expect him to be a *Faun*.

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<sup>32</sup> The Variation of the *Young Man* was created for Vaslav Nijinsky in 1909 and the choreography was by Mikhail Fokine.

<sup>33</sup> From the ballet “Carnival”, choreographed by Mikhail Fokine, 1910.

<sup>34</sup> From the eponymous ballet, choreographed by Mikhail Fokine, 1911.

<sup>35</sup> From the ballet “Scheherazade”, choreographed by Mikhail Fokine, 1910.

<sup>36</sup> From the ballet “The Afternoon of a Faun” choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, 1912.

<sup>37</sup> From the eponymous ballet “Petrushka”, choreographed by Mikhail Fokine, 1911.

And there is another interesting point: according to the title page, Vaslav Nijinsky's memoirs also feature his brother Stanislav Nijinsky, who subsequently goes mad. However, when you watch the play, you get the impression that Stanislav is not a private person, but the soul, the inner SELF of Vaslav Nijinsky himself, who also goes crazy at the zenith of his powers (Nijinski 2000). This is why I have chosen to refer to him as 'the Boy', not 'Stanislav'. The Boy is present in quite a few episodes and his behaviour betrays the feelings of Vaslav Nijinsky himself. If seen from this perspective, Nijinsky is included in the action of the plot both through his roles and through his feelings in his personal life, i.e. family, colleagues, but also as his inner SELF (the Boy announced as Stanislav)<sup>38</sup>. It happens quite often that the Boy and the "Fading" Nijinsky make the same movements. And when the "Fading" Nijinsky still remembers, the Boy in a "frantic" performance expresses the raging feelings of Vaslav Nijinsky himself.

The choreography is entirely Neumeier's. But Nijinsky's *roles* are also presented by means of "quotes" from standard movements typical for the respective choreography, by Mikhail Fokine and Nijinsky himself. When the *roles* interact with the other characters, the choreography is authored by Neumeier<sup>39</sup>.

The contrast between the invited guests and the rest of the characters is manifested in the fact that the guests do not dance, but communicate only with gestures. Speech is also included in the production: Nijinsky shouts, the soldiers shout, the guests exchange secular lines at the beginning, and at the end they also shout.

The contrast is also in the music: in the first act, it is mostly from Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade" (like a magnetic fairy tale); in the second act comes the sobering reality (Symphony No. 11 by Shostakovich).

The climax comes when all the layers are irreparably entangled and can no longer be separated. Then everything collapses in Nijinsky's confused mind and madness sets in. With the complete fusion of these three temporal layers, death occurs. But in Neumeier's directorial reading, physical death is coloured by Nijinsky's spiritual elevation and passing into legend.

In a similar way, John Neumeier sets the ballet "The Lady of the Camellias"<sup>40</sup>. The action unfolds as a montage of three timelines:

✓ *present* - during the auction, where the belongings of the deceased courtesan Marguerite are being sold;

✓ *past* - scenes from Marguerite's life and her love for Armand are presented in a staged reading of "The Lady of the Camellias" by Alexander Dumas- *fils*;

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<sup>38</sup> A similar approach of "splitting" or "multiplication" of the protagonist is very common in Maurice Béjart, and subsequently in Matthew Bourne.

<sup>39</sup> It is curious that Neumeier puts in his author's choreographies a considerable part of the ballets that were performed at the time from Diaghilev's "Season of Russ" - "Le Baiser de la fée" ("The Fairy's Kiss") (1972), "The Rite of Spring" (1972), "Firebird" (1970; with new version 1983), "Orpheus" (2009) by Stravinsky, "Le Spectre de la rose" ("The Spirit of the Rose"), but to music by Louis-Hector Berlioz (1989), "The Afternoon of a Faun" (1996) by Debussy, "Scheherazade" (1996; 1999) by Rimsky-Korsakov, and "Le Pavillon d'Armide" (2009) by Tcherepnin.

<sup>40</sup> "The Lady of the Camellias" - ballet based on the eponymous novel by Alexandre Dumas- *fils* and music by Chopin, choreographed by John Neumeier (1978).

✓ *an even earlier time* - scenes from the life of two other literary characters, Manon Lescaut and the Chevalier des Grieux from Abbé Prévost's novel "Manon Lescaut", which are inserted into the main narrative - "The Lady of the Camellias" by Alexandre Dumas-fils (Yaneva 2009).

The juxtaposition between the two couples (Manon - des Grieux; Marguerite - Armand) opposes two life positions. Moreover, the different contacts of a character from one pair with a character from the other is actually a form of discussion between these two positions. Therefore, Manon and des Grieux appear at key moments for Marguerite and Armand<sup>41</sup>.

The protagonists have the ability to sneak from one timeline to another. They are distinguished by choreography. Those attending the auction are characterized by gestures, postures, pauses and simple movement, but no dance<sup>42</sup>. The actions in the past (recreated in the novel by Alexandre Dumas-fils) are solved with elements of classical dance, but in a modern style, while the dances of the other couple, that of Manon Lescaut and the Chevalier des Grieux (in an even earlier time) are in an old style, with overexposed gestures<sup>43</sup>. A trio is created twice, in which the characters from the two literary works interact, combining past and remoter past time<sup>44</sup>.

If I have to summarize, the main distinguishing features in John Neumeier's productions are the *three timelines of action* (present, past, an even earlier time), which are mostly intertwined in the main structural unit of the choreography, i.e. by a *trio*<sup>45</sup>. It is through the *trio* that the conflict between the central actors becomes most visible. At the same time, the *trio* is usually made up of representatives from different timelines, in a kind of dispute between three different worldviews.

Another characteristic feature is the *triple climax* (for each of the three lines of action depicted). In "Nijinsky", this is in No. 39, when the choreographer Nijinsky collapses (in the even earlier time); in No. 43, when the Nijinsky man breaks (in the past), and in No. 45 (in the present) when guests, roles, relatives are finally "mingled" and all three lines are finally destroyed.

In "The Lady of the Camellias", the climax is in the past (when Armand gives her the money), in the present (last pages of her diary, which Armand

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<sup>41</sup> Moreover, traditionally in these juxtapositions, Marguerite feels herself in the role of des Grieux, while Manon tries to "implement" her in her role. Des Grieux's appearance is a warning to Armand, he should avoid being to be deceived by the treachery of love. Nevertheless, his behaviour is a symbol of true love, as is Marguerite's. Therefore, in the finale, Marguerite dies not of illness, but of love - she joins the group of the couple Manon and des Grieux, symbolizing "eternal" love. In contrast, Armand remains outside such "eternal" love.

<sup>42</sup> No music.

<sup>43</sup> In both action lines, the choreography is accompanied by the music of Frédéric Chopin.

<sup>44</sup> At the beginning of the play, there is a trio between Armand, des Grieux and Manon Lescaut (when Armand meets Marguerite in the theatre), and at the end a trio between Marguerite, des Grieux and Manon Lescaut (shortly before Marguerite's death). The first one comes as a warning to Armand. The second is like an epilogue of an unfulfilled love dream for Marguerite.

<sup>45</sup> In the productions of Maurice Béjart, Mats Ek and Matthew Bourne, the main structural unit is the *duet*. In the productions of the 19th century, the main structural unit is the *solo* - the variation.

reads at the auction); in the even earlier time (the relationship between Manon and des Grieux during Marguerite's last sojourn at the theatre).

In both production, it is as late as at the end of the action (the denouement) when all three lines "gather together". The denouement in "Nijinsky" is triple - in No. 45 Diaghilev and Romola say goodbye to him and the love triangle is "untied"; in No. 46, when the primal family (memories of him) fade from his mind; in No. 47, when Nijinsky finally says goodbye to the world and turns from a crucifix into a legend.

In "The Lady of the Camellias", the denouement is also threefold - Marguerite falls dead in the past (No. 34), Armand closes the diary in the present (No. 34); des Grieux carries the dying Manon in his arms (No. 33).

It is significant that neither in "Nijinsky" nor "The Lady of the Camellias" does Neumeier use multimedia<sup>46</sup> - everything is conveyed only through directorial editing and choreography.

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**Prof. Anelia Yaneva, DSc**  
Institute of Art Studies  
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences  
21 Krakra Str.  
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria  
Email: anyana@abv.bg

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<sup>46</sup> In recent decades, the use of multimedia in ballet productions seems to have been overdone. The effect of this is that the choreography loses its leading function.