



The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky

By Vaslav Nijinsky

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In his prime, Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950) was the most celebrated man in Western ballet--a virtuoso and a dramatic dancer such as European and American audiences had never seen before. After his triumphs in such works as The Specter of the Rose and Petrouchka, he set out to make ballets of his own, and with his Afternoon of a Faun and The Rite of Spring, created within a year of each other, he became ballet's first modernist choreographer. Then, still in his twenties, he began to go mad. For six weeks in early 1919, as his tie to reality was giving way, Nijinsky kept a diary--the only sustained daily record we have, by a major artist, of the experience of entering psychosis. In some entries he is filled with hope. He is God; he will save the world. In other entries, he falls into a black despair. He is dogged by sexual obsessions and grief over World War I. Furthermore, he is afraid that he is going insane. The diary was first published in 1936, in a version heavily bowdlerized by Nijinsky's wife. The new edition, translated by Kyril FitzLyon, is the first complete and accurate English rendering of this searing document. In her introduction, noted dance critic Joan Acocella tells Nijinsky's story and places it in the context of early European modernism.

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The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky By Vaslav Nijinsky Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Vaslav Nijinsky spent the final six weeks before his permanent consignment to an insane asylum as something a madman in the attic. With his family--wife, young daughters and occasionally, mother-in-law--and household staff downstairs, the legendary dancer retreated to his room in a remote Swiss villa to tangle with his burgeoning psychosis. Fearful that his wife would (as she ultimately did) commit him, and highly suspicious of the physician-cum-amateur psychiatrist who daily came by to examine him, Nijinsky perceived the diary as the only safe haven for the rambling thoughts that were overtaking him. Throughout, the anxiety and anguish are palpable, as Nijinsky writes about his disillusionment with his mentor and lover, Ballets Russes director Serge Diaghilev; his alienation from and distrust of his closest family members; and his fear of insanity and its consequential confinement. His writing becomes more obscure as the weeks progress and he examines his relationship to God, writing "I am God" at one point, and later: "God said to me, 'Go home and tell your wife that you are mad.'" As his schizophrenia evolves, the pace and style of Nijinsky's prose changes radically--toward the end he writes in abstract verse--but he remains, with a dancer's sensibility, attuned to the cadences of his environment. The noises of the household, the ringing of the phone, footsteps down the hall, smatterings of conversations overheard are all registered as a sort of accompaniment to his dance with madness and function perhaps as a final tether to reality.

Nijinsky's wife stumbled upon the diary in a locked trunk some years after her husband disappeared into the abyss of madness and soon released it for publication to feed public interest in her famous mate--but not before she sanitized the manuscript to such a degree (removing references to his homosexuality, overblown ego, bizarre paranoia, and various obsessions with bodily functions and sex acts) that its essence was obscured. Now 80 years after it was written, 20 years after its renegade editor died, and six years after the copyright that Nijinsky's daughters held expired, the unexpurgated version of the diaries faithfully restores the fascinating record of a great artist's struggle for his life.

From Publishers Weekly

One of this century's finest male dancers, Nijinsky might have become known as the greatest ballet choreographer of the modern era had his career not ended so early. Nijinsky danced professionally for only 10 years (1907-1917), and his reputation as a choreographer was established by only three ballets, all choreographed for the Ballets Russes between 1912 and 1913. Scandal surrounded his career: under Sergei Diaghilev, his lover and the impresario behind the Ballets Russes, Nijinsky choreographed *The Afternoon of a Faun*, which contained movements suggestive of masturbation; the premiere of his *Rite of Spring*, choreographed to Stravinsky's dissonant score, caused audiences to riot and storm out of the theater. After severing ties with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes at age 29, Nijinsky slid into insanity, and these diaries chronicle six weeks (January 19-March 4, 1919) of this period. The publication of this new translation (initially published in bowdlerized form in 1936), which for the first time includes a fourth journal of letters and poems, gives readers a chance to read an autobiography of a great artist during his psychological decline. This does not always make for easy reading: Nijinsky's thoughts are circuitous; he records his experience moment by moment and often breaks his train of thought to describe an incident in the next room. Although he is sometimes lucid, he often writes in contradictions and non sequiturs. Fitzlyon's excellent translation, which provides helpful and nonintrusive footnotes to explain Nijinsky's many linguistic idiosyncrasies, is complemented by Acocella's (Mark Morris) illuminating introduction. (Feb.) FYI: Acocella has just been named as the dance critic of the *New Yorker*.

From Library Journal

This is a thought-provoking look at the life of a man who has been called the "god of the dance." The famous Russian ballet dancer went insane in 1917, and this diary, written in six and a half weeks, records his ever more erratic thoughts, thoughts that at times become almost poetic: "I am an artist whose voice is dance," in conjunction with the more aberrant: "I am God, I am a man, I am man in God." Nijinsky documents his daily routine and carefully notes random thoughts, feelings, suspicions, and occasionally an accurate view of his true reality: "people will think I am insane because I speak of things I do not understand." Actor John Rubinstein's powerful presentation turns this audio into a one-man show, with an amazing job affecting a slight Russian/Polish accent. Nijinsky gave his last public performance when he was 29; he lived to be 61. Highly recommended for all public libraries. A Theresa Connors, Arkansas Tech Univ., Russellville

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kevin Buckley:

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Crystal Scott:

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Maribel Davenport:

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