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Theatre Street: The Reminiscences Of Tamara Karsavina



Book Information

Paperback: 302 pages

Publisher: Virgin Books (August 1988)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0862879272

ISBN-13: 978-0862879273

Product Dimensions: 8.5 x 5.3 x 1.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (5 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Tamara Karsavina (1885-1978) starts by telling us of her childhood in pre-revolution Russia, in turn of the century St. Petersburg. Her father was also a dancer, Platon Karsavin, and the account of her childhood gives us a rare insight in middle class life of that epoch. There is a detailed description of life in the boarding school and the Imperial ballet. She writes with great tenderness about life at school and about one of the teachers, Christian Petrovich Johansson. In those days he was already in his nineties, a Swede who had turned grumpier with the years, but was one of the greatest teachers in the history of the school. It is with great pride and joy I read that she attributed so much to my compatriot! During the revolution and its aftermath, Karsavina remained in Russia till the bitter end. Then, she too, with her English-born husband and small son, decided to leave. The family escaped through the North of Russia on an English vessel - the famous ballerina and her husband on the crew list as stewardess and purser respectively. Safety was at last in sight in England where they made their home. The last sentence of her account is beautiful: "That night we arrived in Middlesbrough - The Maryinski and Theatre Street left behind for ever, these were the footlights of a new world". Anyone who has ever been to grimy Middlesbrough can only compare with the glitter of old St. Petersburg. The book was originally published in 1930; in the revised edition of 1981 there is an added chapter on Diaghilev which Karsavina wrote in 1947. This beautiful volume with its evocative illustrations would really merit 10 stars, but as five is the highest accolade, I have to limit myself. Maybe the finest dance biography written this century.

An absolutely enchanting book, encompassing so much. A funny and lyrical story of a farouche young girl who grows into a great artist. An intimate and fascinating portrait of Russian life before and after the Revolution. And for the lover of ballet history, a treasure: first-hand accounts of training in the Imperial Ballet School, the Maryinsky theater in the time of the Tsars, the early years of the Ballets Russes. She was in the center of one of the most volatile and important periods of art, and she reminisces of her collaborations with Diaghilev, Chaliapin, Nijinsky, Stravinsky, Cocteau, Picasso, Bakst, and many more.

An insight into the world of the Russian Ballerina written by herself. It is refreshing to read about the events of this great ballerina, much preferred than the sometimes overly pompous writing about someone such as Tamara Karsavina. Woven into the story of her life, as she tells it, is additional information that gives a clear picture of life as a dancer in the time of Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky and others. The emergence of these artists gave rise to the high standard of classical ballet we appreciate today. Karsavina, Pavlova, Nijinsky, laid the groundwork for the great classical tradition to be passed on to the willing young aspiring ballerina. To all those who aspire to dance, read of the great ones gone before you, their experiences will often mimic yours.

This autobiography is a bit difficult to read at times. (I read the 1930 edition.) Sometimes Karsavina's descriptions are just too poetic or convoluted. She has a large vocabulary but doesn't always use it correctly. Also her story is not linear and jumps here and there into tangents or different time periods. It is helpful if you have familiarity with her life history because she either assumes the reader has knowledge of her life or doesn't mind throwing in otherwise random bits. For example, she mentions Nikita having never mentioned that she had given birth to a son of this name. She refers to someone as "B" who one must figure out was her husband and an Englishman. His last name was Bruce. She is very sketchy on dates and sequence of events in her personal adult life. She omits major life details. Allegedly, Fokine wanted to marry her but she only described him in terms of a difficult professional relationship. Additionally, she doesn't mention that she was married twice and she gave birth to Bruce's child before she was divorced from her first husband. Early on in the book, she noted that her father did not want her to become a ballerina because of sordid elements in the theatre of which he was aware having had his own career there. Yet she never discussed any of the sordid details that existed behind the scenes, such as the "protectors" of ballerinas who supplemented their income. Did she have any? I suspect so. The last chapter on her

escape from Russia was exciting to read. Much of the information about the schooling at the Mariinsky or her dance partnerships can be obtained from other sources. Overall, I would not rely on this book for historical accuracy because it is too vague and she glosses over so much. It is a colorful and artistic interpretation of her life until she left Russia. The photos and artistic drawings included throughout the book are wonderful.

A classic. I've read and re-read this so many times. Aside from her brilliance as a dancer, Mlle Karsavina was a gifted writer and brings you into her world with skill and artistry.

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