

Queer as Fact – Episode 5 — Vaslav Nijinsky

Irene: Hello, welcome to Queer as Fact, a queer history podcast. My name's Irene.

Alice: My name's Alice.

I: We're a fortnightly queer history podcast. Each episode one of us will discuss a topic about queer history from around the world. This week I'm going to talk about Vaslav Nijinsky, a queer ballet dancer from Russia.

[Intro music plays]

I: We have a few content warnings for this episode. We have mentions of schizophrenia, early 20th-century healthcare and institutionalisation, abusive relationships, and unbalanced power dynamics within relationships. If you don't want to hear any of that, then feel free to skip this episode. We have more content coming up.

I'm starting with a brief introduction to who Nijinsky is and what his significance is. He's considered the greatest male dancer of the early 20th century, which is to say, at the time they thought he was the greatest male dancer that had ever happened in the world. They called him The God of Dance.

A: I like it.

I: Yep, but there have been some quite good Russian ballet dancers since then.

A: And non-Russian ones?

I: I mean yes, but like—

A: You just looked at me like, 'Why would a great ballet dancer not be Russian?'

I: He was a super good dancer. He's really well known for doing, like, spectacular death-defying jumps where everyone sort of looks and is like 'What happened there? How do you even do that?' And this interviewer asks him after one of his first performances in Paris whether it's difficult for him to do these impossible-seeming jumps and he's kind of confused for a bit because his French isn't very good and eventually they get the message across and he goes, 'What? Oh, the jumps? No, not difficult at all. You just jump, and then you pause up there for a moment, and then you come back down.'

A: That's pretty great.

I: Anyway, aside from that, he changed a whole lot of things about the way the world saw ballet. So, if you think of ballet in the early twentieth century, it's probably reasonable to think of it the way you think of ballet now.

A: How do I think of ballet now?

I: I'm about to tell you. It's kind of elitist, it's stagnant, it's conservative.

A: Yeah, everyone's like, a stick person, and they're all like the same height, and have those creepy feet that go at a 180 degrees. Is that the sort of thing we're talk—

I: Not quite that. Not so much the technical thing as just the kind of, like, social class ballet appealed to.

A: Oh yeah.

I: The kind of art it was. It's very old-fashioned. It's very traditional. It's all kinds of classist.

A: Yep, yep.

I: It's all sort of tied up with the aristocracy and-

A: So I assume you're going to clarify this in a moment, but you're trying to tell me that in the early 20th century it was elitist, and Nijinsky changed it.

I: Yes.

A: But it's changed back.

I: Nothing's happened since then.

A: Okay.

I: Yes, I'm getting to that. So yes, it's old-fashioned. Going to see that ballet is something only the aristocracy does. It's really an upperclass thing, and—

A: Mmhm.

I: This is early-20th-century Russia. You can see what's about to happen to the upper class.

A: Ah yes, the revolution!

I: Yes.

A: My favourite part of history.

I: But yes, at this point ballet is pretty much an excuse for rich people to go and look at fit women's legs.

A: Mm. I feel like it's that now as well.

I: Yes, except slightly less rich people, because sometimes I can afford to go and look at rich women's legs.

A: It's true.

I: So it's all fairly conservative and staid and traditional, and kind of dying out, until Nijinsky and Diaghilev come along. Diaghilev is the producer who runs the Ballets Russes, which is the ballet company that makes Nijinsky really famous.

A: Mmhm.

I: And they cause a whole string of scandals and riots, and do a lot of very exciting things, and change the way everyone thinks about ballet, and it gets very exciting.

Nijinsky's early life — he was born on March the 12th in 1889 or maybe 1890. There's some disagreement on this.

A: I love the way no-one before like, the '50s, knows what year they were born.

I: I love the way they all knew what day they were born, but they're not really sure on the year. Like you think their mothers would remember, like 'Oh yeah, Vaslav, was he born — was it yesterday, or a year ago?'

A: 'I've forgotten already.'

I: 'Wow, he is quite large.'

A: But like, they must have known when they celebrated their birthday, like, how old am I turning this year?

I: Yeah, like, you remember that from an age when it's not hard to count.

A: And your family would know, they'd be like 'Yeah, you're three today.' Anyway, so he was born in 1890 did you say?

I: He was born in 1889 or possible 1890, in Ukraine, in Kiev, which was at that time a part of Russia, which it quite often is.

A: Yep.

I: His name is Vaslav Nijinsky. His parents are Polish, although he grows up mostly in Russia. He doesn't speak a lot of Polish. This is always a thing that makes he said. He feels quite Polish.

A: Would his parents have spoken Polish at home?

I: A little, I think, but not a lot. Also, he did go to boarding school from quite young.

A: Ah okay, yep. That makes sense.

I: He's the middle child of three siblings. The oldest child, Stanislav, falls out a window as a toddler, unfortunately. He survives. He develops a brain injury—

A: Aw.

I: —and spends much of his life institutionalised. The other siblings do still seem to be quite close to him. They're both quite upset when he dies, they go to see him.

A: Okay. That's nice.

I: But he's – yeah. He's not as close as Vaslav and the younger sister Bronia are, because she also goes into dance as a career; they dance in the same companies a lot; they work together a lot. The family is not exactly well-off. Both parents are also in performing arts.

A: Oh yeah.

I: Sometimes things are going pretty well for them, sometimes things are not going well for them, but they're mostly doing okay.

A: Mmhm.

I: Until Thomas, the father, meets another woman, falls in love, and leaves them.

A: Thomas!

I: So, poor Eleanora – the mother – is on her own with three children, one of whom has a brain injury. She's trying to support the whole family as a single mother through a career as a mediocre dancer.

A: Do you know how old Nijinsky is when his father leaves? Am I imagining like five? Or like ten?

I: Somewhere around there. Like, he's a child, but not too young to remember it.

A: Oh okay, yeah.

I: So she looks and she's sort of like, 'Alright, what am I going to do? How am I going to do this?' So she moves the family to St. Petersburg to try and get her two children into the Imperial Ballet School.

A: Okay.

I: It's not as silly a thing to do as it sounds.

A: It sounds pretty out there for a single mother being like, 'What will I do? I've got a plan.'

I: It's not that silly. For one thing, the family has always been in dance.

A: Mmhm.

I: So this isn't like, if my mother when I was seven was like, 'Oh no, I've run out of money. Guess I'll send my child to ballet boarding school!'

A: Yep.

I: Also, if she gets them into the Imperial Ballet School it's funded by the government. The government pays for their food and their clothing and their accommodation and they go through school and she doesn't have to pay for any of it.

A: Ahh. I see how this works now.

I: And then after that, if they graduate and they're good dancers, and they don't do anything terrible in the meantime, they'll get offered a job at the Imperial Russian Ballet Company.

A: Mmhm.

I: Which I think you signed on for five years at the time or something.

A: Oh yeah.

I: So they've got a job for their first five years, and everything's going to be great for them. It's not at all like being a history student.

A: Okay. It's actually a pretty solid plan. Maybe that's what I'll do.

I: Yes. So anyway, that goes well. Nijinsky has a tonne of natural talent and really likes dancing, and passes the audition and gets into the school.

A: What about his sister?

I: She's a couple of years younger. We're coming to that. She does follow him into the school, but not until two years after or something.

A: Okay. Cool.

I: Yeah. So yeah, Nijinsky goes to school. He's not great academically. On one occasion he nearly gets expelled for using a slingshot to try and knock the hats off passing noblemen.

A: That's so rad. I respect him.

I: He doesn't get on well with the other students.

A: Aw.

I: Most of the things I read put this down to jealousy, on the basis that he was just that amazing. I don't really know what the real story was there. Apparently several students were involved in the knocking hats off passing noblemen situation, and everybody blamed it on him.

A: Oh yeah.

I: Yeah, there was a lot of bullying. The year before he graduates, he's going really well as a dancer. He gets offered a place in the company.

A: Is that normal to happen?

I: That's not really normal.

A: Okay.

I: He gets offered a place in the company, and he says, 'No, I think I'll finish school first.'

A: Good on you Nijinsky.

I: He does his last year of school, and he accepts his place in the company. So we're in about 1907 here. He's 18, or 17, if he turned out to be born in 1890 after all.

A: Yep.

I: He's introduced to Prince Pavel Lvov. I don't honestly know what you have to do in Imperial Russia to be called a prince, but he's not like the son of the Tsar or anything. He's a minor aristocrat.

A: I definitely have the impression that in Imperial Russia there were a bunch of princes.

I: Yeah, so, Prince Lvov is a minor aristocrat but still wealthy, like, patronises the performing arts.

A: Oh yeah.

I: —does that kind of thing. He's 30. Vaslav is 18. They get into a relationship which has a kind of pederastic quality to it. When Nijinsky writes about the relationship later, he says, 'He loved me as a man loves a boy. I loved him because I knew he wished me well.' For all the age difference and that, Lvov seems to be quite good for Nijinsky. He buys him jewels and pays for his dance classes and hires highly acclaimed teachers from overseas for him, and puts his mother up in a nice apartment.

A: Pretty nice.

I: And yeah, the two of them are having a pretty nice time. He's put a lot into sort of advancing Nijinsky's career and making connections for him, and sort of networking for him. And about a year after they start their relationship, Prince Lvov says to Nijinsky, 'Okay. Okay Vaslav. I know this man who's going to take a troop of Russian ballet dancers to Paris next year. You really need to have sex with this man. It's will make your career. Trust me, just do it.'

A: So he's pimping out Nijinsky?

I: Basically.

A: But like for Nijinsky's own benefit.

I: Yeah, for Nijinsky's career. He's like, go and have sex with this man, and he's bound to employ you. It'll make you famous.

A: Okay.

I: So Nijinsky is pretty dubious.

A: Yeah.

I: He's not super keen on this idea. He's like, 'Prince Lvov, I'm quite fond of you. I don't really want to sleep with anyone else.' Lvov goes, 'Look, I've booked you the hotel room. Just go and do it.'

A: Wow.

I: And so he goes ahead, and he meets the man, he sleeps with the man, and he's gets a job—

A: Cool.

I: —with this touring company that's going to Paris.

A: Now I know why I'm still unemployed. Sorry. Continue the story.

I: Anyway, so this is Sergei Diaghilev, who I'm going to tell you more about, because he's going to be a really important figure in Nijinsky's life. So, he was born on the 31st of March 1872, so he's quite a lot older than Nijinsky. 17 or 18 years or something.

A: So Nijinsky goes in for older men.

I: Nijinsky apparently goes in for older men. Nijinsky seems to go in for furthering his career—

A: Okay.

I: —in his choices here. There were a lot of things that I read which seemed to insist that no, he didn't enjoy sleeping with men at all, he just did this because it would further his career, but this seems unlikely.

A: Yeah, I'm gonna hear the rest of the story, but right now I don't buy it.

I: I mean, I just generally don't buy it because regardless it's going to have some kind of like, negative social connotations and that kind of thing.

A: Also any excuse where historians try to find a like, non-gay answer for why somebody had sex with people of the same sex, I'm always really dubious of.

I: Yes. In order to back this up they take a whole lot of quotations from journals he wrote later in the middle of a kind of mental health breakdown, and he's having a moral crisis, and everything he sort of writes is, 'Everything I've done is terrible.' He's having this kind of crisis about his sexuality.

A: Oh okay. And so they'll try and say, 'Look, he thought it was terrible, he must have only done it for career reasons.'

I: Yeah.

A: Not he had internal conflict because he was attracted to men but society told him that was wrong.

I: Yeah, basically.

A: Uh-huh.

I: So anyway, Diaghilev, he's openly gay.

A: Okay.

I: Which is technically illegal in Russia at this time. I think the maximum sentence is three months in prison.

A: Okay.

I: It's not that big a deal.

A: Yep, cool.

I: And especially not in the sort of circles he mixed in, which are, you know, your stereotypical performing arts circles.

A: Yep.

I: They're a little bit more sexually liberal than the rest of Russia. So people seem pretty happy to turn a blind eye, at least, to the fact that Diaghilev is having sex with men.

So Diaghilev has always been passionate about the performing arts, basically. He's really into music and dance and theatre. He had dreams of a music career. He studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory of Music. Rimsky-Korsakov was Diaghilev's music teacher at university. So Rimsky-Korsakov is a very well-known and successful Russian composer, and he told him to give up his dream, because he had no talent.

A: Oh my god! That's so mean! What did he play?

I: He studied singing.

A: Oh. Huh.

I: I assume he did some soul-searching about this, but the end result of it seems to have been that he's like, 'Alright, that's probably the correct choice. It wasn't the most suitable career path for me.'

A: Mmhm.

I: While he was quite good at music, he wasn't good enough to be able to make a career out of it.

A: Mmhm.

I: So he decides to go into producing instead.

A: Producing specifically ballet, or just producing?

I: Producing performance in general.

A: Cool.

I: But he manages to get hired as an assistant producer for the Imperial Ballet.

A: So the Imperial Ballet's different from the Ballets Russes?

I: Yes.

A: But they're both government-run Russian ballets.

I: The Ballets Russes is not government-run.

A: Oh, so it was the Imperial Ballet that Nijinsky would have got into after he finished school.

I: Yes.

A: But the Ballets Russes that he's going to end up in later in life, and that was in your little like, little intro bio.

I: Yes.

A: Okay, cool. Yep.

I: Yes. Nijinsky at the moment has signed a contract with the Imperial Ballet, which—

A: Yep.

I: He has to work with them for five years, I think. So Diaghilev decides not to go into music. He gets hired as an assistant producer for the Imperial Ballet and comes up with a series of increasingly ambitious and innovative ideas for what he wants to do. He tries to do weird contemporary things, he has loud creative disagreements with everyone else on the production team, refuses to work with people whose artistic vision is too small, and he loses the job.

A: Aw. Okay.

I: He was the assistant producer, and, basically he's—

A: He was a bit too uppity for someone with 'assistant' at the start of their job title.

I: Yeah, basically. Basically, he doesn't have a lot of experience yet or anything like that.

A: Yep.

I: And he's got a lot of creative vision and doesn't work well with people. So he loses the job.

A: Okay.

I: And—

A: I like Diaghilev.

I: So, he starts curating art exhibitions instead for a while.

A: That's what I do! Sometimes.

I: Yes, he eventually takes an exhibition of portraits to Paris.

A: Yep.

I: And Paris is super keen on this and they say, 'Diaghilev, do you want to bring us more Russian stuff?' So he brings over some Russian musicians. He brings an opera in 1908, at which point the Paris Opera says to him, 'Hey, do you want to bring us some Russian ballet next time? We've heard ballet is amazing in Russia.'

A: Mmhm.

I: And he goes, 'Okay, great! I'll put together a company.'

A: Oh, okay. So is that why they're called the Ballets Russes

I: Yeah.

A: Because they're made for France, and so it's in French.

I: Yeah. That's why they're called the Ballets Russes, because they're a Russian ballet company which has essentially just been put together to show off how great Russian ballet is to France.

A: Cool, okay.

I: Which takes us back to Nijinsky, who has just been offered a job with the Ballets Russes. So at this point Nijinsky is one of the best dancers in Russia.

A: Mmhm.

I: If you have Nijinsky on board then your company is pretty much made.

A: But he's still super young right?

I: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah. This is 1908, he was born in 1889.

A: So he's not 20 yet.

I: He's not 20 yet. He's just incredible.

A: Okay.

I: So basically Diaghilev wants Anna Pavlova on board and he wants Nijinsky on board, and then he thinks nothing can go wrong. Everything's gonna be great. So it does turn out great.

A: Yep.

I: Basically. Their first season in 1909 is a massive success.

A: Mmhm.

I: It's a project-based thing, so he puts together this company for this one tour, and then they all go to Paris, dance, come back, and go back to their usual jobs.

A: So they're on short-term contracts.

I: They're on a short-term contract, basically. And anyway, their season in Paris is a massive success, and Diaghilev decides that it's time to make a full-time company out of this, because it's gone pretty well.

A: Mmhm.

I: Nijinsky is on board with this. He's pretty enthusiastic. Paris is a lot less conservative than St. Petersburg, so this is much more exciting than the Imperial Ballet—

A: Yep.

I: —where he's probably doing the Nutcracker for the 400th time, and by comparison, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes is exciting and innovative, and it makes use of his talents. He's a bit of a weird person. He has a lot to say artistically.

A: He felt that he couldn't properly express himself in the Imperial Ballet.

I: Yeah. He's feeling stifled in the Imperial Ballet, and Diaghilev is saying, 'Well, you want to come to Paris with me and have a job full time, and be doing exciting things all the time?' and Nijinsky says, 'Sure! This sounds great! I'll sign on.'

A: Mmhm.

I: So, the first problem with this is that when he got offered his position at the Imperial Ballet as I said he signed on for five years.

A: Yep.

I: He's still like 19.

A: So he's supposed to have this other job for five more years.

I: Yeah. He's still under contract with the Imperial Ballet. They still want him.

A: Okay.

I: And he doesn't know how to get out of it.

A: Yep.

I: And so Daighilev says to him, 'Don't worry. I'll get you out of this. I've got a great plan.'

A: Is he gonna pimp him out to someone else?

I: And Nijinsky says, 'Alright, what's the plan?' and he says to Nijinsky, 'You know the costume you wore when you performed in the ballet *Giselle* that we put on in Paris?'

A: Yep.

I: And Nijinsky's like, 'Yes?' And Diaghilev says, 'Wear it to do *Giselle* in St. Petersburg.' The difference between the two costumes is, in Russia, Albrecht, who is the male lead in *Giselle*, which is the part that Nijinsky danced, is wearing a modest tunic. It probably comes down to mid-thigh. He's got tights on. He's got shorts underneath his tunic just in case it rides up while he's dancing so the audience can't see his arse. It's all very—

A: —modest.

I: In Paris Nijinsky's wearing a much shorter tunic, and just tights. No shorts.

A: Okay.

I: So, everyone can see his arse. You know what it looks like when you see a male ballet dancer from behind.

A: Yes.

I: It looks like his pants were spray-painted on.

A: Yes.

I: Yes. A: That's what's happening in Paris.

A: So he's telling Nijinsky to wear his costume that will be incredibly scandalous.

I: Yes.

A: Okay.

I: Basically. The costume is fine Paris; everyone's like, 'Yes, ballet dancers wear revealing clothing. Nijinsky does have a great arse.' So this is fine. In St. Petersburg this is scandalous. This is terrible. The Imperial Ballet takes him aside, and sits him down, and demands that he behave himself, make a written apology for damaging the reputation of the company, and beg for forgiveness, and then maybe they'll give him his job back. Assuming, obviously, that they are the only company in the world worth anything, because they're the imperial Russian Ballet, and he got nowhere else to go. And Nijinsky's like, 'No thanks, I don't need you and your conservative values.' And he goes back to Diaghilev, and he's like, 'Thanks! That was a great plan. It's all sorted. I'm working for you now.'

A: My favourite part of this is I'm imagining Nijinsky like before he goes on stage in this production, but he's in like his mini-skirt but nobody can see him or they won't let him on stage, so he's like, sneaking round the wings in a mini-skirt, trying not to be discovered.

I: He whips off his shorts at the last minute.

A: Yeah. Yeah, he rips off his long tunic to reveal a short tunic underneath and then *leaps* onto the stage.

I: Stripper tunic!

A: Yeah. Press studs!

I: Yep. Anyway, the second problem here is that Nijinsky's sleeping with his boss.

A: Yes, he is.

I: Which could have been fine if they handed it like mature adults, but Nijinsky got this job by sleeping with Diaghilev, and they continue about as sensibly as that.

A: Cool.

I: So Diaghilev is like, 'Here's an idea. This company is only just starting out. How about instead of paying you a wage you come and live with me, and I'll feed you and buy you everything you need and send an allowance to your mother.'

A: Okay.

I: And Nijinsky is like, 'Sure. No worries. That sounds fine. I'll still have food and accommodation. You'll send money to my mother' — which is what he did with some of his earnings — he supported his mother.

A: Mmhm.

I: 'So this all seems fine.' I don't really know what Diaghilev is up to here. Maybe he's just trying to save money.

A: Yes, it's probably something like that.

I: As ballet companies are expensive. Maybe he just likes the weird power dynamic and he's—

A: Oh yeah, that's true too.

I: Yeah. I don't know. Whatever's going on, this relationship has some problems. I will say here though, like I told you before, a lot of what we know about Nijinsky's personal life comes from this

series of journals he wrote in 1919 when his mental health is in a terrible state and he's having a moral crisis. Writes about – in terms of his relationships – we have to take what he says with a grain of salt. They tend to look a lot more terrible in the way he describes them than they may actually have been.

A: Oh yeah, that makes sense.

I: So anyway, he agrees to Daighilev's proposal and he moves in with him, and the company goes on tour again, and they start doing great, exciting things. Diaghilev lets Nijinsky have a go at choreographing.

A: Oh, that's exciting.

I: Which is exciting for Nijinsky. They use music written by weird avant-garde composers like Stravinsky and Debussy.

A: I hate Stravinsky.

I: So does most of Paris.

A: Yeah. Do they do – what's that one I hate? *Rite of Spring*?

I: That is coming.

A: I hate it.

I: So does most of Paris.

A: Hooray!

I: That's not true. So does like, half of Paris. It's fairly evenly matched.

A: Good. Let's hear about it.

I: So anyway, the first thing Nijinsky puts on is this short twelve-minute ballet called *Afternoon of a Faun*. The idea of it – they wanted to replicate the scenes they saw in Ancient Greek and Assyrian artwork.

A: Okay

I: So it's totally different like in terms of movements, to classical ballet.

A: Yep.

I: It was interesting. What do you know about Ancient Greek artwork?

A: Um. There's a lot of penises.

I: Yes. Yes, Ancient Greek artwork can be quite erotic. So basically what happens in *Afternoon of a Faun* is there's this faun, lounging around on the stage when some pretty wood nymphs come in, they do a little dance, and then as they're leaving one of them drops her veil.

A: Okay.

I: And they leave the stage, and this veil is left behind, and the faun, who has been lounging around, picks up the veil and essentially masturbates with the veil.

A: Okay. When you say masturbates with the veil, how much of that is through dance, and how much of that is lie, this is clearly what's happening, like

I: This is quite clear.

A: Okay.

I: This is quite clear. There's a quotation from Nijinsky somewhere where he says something to the effect of, 'I pretty much had an orgasm on the stage.'

A: Okay.

I: It's quite erotic.

A: Okay.

I: The public response was mixed.

A: Yeah.

I: Some of the positive reviews called it "a perfect union of mime and music" and "a joy to the eye"

A: Okay.

I: By which I guess they meant, 'I love seeing hot ballet dancers touch themselves.'

A: Okay.

I: Another review called him "a lecherous faun whose movements are filthy and bestial in the eroticism, as crude as they are indecent" and called the whole piece "loathsome." So I mean, I suppose he got his message across.

A: Yeah, I mean, you don't make that kind of ballet without expecting half you reviewers to call it, like lewd and loathsome.

I: Yes. So that was his first ballet.

A: He didn't like—

I: —ease into it, did he.

A: No.

I: Another one of the ballets he choreographed was called *Jeux*, which is 'games'.

A: How to you spell *Jeux*? J-E-U-X?

I: Yep.

A: Yep, cool, okay.

I: According to Nijinsky's diaries, hilariously, Diaghilev wanted the like, storyline to be a sexual encounter between three young men.

A: Okay.

I: Nijinsky thought it should include an aeroplane crash.

A: That's what I always look for in my sexual encounters.

I: So, unfortunately, for some reason, we don't really know what happened here. Somebody made them tone it down, and it wasn't three young men on a desert island having sex.

A: Is that how he thought the aeroplane crash would come into it? Or are you being facetious?

I: It's really not clear. He just vaguely in his notes mentions that he thought there should maybe be an aeroplane crash in this.

A: I can't picture how he thought this would go down.

I: I don't know, but, yeah, somebody made them tone it down, or they thought maybe they should tone it down, because they might even be pushing the sensibilities of the Paris audience here, and it winds up being a totally heterosexual love triangle between two women and a man over a game of tennis.

A: That's so lame.

I: It went down better than *Afternoon of a Faun*.

A: Mmhm

I: It was less controversial. Now we're up to your favourite.

A: *The Rite of Spring*?

I: *The Rite of Spring*! So it premiered on the 29th of May 1913. The plot of *Rite of Spring*: so basically that somewhere in prehistoric Russia, for pagan ritual sacrifice reasons a virgin has dance herself to death in honour of the god of spring. To show you what's weird about them in terms of music, here I'm going to play you a little section of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*.

[Music plays: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swWR8Ux1LWs&t=24s>]

A: Ah yeah, that sounds super conventional. Like I can picture someone just like, in a tutu going across the stage.

I: You can't see the picture I have on Youtube here, but she is in fact in a white tutu, doing pretty little things with her arms like this. I hate *Sleeping Beauty*. I hate it so much. This is *Rite of Spring*.

[Music plays: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFe4SJLOWI&t=34s>]

A: I hate *Rite of Spring*.

I: I hate *Sleeping Beauty*. I like *Rite of Spring* better.

A: *Rite of Spring* is like when you scrape your fingernails down a blackboard.

I: *Rite of Spring* is like when a virgin is forced to dance to death in honour of the god of spring.

A: Yeah, I mean, I think I hate *Rite of Spring* in exactly the way they wanted me to hate *Rite of Spring*, like I feel really uncomfortable and like, on edge, and—

I: It was meant to be quite, like confronting, and quite primal.

A: Yeah, I think that's why I hate it.

I: The dance is also totally different to what the audience has been led to expect. They use a lot of turned-in feet, so kind of pigeon-toed.

A: Uh-huh.

I: Another thing about it is the choreography is not designed to look pretty.

A: Okay.

I: Much of what the audience has been used to seeing is designed to look aesthetically pleasing, to have these nice long lines and pretty women in pretty dresses.

A: So – sorry – did Nijinsky choreograph this?

I: Yes.

A: Yep.

I: Yeah, this is Nijinsky's work, and this is not designed to look pretty at all. It's designed to look quite horrible and pagan, like there's blood sacrifice.

A: Cool.

I: So it's fairly confronting. They're not unaware that this is going to be controversial. They try and sort of slip it in between two more conventional pieces they've got—

A: Oh yeah.

I: —so that maybe the audience will come out still feeling okay.

A: Mhm.

I: So they're like, 'Maybe we'll just sort of ease them into it. Do one really weird ballet and some nice little things.

A: Yep.

I: It doesn't work.

A: Mmkay, what happens?

I: The—

A: You warned me there were going to be riots. I want to hear a riot!

I: Yeah, no, there is indeed a riot. There's some disagreement about how this started, like some people have said that disturbance in the audience began almost immediately, as soon as the music started playing. Some people said it took some time. Basically the audience was split between people who thought themselves kind of Bohemian and progressive and were like, 'We're at the forefront of art here, guys, this is amazing!' and people who were wealthy and had been there to like, look at some pretty women.

A: Oh yeah.

I: Maybe see Nijinsky's arse.

A: Yep.

I: And they were quite put out by being confronted by human sacrifice, and they basically get into a fight.

A: So basically the people who are enjoying it are beating up the people who weren't enjoying it and vice versa.

I: Yeah, basically it starts, you know, people are unsettled, people call things out, people—

A: Oh yeah.

I: And it ends up turning into physical violence, and there was a riot.

A: Okay, cool.

I: Whether that's a success or not is hard to say. Nijinsky and Diaghilev were definitely pushing the boundaries here. I don't know whether they wouldn't have looked and been like, 'Wow. There's a riot. Yep, we nailed that.'

A: Yeah, like, they might be like, 'Yeah, look at this successful art, I've really challenged society here.'

I: Yeah, so it's really hard to say. Now we tend to look back at it and be like, 'That's a good thing that—'

A: The riot itself is a good thing or the ballet is a good thing?

I: The ballet is a good thing. Like the ballet now is seen as like, challenging artistic boundaries in a valuable way—

A: Okay.

I: —and that kind of thing. But it might have been hard to judge at the time

A: Mmhm.

I: They might have been looking and thinking, 'Did we just invent the dance equivalent of atonal music?' I really don't know.

As you can hear, Nijinsky's ballets are controversial.

A: Yep.

I: They're exciting artistically, like a certain group of people in France are super into it and they're like, 'This is amazing' but Diaghilev's financial backers and the theatre owners and all those kinds of people are putting pressure on him saying, 'Can you just go and put on some of that normal stuff you put in the early seasons of the Ballets Russes?'

A: Yep.

I: 'Stop doing this weird stuff.' In addition to this Nijinsky does weird choreography, he's bad at communication, and so he has a hard time getting what he wants across to his dancers a lot of the time.

A: Mmhm.

I: So basically Nijinsky's ballets are just putting the company under a tonne of stress.

A: Okay, yep.

I: So Diaghilev goes back to the choreographer he'd had for his first couple of seasons, before he made the company full-time—

A: Yep.

I: —and says, ‘Look, can you do a couple of new ballets for me, because I think we need something a little bit more—’

A: ‘—chill.’

I: ‘—palatable for while.’ Nijinsky is quite put out by this. The stress of being so controversial is kind of weighing on him. Diaghilev has just turned around and gone back to the previous choreographer, so Nijinsky is quite upset by this. It puts strain on their relationship.

A: Yep.

I: Diaghilev didn’t actually tell Nijinsky in person that he was switching back to his old choreographer.

A: Ooh!

I: Because like, he wasn’t brave enough to tell him in person. He sent Bronia to do it.

A: Not cool, Diaghilev.

I: Yeah. So things are still going okay for the company. While Nijinsky’s ballets aren’t as financially successful as some of the others have been, they’ve still got like other repertoire.

A: Mhm.

I: Things are still okay. But for Nijinsky and Diaghilev’s relationship, not so great.

A: Yep.

I: So in August 1913 – so a couple of months after the premier of Rite of Spring – they decide they’re going to do a tour of South America.

A: Okay.

I: Nijinsky is going. Bronia, who he’s always travelled with, they’ve worked really closely together all their lives—

A: Wait, so is Bronia in the Ballets Russes as well?

I: Yes.

A: Oh!

I: Bronia has recently got married and she is pregnant, so she says, ‘I’m not going to come. I can’t dance anyway; I’m pregnant, and I don’t want to put the stress of like, ocean travel—’

A: Yep.

I: ‘—on me so I’m staying behind.’ So Nijinsky’s like, ‘Alright. That’s fine. I’ll cope without you.’ Diaghilev says he can’t come because when he was a child a fortune-teller told him he would die if he crossed the ocean.

A: But Diaghilev organised this tour? He’s in charge?

I: Yes. He’s in charge of this tour but he’s not going to accompany it personally because a fortune-teller told him that an ocean crossing would kill him.

A: Okay. Reasonable.

I: Some of the things I read suggested that this was making an excuse because he wanted some time away from Nijinsky.

A: If I was going to make an excuse to have a break from my partner, I'd like try a little bit harder. 'A fortune-teller told me....'

I: Yeah. I dunno. Maybe he was just really that superstitious.

A: Yeah, I think I'd believe more that he was that superstitious.

I: It's worth noting that later on when air-travel becomes more common he does go to America by plane, but—

A: Yeah.

I: Yeah. So it's the boat thing maybe?

A: I believe it. Just out of interest, how does he die?

I: He does not die on the ocean.

A: But *how* does he die?

I: He died of diabetes apparently, in Venice.

A: You know what Venice is?

I: On the water!

A: Floating.

I: Ooh.

[laughter]

I: So anyway, the tour goes ahead anyway. Nijinsky is quite stressed because Diaghilev's stayed behind and is like, 'Nijinsky, you can run the company like, be the sort of acting person in charge of the company.'

A: Okay.

I: He's been a major choreographer, he's the principal dancer, and Diaghilev's like 'It's fine, I can just heap this on you as well.'

A: Yep, okay.

I: So anyway, they go on tour. This is where we meet Romola de Pulszky who is going to be Nijinsky's wife.

A: Oh.

I: This a really a bit of a weird story. I'm actually reasonably fond of Romola. This story starts out weird, but she becomes quite good. But anyway, she basically develops an interest in ballet. She's seen Nijinsky dance, she's like, 'Wow, he's amazing. I want to know more about him. I want to marry him.' She's just – massive fan.

A: Mmhm.

I: And so she speaks to Cicchetti who is the ballet master of the Ballets Russes, so he takes all the classes.

A: Oh yeah.

I: And she's like, 'Look, I'm an amateur, not a professional, but I really love ballet, and I'd love to take some classes with your company.'

A: Mhm.

I: And he's like, 'Yeah, I guess.' And Nijinsky's a bit put out by this, he's like, 'We're running a professional company. What is she doing here?'

A: Yep, okay.

I: But she comes on the tour, and hangs out with the company on the boat to South America.

A: What? Wait, so—

I: Some background – she is an aristocrat.

A: Okay

I: She has a bit of money. She has some influence.

A: So they kind of have to suck up to her a bit.

I: Yeah.

A: Okay. And they met her in France?

I: Yes.

A: Okay.

I: Yeah, so she tries to strike up conversation with Nijinsky a bunch. He's not that great at French and that's their common language so it doesn't go super well. They have some awkward conversations with an interpreter. Basically she tries to sort of spend time with him and connect with him and it's not going really well, and then, out of nowhere he proposes to her. She honestly, at the time she thinks it's a joke. She thinks he's making fun of her.

A: Okay.

I: She is quite upset because she basically thinks he's mocking her.

A: Yep.

I: Eventually, he manages to persuade her that he's quite serious, and he wants to marry her.

A: So, do you reckon he's doing this to get at Diaghilev, 'cause Diaghilev's been treating him quite badly recently?

I: That is possible. Diaghilev has been treating him quite badly. Diaghilev has always been kind of jealous and controlling about Nijinsky.

A: Yep.

I: And so it may be the case that Nijinsky's gone, 'Look, I'm away from him. He can't stop me. I'm gonna get out of this.'

A: Okay, yeah.

I: 'If I'm married, he can't drag me back in.'

A: Yep, okay.

I: I don't really know. Nijinsky may have just been making an odd, spur-of-the-moment-choice. I really don't know. Like, it was as weird at the time as it sounds now. So nobody really knew why that had happened. She was quite offended and thought he was—

A: —joking.

I: —thought he was joking. And anyway, she says yes, he's still her massive celebrity crush. So she says yes.

A: This must be a really weird dynamic.

I: It is super weird for a while, yes.

A: I mean, he's her celebrity crush and they don't have a common fluent language.

I: Yes.

A: Yeah.

I: They get married in the September.

A: In South America?

I: In South America, yes.

A: Yep.

I: They both seem to realise at this point that they've got in way too deep and this might be an error.

A: They sure have!

I: Nijinsky writes at the time that he may have made an "irreparable mistake"—

A: Yep.

I: —putting himself "in the hands of someone who did not love [him]" is what he says.

A: Okay.

I: And she writes a biography herself and when she talks about their wedding she says she "almost cried with thankfulness" when he didn't want to sleep with her on their wedding night.

A: This is just really weird from both sides.

I: So they've both made a weird choice here, they're both quite relieved that the other one is—

A: —not that into it.

I: —not that into them too. So they finish the tour in South America and they head back to Paris and Diaghilev when he hears that Nijinsky has got married, is super angry.

A: Okay.

I: He dismisses Nijinsky from the company.

A: Ooh. This is why you don't sleep with your boss!

I: This is why you don't sleep with your boss. He has a sort of flimsy excuse about not employing married people.

A: Does he already employ other married people?

I: I don't actually know, but I don't think he's raised this before.

A: Okay.

I: Anyway, he dismisses Nijinsky from the company, which he also does in a super shoddy way where he doesn't do it to Nijinsky's face and Nijinsky is just kind of waiting for him to tell him when he wants him back in for class or rehearsal or something and eventually sends him a message and Diaghilev sends back and is like, 'No. Sorry. You're not working for me anymore.' Which is a massive problem for Nijinsky because, remember they had that questionable work arrangement, where Nijinsky basically didn't get a wage? He lived with Diaghilev and got food and board.

A: Yep.

I: So Nijinsky has no savings.

A: Ohhh, I see. Yeah that's bad.

I: And because in terms of dance he's always been doing weird things and controversial things and now he has Diaghilev putting a black mark against his name basically he has a lot of trouble getting work after that.

A: Yep.

I: And eventually he goes to Bronia and he says, 'Hey, if I wanted to start my own company, would you want to be involved?'

A: Okay.

I: And she's like, 'Yeah, sure. No worries.'

A: You make her sound so chill, like, 'Yeah. Whatever bro. Just start a ballet company!'

I: 'Yeah, sure, no worries. I'd dance it that. That sounds great.' And so they start this ballet company of their own. They have problems just in like a hundred small ways with it as opposed to any major problems. All the things they talk about are like, they can't find a space to rehearse, or the props they ordered arrived late, or—

A: I'm very sad for them.

I: Yeah, it doesn't seem to go well with them. I don't know why. I don't know whether there's a major conspiracy against Nijinsky, or whether they were just unlucky and these things didn't come off for them. Nijinsky also as we've discussed is bad at communicating with people and finds it quite stressful and has a lot of trouble explaining to people what he wants from them.

A: Yep.

I: And he just doesn't really work well in charge of people.

A: Mmhm.

I: In spite of all this they manage to get a like, season at a theatre.

A: Mmhm

I: And they're putting on a show, but it's all been a bit weird and really stressful, and eventually in the middle of one performance they find him in the interval in his dressing room sitting on the floor screaming, having got halfway through his like, changing costumes in between and deciding he's just done.

A: Yep. Okay.

I: He's just had it. He doesn't want to finish this performance. He doesn't want to do this anymore.

A: So he's had a breakdown.

I: He's had a bit of a breakdown. So his sister sits down with him and kind of talks him through it and is like, "Look, you can at least go back on stage and finish this performance and then you can take a few days off and we can work this out."

A: Yep.

I: He finishes that performance – gets into his second costume and he goes back out on stage and he finishes the performance.

A: Poor Nijinsky.

I: And then he cancels the next few days – his understudy dances, and the theatre eventually says to them, 'Look, we took this on because people want to see Nijinsky dance, and if it's someone else dancing we can't afford to do it. We're not gonna sell the tickets.'

A: Okay.

I: So they cancel the rest of the run.

A: Yep.

I: So Nijinsky's company is not going super well.

A: Mmhm.

I: He still has no money—

A: Mmhm.

I: —because Diaghilev never paid him.

A: Yep.

I: And he doesn't really know what to do after that. Then Diaghilev, who hasn't got in touch with Nijinsky for some time—

A: Are we talking like years? Or like months?

I: Like a couple of years, I think. Not a long time after. Like it's not like, decades after. It might be a few years. Yeah, it might be a couple of years.

Diaghilev sort of says to him, 'Look Nijinsky, how do you feel about dancing for the Ballets Russes again? We're planning on doing a tour of the US. Would you like to come?' Because obviously Nijinsky being the best dancer in the world is really an asset to any company and Diaghilev hasn't been doing as well when—

A: Yep.

I: —when Nijinsky isn't there.

A: Is Nijinsky still married to Romola?

I: Yes, Nijinsky and Romola are still married. This is where Romola actually gets to shine. This is her moment. So Diaghilev says to Nijinsky, 'Hey do you want to work for me again?' and Nijinsky, whose company has just fallen through, has just had a tonne of stress, and has no money—

A: Yep.

I: —is like, 'I dunno. He didn't pay me last time. It was a bad experience. We had a bad relationship. And alright, I guess.' And Romola says, 'Now hang on a second. Let me talk to Diaghilev.'

A: Good on you Romola.

I: And so she negotiates with Diaghilev for Nijinsky and basically what she says is, "Look, he'll dance for you if you pay him this time, and also you pay him for those couple of years he worked for you when you literally didn't give him wages, because that is not cool, and you're going to pay him back now.'

A: Oh, good on her!

I: And Diaghilev is like, 'I don't know. That's expensive. I owe him like, many money.'

A: Yep.

I: And Romola is like, 'Well, fine. If you don't pay him, you don't get him to dance for you.' So eventually Diaghilev gives in. He pays him \$13,000 then.

A: Wow.

I: And an extra 1000 for every performance.

A: So when you say \$13,000 is that US dollars at the time?

I: Yes.

A: That's a *lot* of money.

I: It is a lot of money. He deserves a lot of money. He is being paid like, three years wages all in one go.

A: Yep.

I: It's not quite as much as Romola wanted for him.

A: Mmhm.

I: It's probably not quite as much as he deserved, but it's—

A: —a lot of money still.

I: It's a lot of money still and it's more than he expected given that he agreed to do this for food and board at the time. So like I said, that starts out a bit weird, but Romola seems to be fairly invested in this not being terrible.

A: I mean this is probably partly for Romola's own benefit 'cause she's probably living on this wage as well.

I: She is an aristocrat.

A: True.

I: She is doing okay. So they do this tour of the US. Diaghilev crosses the ocean this time.

A: But it's okay 'cause he does it in a plane.

I: I think he does it by plane this time so it might be okay.

A: Yeah.

I: But not long after Diaghilev gets there he has a disagreement with Otto Kahn, who runs the New York Metropolitan Opera, who is the person who invited them over.

A: Oh yeah.

I: He's the American contact they have. He has some kind of creative disagreement with him, and eventually says, 'Alright, fine, I'm leaving the tour. Nijinsky can handle this. I'm going back to Europe.'

A: Oh my God.

I: Nijinsky, as we know, he's not going to cope with this. He doesn't handle management well. This is not really his thing. He shouldn't have to do this.

A: Diaghilev's the worst.

I: Diaghilev is the worst. He's just a bad person. So he leaves. He leaves poor Nijinsky to manage the rest of the tour. It doesn't go terribly.

A: Okay.

I: It doesn't completely fall apart, because Nijinsky is still an amazing dancer. People are essentially coming to see Nijinsky. The performances are really good. Occasionally some of the critics do comment that he is technically good but seems like, emotionally distant or—

A: Oh yeah.

I: —not really in his character or whatever.

A: He's dealing with some things.

I: He's dealing with some things. But generally the actual artistic side of the tour goes pretty well. The company doesn't make a lot of money off it though because Nijinsky is just not good at managing 'cause he doesn't have the skills, he doesn't have the experience, he should never have been put in charge of this.

A: Yep. Okay.

I: And he's really stressed. Things sort of go downhill for Nijinsky from here in terms of his mental health

A: Mmhm.

I: It's not long after this that he does his last public performance—

A: Mmhm

I: —in South America in 1917. Another thing that happened around the time of that US tour—

A: Yep.

I: —was Nijinsky's older brother, who I mentioned near the start, who fell out of the window as a toddler finally dies. Nijinsky seems to be quite upset about this. He also talks about having a fear of being institutionalised.

A: Mmhm.

I: Possibly from having visited his brother in institutions before.

A: Mmhm.

I: Yes, so his mental health is in decline and he's basically sort of saying, look, this is too much for him, he can't handle the performing any more. There are things going terribly wrong for him, and they're not really good at mental health because it's the early 20th century.

A: Yep.

I: And they don't really know how to handle this, so he gives his last public performance 30th of September 1917 in South America.

A: So how old would he be now?

I: He's in his late twenties?

A: He's still super young.

I: He's still super young, yes. And the tour is losing money and eventually what happens is they end the tour and Romola moves with him to Switzerland, in the hope that he can have a break and hang out in the mountains and recover from the stress.

A: Yep.

I: Which sort of works. It doesn't seem to be helping a lot. She tries to get him more psychiatric help. Eventually, a couple of months later, he's diagnosed with schizophrenia.

A: Okay. Yep.

I: And he essentially spends the rest of his life, like, in and out of mental institutions. Romola honestly tries really hard to look after him.

A: Good on Romola. I like Romola.

I: Considering the start where she stalked him on a tour to South America and he proposed to her when they didn't have a common language, it comes out reasonably well. Sources don't tend to be friendly to her. Eventually he and his wife move to England.

A: Uh-huh.

I: In the '40s, just after the war.

A: Yep.

I: I think she is again chasing better psychiatric care for him, so they move to Surrey. He eventually dies on the 8th of April in 1950, in England, and he's survived by his two daughters, and his wife. She publishes a biography and she publishes his diaries, which – she does do some editing of. She apparently rearranges sections—

A: Mhm.

I: —like in terms of the order of events. She deletes any mentions of homosexuality. She may be the beginning of that thing where people said he was not actually interested in sleeping with men; he had some other social reasons for it. She sort of cast him in that light.

A: We don't actually know that much of his life after he stopped dancing.

I: Most of what we know about him comes from those diaries that he wrote, and he wrote them when he was in Switzerland.

A: That was just after the—

I: —just after the end of his career basically.

A: Yep, okay.

I: He spent like a month and a half intensely writing these diaries and that's where a lot of our information comes from, so we don't have as much detail about what he got up to after that.

A: The picture we have of his life comes from when he was in one particular mental state.

I: Yes. You know, we call it Nijinsky's diaries but he didn't sort of write a daily diary.

A: Okay. It's more like Nijinsky's stream of consciousness?

I: Yes. It's more like Nijinsky's very stressed stream of consciousness. It wasn't like, a great time for Nijinsky.

A: I wouldn't imagine that my like, stream of consciousness that I write down when I'm stressed, if that was published, would provide any accurate representation of my life.

I: It would certainly be a terrible view of my sexuality.

A: Yeah, no I think it would be a terrible view of my sexuality, and not an accurate representation of my life or how I felt about anyone in my life.

I: No, it's true. So—

A: So it's interesting that that's our major source on Nijinsky.

I: Yes. So I think that's possibly why a lot of his experiences come across as very stressful.

A: And why his relationships with Diaghilev sounds so negative, and – not to say there's anything wrong with Romola – but why we've come out with a very positive view of Romola and a very negative view of Diaghilev, when that might not be true but that might be based on him feeling bad about having a relationship with another man.

I: Yes. Yeah, no that's definitely true.

A: Okay.

I: So, yeah, the sources that we get this from are a little bit odd, and obviously Romola had her own motivations when she published about him.

A: Yep, she would have had her own agenda as well. So do we now have access to his diaries uncensored?

I: Yes.

A: Cool, okay.

I: Yes, we do. We can now read the whole thing.

A: And have you read her biography?

I: I have not read it all.

A: But you've read some of it?

I: I've read a couple of like bits and pieces. But I haven't read the whole thing.

A: So obviously they were married and she supported him.

I: Yes

A: But were they in a romantic relationship?

I: I would say so. They have two children.

A: Okay.

I: So they're at least in a sexual relationship eventually, even though they don't sleep together on their wedding night. I'm inclined to say that he and Romola's relationship had a really odd start but was genuine.

A: Okay, yep. Cool.

I: I tended to find what happened was there were either sources which said that he and Romola's relationship was genuine, and his same-sex relationships were only to serve his career or he didn't really enjoy them, or he was pressured into them or things like that, and there were sources who basically dismissed his relationship with Romola in order to call him a gay icon.

A: And you're inclined to say that both his same-sex relationships and his marriage were genuine romantic and sexual relationships.

I: I can think of no reason to discount them.

A: Okay. So do you reckon she deleted the mentions of homosexuality to protect his memory, or because she was uncomfortable with the fact that her husband had had relations with other men?

I: I would say some of both.

A: Okay. How open was he about his homosexuality during his life? 'Cause you said Diaghilev was openly gay.

I: Yeah. Diaghilev was quite open. It was one of those situations where everybody knew that Nijinsky and Diaghilev were together—

A: Yep.

I: —but they weren't sort of, obvious about it. It was just a very well-known rumour basically.

A: Oh yeah. Okay.

I: I would suggest it's some of both. She wants him to be remembered well. She tones down some of his sort, more obviously like, psychotic portions of the diary.

A: Okay.

I: So, there's a whole lot where he wrote from the perspective of God. There were basically just odd bits and pieces in the diary that she's looked and she's gone, 'People won't think of him well if they see this.'

A: Oh yeah.

I: And so she's taken them out. The full version was published in 1999.

A: Okay. So not actually that long ago.

I: Not actually that long ago. It's quite recent

A: I suppose it's almost 20 years ago but like, in the scheme of things, compared to him dying in the '50s, not that long ago.

I: Yeah, no. That's what I thought too.

A: Mm.

I: It's quite recent by comparison. So we can stop here, with Nijinsky as the greatest ballet dancer of the early 20th century. and there are many more great queer ballet dancers in the future.

A: I'm excited to hear many more episodes on all of them.

I: So thank you for listening to Queer as Fact. I'm still Irene.

A: And I'm still Alice.

I: And our next episode will be presented by Hamish, who will be telling us two prominent stories of homosexual love in Ancient China, which are so well known as to have entered idiom in Chinese.

That will be coming out on the 15th of June. We will see you then.

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Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.