

Anna Pavlova (1881-1931)

by *Lindsey Grites Weeks*



Known as the “Incomparable” ballerina, Anna Pavlova achieved legendary status both in the United States and throughout the world. For early 20th century American audiences, Pavlova became “a household word, a symbol of the heights of balletic soulfulness” (Gaiser Casey, 6). Her performances captured the public’s imagination, inspiring countless future dancers and establishing new audiences for ballet in the United States.

Early Life and Career

Anna Pavlova was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on January 31st, 1881. Her first exposure to ballet came at the age of eight when she attended a performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Maryinsky Theater. The performance captured her imagination and sparked her desire to pursue a career as a ballerina.

From the age of ten, Pavlova attended the school of the Imperial Ballet under the instruction of Christian Johannsen, Pavel Gerdt, and Enrico Cecchetti. Upon leaving the school, she made her debut at the Maryinsky Theater in 1899. She performed solo roles in *Le Corsaire*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Don Quixote*, *Paquita*, and *Giselle*, among other ballets, and she was promoted to the rank of *prima ballerina* within the Imperial company. From the beginning of her career, Pavlova became known not for technical virtuosity in the classical style of ballet master Marius Petipa, but rather for her lyricism, expressiveness, and unique ability to fully embody the roles she performed.

During her time at the Maryinsky, fellow company member and choreographer Michel Fokine created Pavlova’s “Dying Swan” solo, which became her most identifiable and enduring role throughout her career. Choreographed to “The Swan” section from Saint-Saëns’ *Carnival of the Animals*, the brief solo piece combined “masterful technique with expressiveness” and represented “the symbol of the New Russian Ballet” of the younger generation of Imperial dancers (Fokine, 1931, 134).¹

In addition to artistic departures from the classical style, Pavlova, Fokine, Tamara Karsavina, and other company dancers rebelled politically against the Imperial Ballet. They participated in a brief strike in 1905, demanding better working conditions and greater artistic autonomy. While the strike was short-lived, it further divided the company and prompted the dissidents, such as Pavlova, to search for touring opportunities. She partnered with [Adolph Bolm](#) in 1907 and left Russia to tour Sweden, Denmark, Austria, and Germany.

Following the success of her first tour, Pavlova joined Fokine, Karsavina, Vaslav Nijinsky, [Bronislava Nijinska](#), and other former Maryinsky dancers in Serge Diaghilev’s [Ballet Russes](#) in 1909. After only a handful of performances, in which she was hailed as a “second Taglioni,” Pavlova left the Ballets Russes for a lucrative engagement at the Palace Theater in London (Philip, 60). She and partner Mikhail Mordkin were described as inspiring a “cult” of devoted followers and as creating “a sensation of a century” (Franks, 21).

Debut in the United States

Pavlova’s debut with Mordkin at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on February 28, 1910, was both a critical and a popular success. Accounts of her triumphs in Europe preceded her arrival and were used to promote her first appearance (for instance, in the *New York Times*, 11 July 1909 and 29 September 1909). Carl Van Vechten, dance critic for the *New York Times*, described the audience’s enthusiastic reception of Pavlova as “of the sort which is seldom given to anybody in this theater,” and he stated further that “it would be difficult to conceive a dancer who so nearly realizes the ideal” of ballet performance (Van Vechten, 148-149). Her appearance with Mordkin sparked “the Met’s first dance boom,” creating interest in ballet beyond the “inconsequential divertissement during the course of an opera” (Dorris, 198, and Hurok, 54). While New York audiences had welcomed international stars of the ballet world in the

past, including Fanny Elssler and Carlotta Grisi in the 1840s, earlier performers failed to generate sustained interest in the art form, whereas Pavlova's debut marked "the beginning of the ballet era" in the United States (Van Vechten, 151, and Hurok, 53-54).

Pavlova toured intermittently in the United States from 1910 to 1915. She spent the years of World War I in South America and did not return to the United States until 1920. She began to work with impresario [Sol Hurok](#) to arrange her American tours from 1921 to 1926. Performance venues for these tours ranged from opera houses to music halls and vaudeville stages, where she would appear in the same program as "trained elephants...acrobats [and] jugglers" (Hurok, 56). Hurok, embarrassed by the poor conditions of some of the theaters in which Pavlova performed, recalled her saying, "These are the people who need me – they have never seen *any* dance company" (Philip, 62).

International Tours

From 1910 until her death in 1931, Pavlova toured nearly continuously throughout the world, first with the Imperial Russian Ballet and later with her own company. Her musical director, Theodore Stier, who toured with the company from 1910 to 1925, estimated that the company had traveled 300,000 miles and had performed close to 4,000 times. These tours were managed by Victor Dandre, whom Pavlova referred to as her husband although there is no official record of their marriage.

Pavlova's travels brought ballet to areas of the world that had never been exposed to the art form before, and she became known as a "missionary of dance." Her company performed in Japan, China, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, India, Egypt, South Africa, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Peru, Argentina, and throughout Europe. During her travels, she took every opportunity to participate in regional dance forms and to "encourage her hosts...to discover their own rich dance traditions" (Fisher, 60). During her tours of

India, she worked with both Uday Shankar and Rukmani Devi, key figures in the revival of Indian classical dance forms. Travel also provided Pavlova with sources of choreographic inspiration; she created "Radha and Krishna," "Ajanta Frescoes," "Hindu Wedding," "Oriental Impressions," and "Mexican Dances" based on her experiences of regional dance forms in India, Japan, and Mexico.

Between touring commitments, Pavlova made her home in London at Ivy House, which she bought in 1912. There she founded a small ballet school to pass on her own style to future generations of dancers; some of the students she trained eventually became part of her touring company. One of Pavlova's first students, Muriel Stuart, would later open ballet schools in California and join the faculty of the [School of American Ballet](#) in New York. Pavlova also kept her famous pet swans at Ivy House and was often photographed with them.

Pavlova on Film

Pavlova took an early interest in film as a means of preserving dances and as an accessible medium for dance audiences. She appeared in the 1915 silent film *The Dumb Girl of Portici*, based on an opera by Auber. It featured some dance sequences but also gave her an opportunity to portray a dramatic role through expressive movements and facial expressions. Film audiences "responded to her charismatic power," and the film became "part of her proselytizing effort in...the name of dance" (Philip, 68). Other film footage fragments include screen tests of some of her solo dances, including "The Dying Swan," and "home movies" of her off-stage life in London and on international tours. The film footage in existence is limited in both quantity and quality, and it can only offer slight glimpses of the technique, style, and expression for which Pavlova was celebrated.

Death of Pavlova

Pavlova died on January 23rd, 1931, from a respiratory illness. Her death came just before her 50th birthday, just as she was about to begin

a new tour in The Hague. Fokine, quoting Dandre, reported that her last words were, "Prepare my swan costume" (Fisher, 58). Her body was brought back to London, her adopted home. In 2001, the Russian embassy in London requested that her ashes be removed from a London cemetery and transported to Russia, but approval for that request fell through and her ashes remain in London (reported in *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 9 March 2001).

Pavlova's Legacy

Anna Pavlova captivated early 20th century audiences in the United States and throughout the world. As Pavlova biographer Cyril W. Beaumont wrote, "To many aspirants for dancing honors she was their model, their inspiration, and their star" (Beaumont, 15). Her performances inspired the next generation of American dancers and choreographers, including [Doris Humphrey](#), [Ruth Page](#), and [Agnes de Mille](#).

Pavlova has often been characterized as a conservative artist, the "last of the great school of classic dancers" in the tradition of Marie Taglioni, Fanny Elssler, and Carlotta Grisi (Van Vechten, 187). Her choreographic contributions have been largely overshadowed by the work of her more experimental peers, such as Fokine and Nijinsky. However, Pavlova was also an innovator, infusing her dramatic personality into the classical technique of her Maryinsky predecessors and creating a performance style that was uniquely her own. Inspired by her international tours, she adapted movement from around the world into her ballet vocabulary. She is perhaps remembered most as a charismatic performer, particularly in her signature work, "The Dying Swan," which is still performed (and parodied) to this day.

Throughout her career, Pavlova presented herself as the epitome of a disciplined ballet artist and demanded that the art to which she dedicated her life be taken seriously. For Pavlova, ballet required consummate devotion; she was quoted in a 1913 interview as stating that "dancing is such an absorbing art that one

has all one can do to do it alone well" (*New York Times*, 8 June 1913). Olga Maynard described her as "the dancer who changed the concept of ballet, compelling the intelligentsia of her time...to accept it [as equal to other art forms]" (Maynard, 45). At the same time, she popularized ballet, making it accessible to new audiences; her goal was "to dance for everybody in the world" (Franks, 40). In building respect for ballet as an art form, as "something that occurred outside of music halls with their skirt dancers of questionable reputations," Pavlova helped to legitimize ballet in America as a mainstream and empowering activity (Fisher, 51-55).

With a legendary figure like Anna Pavlova, it can be difficult to separate fact from fantasy, historical truth from romanticized image. The complexities of her persona continue to fascinate ballet aficionados to this day. Pavlova embodied the classical image of the delicate, swan-like ballerina, but she was also a career woman, performing, choreographing, and overseeing both a touring company and a school. Her work bridged the gap between the classical Russian style of Petipa and the experimental work of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. She presented ballet as an art form worthy of serious consideration and respect, but also as a form with widespread popular appeal. She brought ballet to new destinations around the world, but she also let her travel experiences and exposure to unfamiliar dance forms shape her presentation of ballet. Anna Pavlova's complex and multi-faceted image has left an indelible imprint on American ballet history.

NOTES

1. There is some discrepancy as to the year the "Dying Swan" was choreographed. See Fisher, 65.

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

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