





Fig. 1  
Poutiatine in *The Love Letter*, 1931/32.  
(Courtesy of Tanya Bayona)

# Waltzing Through A Golden Era of Ballet

## Princess Nathalie Poutiatine and her 'Russian Ballet' productions (1930–1939)

Dr Kathrina Farrugia-Kriel retraces some of the seminal steps in the life of Princess Nathalie Poutiatine (1904–1984) and pieces together surviving programmes of the several forgotten ballets from the 1930s

On Monday 3 June 1929, Russian émigré Princess Nathalie Poutiatine performed *Danse de la Tsarevna du 'Ballet Konek Gobunok'* [The Tsarina's Dance from *The Little Humpbacked Horse*] at the invitation of Lady Margaret Strickland, wife of Lord Gerald Strickland.<sup>1</sup> The Grand Patriotic Concert was given in honour of His Majesty King George V's birthday and took place at the Royal Opera House in Valletta, raising money for a variety of philanthropic causes.

Over the course of the ensuing decade, Poutiatine gave annual (1930–1934) and biannual (1935–1939) ballet recitals at the Opera House, showcasing her artistic influences and substantially developing ballet as 'art' on the Island. In this article, I argue that Poutiatine kindled diasporic connections to renowned 'Russian Ballet' companies between her homeland, mainland Europe and Malta, under its former identity as a British colony. In the absence of any recordings of performances given at the Royal Opera House, I retrace fragments of her

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autobiography and piece together the surviving programmes and photographs of the forgotten ballets from the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1904 in St Petersburg, Poutiatine was homeschooled at the family residence on Millionaya Street. She learned to waltz and dance the polka at the Tolstoy family home, and her interest in ballet grew over the years:

Once a year only, at Christmas, I was taken to the Maryiinsky theatre to see a performance of ballet; this impressed me so deeply that I was spellbound and thought how wonderful it would be to dance through life in the company of these fairylike creatures.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently,

Aunt Catherine...managed to persuade my parents to let me take lessons privately at home from the famous Madame Tamara Karsavina... she had little time to spare for tuition, so after a few lessons, she sent a young dancer to replace her by the name of Felia Dubrovskaya.<sup>4</sup>

Her idyllic childhood came to an abrupt end with the Bolsheviks' uprising in 1917. Her mother, Princess Olga, witnessed the abdication of Grand Duke Michael, brother of the assassinated Tsar Nicholas II, at their family home on 3/16 Millionaya Street, on 15 March 1919.<sup>5</sup> The Poutiatines fled to Odessa (now part of Ukraine); a 'permit was obtained... on one condition: that the Poutiatine family, if allowed to depart, would not indulge in any anti-soviet activities abroad.'<sup>6</sup> The family fled their homeland in April 1919 aboard *SS Bermudian*, a Canadian ship that travelled alongside *HMS Marlborough*, aboard which were the remaining members of the Romanov dynasty.<sup>7</sup> After a two-year stay in Malta, Poutiatine together with her mother Princess Olga moved to Paris, where she continued her piano studies, and took ballet classes with eminent Russian émigré teacher Lubov Egorova.<sup>8</sup>

Following her marriage to Edgar Tabone in Rome, Poutiatine returned to Malta on the *Porto di Savona* on 18

November 1927.<sup>9</sup> Life as a married woman took on a different pace: 'After Paris the rhythm of life on the Island appeared rather slow and full of leisure.'<sup>10</sup> Social gatherings, as well as short trips to Sicily, occupied Poutiatine's life in 1928. Her close association with the Mercieca, Inguanez and Best families and friends including John Francia, Constantina (Zena) Mattei and Lt Geoffrey Marescaux de Saubruit, highlighted her well-connected life as an islander.

Poutiatine's nostalgic yearnings for music and ballet began to emerge: 'one morning I took out my ballet shoes and for the sake of exercise I started practising.'<sup>11</sup> Her choice to settle in Malta suggested some controversy:

I think my parents felt I was going to some kind of voluntary exile, considering that my talents for music and classical ballet would be wasted on the island, where they had no chance to develop and flourish.<sup>12</sup>

### The emergence of ballet as 'art' in Malta in the 1930s

Poutiatine's first appearance on the stage of the Royal Opera House, in 1929, was the catalyst for change for the Island that had minor connections with concert ballet.<sup>13</sup> Several requests were made for Poutiatine to perform publicly again and to give classes in the art of ballet.<sup>14</sup> These factors instigated the connection between studio and stage, a central dogma to Poutiatine's art of ballet: 'Every spring I started staging performances at the Opera House to give the pupils the feeling of the stage and to show their yearly progress.'<sup>15</sup> It is the richness of Poutiatine's contribution to the performance histories of ballet in Malta that warrant a close examination of the repertoire produced at the Royal Opera House, Valletta, during the 1930s.

The first concert of 'Russian Ballet' was given on Friday 30 May 1930, in aid of the Russian refugees and under the patronage of H.E. the Governor of Malta John Philip du

Fig. 2  
*Danse Tzigane*, 1931/32.  
(Courtesy of Tanya Bayona)

Cane,<sup>16</sup> as well as several of her eminent friends, including Chief Secretary Sir Thomas Alexander van Best, Lord Strickland, Sir Ugo Mifsud, her brother-in-law Sir Arturo Mercieca, and their spouses.<sup>17</sup> The stage manager for the production was Silvio Mercieca, with Marescaux as his assistant. The programme consisted of twenty-two short recitals, including an overture (Tchaikovsky's 'Catherine'), five song recitals, Fedora Douglas Watson's music compositions, and sixteen dances. Poutiatine performed *Columbine* (Sugar Plum Fairy, *The Nutcracker*) (Fig. 6), a Hungarian Dance set to Brahms, a Minuet to Paderewsky, *Le Cygne* to Saint-Saëns, and a Russian Dance from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*.

A handful of Maltese young women, including Lola Francia and Ella Zammit-Cutajar from Ms Jackson's dance troupe, Amy Lowell and Poutiatine's niece, Mari Mercieca, took part in this first ballet concert. These women were given several repertory works to perform, including 'Piccicato' ('Pizzicato') from *Raymonda* for Zammit-Cutajar, *Danse Hollandaise* for Francia and Zammit-Cutajar and a 'Red Riding Hood' solo from *The Sleeping Beauty* for Rosemary Hawkins. A duet in part two of *December*, created for Mercieca and Zammit-Cutajar, stands out in the programme for its musical choice, Tchaikovsky's *December Waltz*, and its recurring use throughout the 1930s.





opposite above: Fig. 3  
Students in *Ballet Chopiniana*, 1933.

opposite below: Fig. 4  
Poutiatine with her students in *Reminiscences des Sylphides*, 1937.

overleaf: Fig. 5  
Students in *Tramway: A busy morning*, 1937.  
(Courtesy of Tanya Bayona)

Two ballets were created for the younger participants, mostly English expat young girls and a couple of boys: *Toys (Dolls and Soldiers)* and a snowflake scene set to music from Délibes' ballet, *Coppélia*. The men who danced in this first production remained unnamed; yet, there are seven 'partners' credited in *Gavotte* ('From Rosamunde ballet'), and four other partners unnamed in *Mazurka* (*A Polish national dance from the opera 'A Life for the Tsar'*). The evening concluded with 'God Save the King'.

Unfortunately, there are no apparent surviving programmes from 1931 and 1932. Despite the absence of programmes from these years, Poutiatine's collection of photographs included a solo dance titled *The Love Letter* (Fig. 1), and group photos of a 'Tzigane' (gypsy) themed dance (Fig. 2). These ballets account from either 1931 or 1932. Set on the stage of the Royal Opera House, the photographs include Poutiatine and the Mercieca siblings (Mari and Tancred) and Victor Lowell, first named in productions as early as 1933.

The existing programmes from the 1930s highlight intriguing details. The fourth annual ballet concert, given on Friday 19 May 1933, included several solos for Poutiatine included in *Danzas Espanolas*, *Polka 'Rendez-Vous'*, and *Old Gipsy Waltz*. Group dances including *Ballet Chopiana*, an eight-part ballet set to Chopin's Waltzes and Nocturnes (Fig. 3). The programme for that year lists the first group of young Maltese girls, including Helena and Joy Micallef Eynaud, and a handful of regular dancers such as Francia, the only dancer who remained a constant performer in Poutiatine's productions from 1930 until 1946.<sup>18</sup>

By 1934, Poutiatine performed a reduced number of solos, including *Mazourka: 'Characteristic Polish Dance'*, and in 'Christmas Waltz' (as part of *December Fantasy*) with Robert Borg Olivier, Lowell and Joe G. Vella. Young dancers, including the Micallef Eynaud sisters, Angela Watkins and Audrey Charnock, began to make regular appearances. Mary Scicluna,<sup>19</sup> a gifted dancer in Poutiatine's productions,

performed *An Eastern Thought*, *Invitation à la Valse* (set to Carl Maria von Weber's *Invitation to the Dance*), and *Bagatelle* with Francia and Diana Littlejohns.

The 1935 programme suggests the first signs of an increase in student numbers and reflects the continued popularity of Poutiatine's endeavours garnered in the first few years.<sup>20</sup> The concerts showcased the talented Angela Watkins in solos, such as *Printemps* (Grieg, played by Rose Critien). Poutiatine, together with Lowell, danced a 'Viennese Waltz' to Strauss' *Les Roses du Sud*. A children's ballet *La Boutique Enchantée* featured in the 1935 programme. The narrative of the ballet included two customers, Victor Mercieca and Olga Pace, whose father Dr Giuseppe Pace was to commission the building of Poutiatine's studio in Tigné. *La Voisine du Jardinier* stands out as one of Poutiatine's inventive choreographic studies. It is during this sixth concert that we find the first references to dancers who later taught ballet on the Island in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including Irene Cox<sup>21</sup> and Jenny Selvaggi.<sup>22</sup>

The 1937 production featured Poutiatine in *Poème Printanier*, and *Vienna, City of My Dreams* with Lowell and Tancred Mercieca,<sup>23</sup> with costumes by the renowned Madame Manfré. Poutiatine also performed alongside her students in *Reminiscences des Sylphides* (*A composition of pure classical essence*) (Fig. 4), another rendition of *Ballet Chopiniana*, and *Slavonic Dances*, which included performances by Cox, Joy Micallef Eynaud and Yvonne Muscat. Poutiatine's young dancers, including the talented Joan Abraham, performed *Tramway: A busy morning* - a short ballet of eight dances set to a score by the Belgian composer Jean Louis Gobbaerts (Fig 5).

The final concert for the 1930s, given on Friday 2 June 1939, typified the significant developments in Poutiatine's ballets at the Royal Opera House. The two-part concert featured three short 'story' ballets, including an adaptation of *Swan Lake*, and a series of six shorter dances in the second part, including: *Le Ballet au Temps de Degas*, based on a school of ballet in Paris during the nineteenth century, included







Fig. 6  
Poutiatine in *Poème Printanier*, costume by Madame Manfré, 1937.  
(Courtesy of Tanya Bayona)

Francia as the teacher, Yvonne Calascione as pianist, and seven pupils including Clarke and Cox; *La Legende du Lac Enchante* which featured Mary Arrigo<sup>24</sup> as The Prince, Clarke as the Swan Princess and Abraham as the Solo White Swan. Poutiatine's swansong included *Scherzo: 'L'ambition de la Fleuriste'* and *Deux Valses*, accompanied by her nephew Tancred and four other dancers, including Cox, Iris Merola, Daphne Paige, and Paddy Shorten. Waltzing to Oscar Strauss' compositions, Poutiatine brought a golden era of ballet to a close.

#### Of inspiration and aspiration: Thematic, costume and musical choices

An analysis of the surviving programmes from 1930 to 1939 broadly suggests three main themes that informed Poutiatine's productions: the Russian Imperial period, the influences and the repertoire of Michel Fokine, and the legendary dancer Anna Pavlova.

Poutiatine danced Pavlova's iconic *Dying Swan* (1909) as *Le Cygne* (1930) and in 1934 as *La Mort du Cygne*. Musical and costume choices also appear to have had connecting themes. For both Pavlova and her 'disciple', Tchaikovsky's *December* was a favourite. Poutiatine first used the score *December* in 1930, and again in 1934 in 'Christmas Waltz', part of *December Fantasy*. The connection between the two women's artistic vision ran deeper than production or choreographic choices. Crucially, Pavlova's visits at Egorova's school offered significant aspiration: 'I saw Madame Pavlova's tender look fixed on me, so ready to understand better than anyone the problems of her art.'<sup>25</sup>

The Ballets Russes companies, including Serge Diaghilev's company (1909–1929) and the later Théâtre des Ballets Russes (season 1932), are also significant influences in Poutiatine's approach to the art of ballet. A programme from April 1926 is a testament to Poutiatine watching

Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company at the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo. The repertoire included the seminal ballet *Les Sylphides* (1909), originally created for Pavlova, Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky by Michel Fokine.<sup>26</sup> Several references to Fokine's masterpiece in Poutiatine's repertoire of the 1930s are made, notably *Ballet Chopiniana* (1933) and *Reminiscences de Sylphides* (1937). *Invitation à la Valse* (Weber), created for Chris Johnson and Scicluna, establishes the connections to Fokine's *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911).

Similar to the practice of commissioning costume designers and couturieres by Ballet Russes companies, Poutiatine paid significant attention to costume design. Costumes were first credited in the programmes of 1934 to Miss Borg Belizzi, who continued to be a regular contributor to the productions until 1939. A handful of Poutiatine's costumes for 1937 were created by the celebrated couturier Madame Manfré, a former assistant to Madame Patou in the Gowns Department at the New York Hudson stores and later 'an accomplished courtier in her own right'.<sup>27</sup> The costumes for *Vienna, City of my Dreams* and *Poème Printanier* reveal the elegance of Manfré's designs (Fig. 6).

The recurring musical choices of the Chopin, Délibes and Tchaikovsky compositions, together with other dominant musical themes in Poutiatine's ballets from the 1930s suggest the predominance of the waltz. Such choices are evident in ballets such as *Le Beau Danube Bleu* (1934), *Les Roses du Sud* (1935), and *Vienna, City of my Dreams* (1937). Poutiatine's choices were 'classical' in so far as she chose *mazurkas, polonaises* and, of course, her beloved waltzes by well-known Austrian, Polish, and Russian composers. Nevertheless, her choices did include musical compositions in vogue during her contemporary times, including those by Darius Milhaud, Oscar Strauss and Franz Lehar. The waltz remained at the epicentre of her art and, closing the decade with *Deux Walzes*, Poutiatine reaffirmed the nostalgia for the waltzes of her youth and idyllic childhood in St Petersburg.



**Fig. 7**  
**Poutiatine in *Columbine*, 1930.**  
(Courtesy of Sandy de Domenico)

A forthcoming publication, *Princess Nathalie Poutiatine and the Art of Ballet in Malta*, narrates largely unwritten histories associated with this post-Revolution émigré: Poutiatine's departure from her homeland; her studies in Paris with Lubov Egorova, and the connections with the Ballets Russes companies; the establishment of her school and productions across five decades; her writings on the art of ballet, and recollections by her former students, including Tanya Bayona M.Q.R. The twilight years of her Russian Academy of Dancing in the late 1970s reflect the burgeoning energy of the first generation of 'professionalised' dance teachers following Malta's Independence from the British Crown.

#### Notes

- 1 *The Little Humpbacked Horse* was first choreographed in 1866 by Arthur Saint-Léon to a score by Cesare Pugni. The ballet underwent several choreographic revisions including Marius Petipa's 1895 production for the Imperial Ballet and Alexander Gorsky's version (1912), in which Tamara Karsavina starred as the Tsarina. The ballet continues to a popular Russian-themed ballet, and Alexei Ratmansky produced the 2009 ballet for the Mariinsky ballet.
- 2 Nathalie Poutiatine, *Princess Olga: My Mother* (Valletta: Gulf Publishing Limited, 1982).
- 3 Poutiatine, op.cit., 108-109.
- 4 Poutiatine, op.cit., 109. Both Karsavina and Dubrovska went on to have illustrious careers with the Ballets Russes, and subsequently in England and America.
- 5 The discrepancy accounts for the thirteen-day difference between Julian and Gregorian Calendars (1900). Russia adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1918.
- 6 Poutiatine, op.cit., 162.
- 7 Frances Welch, *The Russian Court at Sea: The Last Days of a Great Dynasty, The Romanov's Voyage into Exile* (London: Short Books, 2011).
- 8 Nathalie Poutiatine, 'Ballet Methods', in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 16 December 1962, unpaginated.
- 9 Listed in the maritime archives of the National Archives of Malta, Rabat.
- 10 Poutiatine, op.cit., 212.
- 11 Poutiatine, op.cit., 215.
- 12 Poutiatine, op.cit., 206.
- 13 In a series of articles published in *The Sunday Times of Malta* (1965-66), A. Samut-Tagliaferro outlines the popularity of opera in Malta since the opening of the Royal Opera House in 1866. The first Gilbert and Sullivan musical production was *The Yeoman of the Guard*, produced by the M.A.D.C. in February 1902 (19 December 1965). While some ballet recitals were given in 1925 by 'Aurea' and other dance forms seen more commonly in operas, appeared on the stage of the Royal Opera House, it is possible to suggest that Poutiatine's concerts were the first 'annual' events in the artistic seasons of the 1930s.
- 14 Poutiatine, op.cit., 216.
- 15 Poutiatine, op.cit., 219.
- 16 DuCane was Governor of Malta between 1927 and 1931.
- 17 Despite their political differences, the attendance of Strickland, Mifsud and Mercieca at Poutiatine's concert appears to ride over any sovereign or government allegiance. This is further discussed in the forthcoming publication on Poutiatine's ballets in Malta (1930-1965).
- 18 The majority of the young women performed in Poutiatine's productions until they got married. The exception was Mary Scicluna (later Mary Arrigo). However, Lola Francia performed until 1947 and died unmarried. She was also the younger sister of Lady Mifsud.
- 19 Mary Scicluna was the daughter of Sir Hannibal Scicluna (1880-1981).
- 20 By 1935, the programme listed thirty-five students, the majority of which were English expatriate and children of well-to-do Maltese families including the Pace and Micallef Eynaud families.
- 21 After 1945, Cox taught dance at St Dorothy's Convent School in Mdina. Author in conversation with Irene Cox's daughter, Davinia Clarissa Camilleri, on Saturday 22 April 2017.
- 22 Selvaggi briefly taught Daphne Lungaro-Mifsud and suggested that Lungaro-Mifsud sought professional training with Poutiatine. Author in conversation with Daphne Lungaro-Mifsud, March 2014.
- 23 Tancred Mercieca was the second-born son of Sir Arturo Mercieca (1878-1969) and nephew of Edgar Tabone, Poutiatine's husband. He danced in Poutiatine's productions from c.1931 until 1939.
- 24 Daughter of Sir Hannibal Scicluna, Mary studied ballet in Paris in 1935 and subsequently returned to Malta later that year or in 1936. She married in 1937 and unlike any of the other dancers, she returned to perform with Poutiatine's productions in 1939 as Mary Arrigo. Email correspondence with Jacqueline Vassallo, Mary Arrigo's daughter.
- 25 Poutiatine, op.cit., 196.
- 26 The triple bill included *Carnaval* (ch. Fokine) with Lydia Sokolova, Alexandra Danilova, and Alicia Markova; *Les Sylphides* (ch. Fokine) with her former ballet teacher Felia Doubrovska, Serge Lifar, Danilova, Lubov Tchernicheva and Alice Nikitina, and *Zephyr et Flore* (ch. Massine).
- 27 Wilma Friggeri, 'Madame Manfré: A Dressmaking Legend of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century', in Nicholas De Piro and Vicki Ann Cremona (eds), *Costume in Malta: An History of Fabric, Form & Fashion* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1998), 158.