

Sol Hurok (b. Solomon Israelovich Gurkov, 1888-1974)

by Harlow Robinson

The performing arts impresario and manager Sol Hurok, founder of the company "S. Hurok Presents," was the leading presenter of dancers and dance companies in the United States from the 1930s until his death in 1974. Hurok played a major role in popularizing dance with a wider audience, and is regarded as a major force in the rapid growth of the American dance "industry" in the mid-twentieth century.

Hurok introduced American audiences to classical ballet through the extensive tours he organized for such companies as the [Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo](#) and the Sadler's Wells Ballet (later the Royal Ballet). Seminal modern dancers and companies including [Isadora Duncan](#), Loie Fuller, Mary Wigman, the [Katharine Dunham](#) Company and the Roland Petit Ballet also appeared under Hurok's management. The liberalization of Soviet cultural policies following the death of Soviet leader Josef Stalin in 1953 made it possible for Hurok to realize his life-long dream of bringing major Soviet dance companies to the United States. In 1958, at the height of the Cold War, he presented the Moiseyev Folk Dance Ensemble, and in 1959, the Bolshoi Ballet, on wildly successful cross-country tours that helped to make dance and dancers "glamorous," and deeply influenced American choreographers and dancers.

Dance critic John Martin wrote in an article for the Royal Ballet's Twentieth Anniversary Program at the Metropolitan Opera in 1969 that Hurok's presentation of Sadler's Wells in 1949 represented "the greatest opening of the popular audience that the ballet had ever known in this country, and it has persisted with our own companies."

Born in a small city near the Ukrainian-Russian border, Hurok left Russia in 1906 and settled in New York, where he

progressed from organizing left-wing political events in Brooklyn to presenting prominent musicians (violinists Efrem Zimbalist and Mischa Elman) and dancers at Carnegie Hall and the Hippodrome. Hurok's first important dance "attraction" was the Isadora Duncan Dancers, whom he presented in 1919 at Carnegie Hall. They appeared without Duncan herself, but later she also performed under Hurok's auspices. During that same season, Hurok presented the dancer/choreographer Michel Fokine and his wife Vera in a program at the Metropolitan Opera. From 1921 to 1925, Hurok presented the already famous [Anna Pavlova](#) in highly-publicized cross-country tours. During her last North American tour in the 1924-1925 season, Pavlova and her company, often accompanied by Hurok, gave 238 performances in 77 towns in 26 weeks, bringing ballet to a wider public than ever before. With Pavlova, Hurok shared the belief that ballet was an art form that belonged to a mass audience, and not only to the aristocratic elite with whom it had traditionally been associated in Europe.

A new era in Hurok's advocacy of ballet began with his presentation of various companies that had formed in the aftermath of the death of Serge Diaghilev (in 1929) and the collapse of the Ballets Russes. In 1933, he presented the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in New York. Over the next few years, he took them on grueling cross-country tours, traveling more than twenty thousand miles each season. Among the choreographers and dancers who participated in these tours were [Alexandra Danilova](#), Sono Osato, Leonide Massine, Tamara Toumanova and Vera Zorina; all would make important future contributions to American classical and modern dance. The success of these tours helped to establish the Russian classical ballet tradition as the "gold standard" for ballet in the United States, and laid the

foundation for the development of American companies like [American Ballet Theatre](#) (Hurok was involved in its early history) and the [New York City Ballet](#). At the same time, Hurok was criticized by American dancers (notably [Martha Graham](#) and [Agnes de Mille](#)) for favoring foreign “stars” and pandering to the public weakness for technique and tricks at the expense of dramatic and psychological truth.

In the 1940s, Hurok presented dancers Anton Dolin and Alicia Markova in their own company, and, in 1949, the first appearance in the U.S. by the Sadler’s Wells Company. This engagement also introduced ballerina Margot Fonteyn to American audiences, in the first complete production of Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty* seen in New York. Sadler’s Wells director Ninette de Valois later called the performance the greatest triumph in the company’s history.

Hurok’s career took a new turn with his presentation of Soviet dance companies in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The result of protracted and difficult negotiations with Soviet cultural bureaucrats, the tours arranged for The Moiseyev Folk Dance Ensemble, the Bolshoi Ballet and the Kirov Ballet were events of enormous political and cultural significance that resonated far beyond the world of dance. Hurok had paved the way by presenting in the U.S.S.R. two of his most prominent musical attractions, violinist Isaac Stern and opera singer Jan Peerce. Finally, on April 14, 1958, the Moiseyev Ensemble opened at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, to ecstatic reviews. By the time the company left for Moscow on July 1, it had appeared before an estimated 450,000 spectators across the country and provided inspiration for several generations of dancers and choreographers, expanding the dance vocabulary and repertoire.

The Bolshoi Ballet met perhaps even greater acclaim when it appeared across the United States in the spring of 1959. In the Bolshoi repertoire was Sergei Prokofiev’s ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, never before seen in America, choreographed by the company’s ballet master Leonid Lavrovsky and starring the Bolshoi’s prima ballerina Galina Ulanova as Juliet. Many years later, *New York Times* dance critic Anna Kisselgoff wrote that the production displayed a “dramatic realism made marvelously bold and conveyed through a choreographic style totally different from that seen in the West.” The Bolshoi production did a great deal to popularize Prokofiev’s ballets in the United States, where they soon entered the repertoire of virtually every major company. Hurok brought the Bolshoi back to America several more times, and in 1966, the company presented the last performance at the old Metropolitan Opera House before its move to Lincoln Center. The Kirov Ballet came on tour in 1961 and 1964, although not with the same level of commercial or artistic success.

Hurok sold his firm (then known as Hurok Concerts, Inc.) in 1969, but continued to be involved in the business. The worsening climate of American-Soviet relations complicated his efforts, however, and culminated in a bombing of his offices in January, 1972, by members of the radical Jewish Defense League, who objected to his sponsorship of Soviet artists due to persecution of Jewish citizens in the U.S.S.R.

In his later years, Hurok advocated for the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts. In testimony before a Senate Special Subcommittee on the Arts in 1963, he said: “I have dedicated my life to the belief that the arts are a major part of any life and that to be without them is to starve, no matter what other wealth one may achieve.” The day Hurok died in New York,

he was planning to discuss with David Rockefeller the idea of presenting [Rudolf Nureyev](#) at Radio City Music Hall in a new attraction called “Nureyev and Friends.”

Harlow Robinson is an author, lecturer and Matthews Distinguished University Professor of History at Northeastern University. His books include *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood's Russians: Biography of an Image* (Northeastern, 2007), *Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography* (five editions), *The Last Impresario: The Life, Times and Legacy of Sol Hurok* (Viking/Penguin) and *Selected Letters of Sergei Prokofiev* (editor and translator, Northeastern). His articles, essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Nation*, *Opera News*, *Dance*, *Playbill*, *Symphony*, *Slavic Review*, *Russian Review*, *Russian Life* and other publications. He is a frequent lecturer and annotator for The Boston Symphony, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and the Metropolitan Opera Guild. In 2010, he was named an Academy Film Scholar by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.