

TACOMA CITY BALLET LIBRARY



THE HISTORY OF  
THE BALLET RUSSES



*The Baby Ballerinas*

WRITTEN BY  
ERIN M. CERAGIOLI

# *The Baby Ballerinas*



The “Baby Ballerinas” were three young ballerinas who danced with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo during the 1930s. These three little Russian girls, Tatiana Riabouchinska (Age 14), Tamara Toumanova (Age 12) and Irina Baranova (Age 12), were discovered by George Balanchine, Chief Choreographer of the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo, in the ballet schools of Olga Preobrajenska and Mathilde Kschessinska in Paris. They received their title of the “Baby Ballerinas” from Arnold Haskell, English ballet critic, solely based upon their age. After Diaghilev’s death, the publicity bestowed on the “Baby Ballerinas” helped revive interest in the ballet.

Balanchine’s need for complete control undoubtedly found fulfillment in the unquestioning dedication of talented young dancers who wanted to perform. While the “Baby Ballerinas” were uniquely talented and their story is one of the highlights in ballet history, theirs was a phenomenon that should have never happened. By the time these three young ladies were in their early 20s, they had clocked more uninterrupted weeks of touring than many dancers twice their age. They toured America, Canada, Cuba, Europe, and Mexico dancing in 125 cities in only four months. Baranova described their teenage life by saying that after one-night stands in American cities, they would go to a local drugstore for a quick bite, then to a rented hotel ballroom to rehearse new ballets, and finally return to the train that was awaiting them to sleep from dawn until the next afternoon when the company would arrive at its next performance destination.

*The Baby Ballerinas*

TATIANA RIABOUCHINSKA



MAY 23, 1917 - AUGUST 24, 2000

**Tatiana Riabouchinska** was born in Moscow on May 23, 1917 just a few months before the October Revolution of 1917. Because her father held the office of the Banker of Tsar Nicholas II, the whole family was put under house arrest to await probable execution by the Bolsheviks. Their loyal servants, taking pity on the family, helped her mother and the four children to escape. They fled to Caucasia, situated between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and eventually arrived in France. They settled in Paris, where there was a large community of Russian immigrants. Tatiana, known as Tania, began her studies of classical ballet with Alexandre Volinine, who had trained at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow, and with Mathilde Kschessinska, a friend of the family, who had been Prima Ballerina Assoluta of the St. Petersburg Imperial Theaters.

At fourteen Riabouchinska was chosen to join *La Chauve-Souris*, a vaudeville troupe, to perform in their 1931 Revue which featured Russian songs, dances, and comedy numbers where she appeared in two short ballets. Soon afterward, she was seen and hired by George Balanchine, choreographer and ballet master for the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*, at Madame Kschessinska's ballet school. Riabouchinska was given many leading roles to dance, and she was known for her beautiful arm movements, exquisite pointework, light delicate style featuring soft jumps and feathery landings, speed, musicality, and sensitive interpretation of her roles. While her dancing attracted the eye of the ballet lover, it also attracted the eye of Walt Disney, who engaged Riabouchinska to be the moving model for the animators creating the Hippopotamus Ballerina in Disney's animated film *Fantasia* in 1940. She was the oldest of the "Baby Ballerinas," and remained with the de Basil's *Original Ballet Russe* until 1942. World War II disrupted the normal operations of the company, and all touring in Europe stopped. By that time, Riabouchinska had danced in the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* from 1932 to 1942.

In 1943 Riabouchinska married David Lichine, and the two of them embarked on a joint career as free agents dancing and choreographing for many companies in America, Argentina, England, and France. Retiring to Los Angeles in 1953, they devoted their energies to founding their ballet school in Beverly Hills. After Lichine died in 1972,

Riabouchinska continued teaching ballet and indeed, taught until a few hours before her death on August 24, 2000.

*The Baby Ballerinas*

TAMARA TOUMANOVA



MARCH 2, 1919 - MAY 29, 1996

**Tamara Toumanova** was born on March 2, 1919 in the boxcar of a train making its way across Siberia. Her mother, Eugenia Tumanishvili, Princess of Tiflis, a region in Russia, was fleeing Russia after the Revolution of 1917. Toumanova spent her early childhood living in refugee camps in Shanghai and Cairo before her family settled in Paris.

In Paris, Toumanova saw Anna Pavlova dance which sparked her interest in the studying classical ballet. Her mother enrolled her in Olga Preobrajenska's ballet school. Toumanova described Mme. Preobrajenska as her "first and only permanent teacher," and said that "I think always of Mme. Preobrajenska not only as my beloved, never-to-be-forgotten teacher, but my immortal friend."

In 1925 at the age of six, Toumanova was invited by Anna Pavlova, her idol, to perform in a concert for which she danced a polka that Mme. Preobrajenska had taught her. She made her debut at the Paris Opera at the age of ten and by the age of twelve, George Balanchine, choreographer and ballet master for the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*, saw her in a ballet class at Mme. Preobrajenska's ballet school and engaged her for *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*.

Toumanova was instantly recognized as a young prodigy of immense talent, and she was named "The Black Pearl of the Russian Ballet." A.V. Coton, the English ballet critic, described Toumanova as "the loveliest creature in the history of the ballet with black silky hair, deep brown eyes, and pale almond skin." Indeed, Toumanova was considered the most glamorous of the trio of "Baby Ballerinas." Throughout her dynamic career, her mother, known as Mama Toumanova, was her devoted companion, nursemaid, dresser, agent, and manager.

For forty years, Toumanova performed in ballets as well as making both her Broadway and Hollywood debuts. Her Broadway debut, *Stars in Your Eyes*, was in 1939, and her Hollywood film debut, *Days of Glory*, opposite Gregory Peck, was in 1944. Although the film did not fare well at the box office Peck and Toumanova, both making their debuts, received very favorable reviews. Toumanova appeared in many more films, *Tonight We*

*Sing* (1953), *Deep in My Heart* (1954), *Invitation to The Dance* (1955), and Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* (1966). In 1970, she made her final screen appearance in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*. Toumanova taught ballet throughout the world until her death in Santa Monica, California on May 29, 1996. Before her death, she gifted Mme. Preobrajenska's costumes to the Vaganova Choreographic Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

*The Baby Ballerinas*

IRINA BARANOVA



MARCH 13, 1919-JUNE 28, 2008

**Irina Baronova** was born in St. Petersburg, Russia on March 13, 1919. In November of 1920, her family escaped the Russian Revolution by dressing as peasants and crossing the border into Romania. The family eventually settled in Bucharest where her father found menial work in various factories. The family lived in the slums of Romania struggling to earn their daily bread and learn the language of their new country. Reduced to dire poverty, Baronova's mother vented her frustration on her only child, beating the child while her husband was at work. Baronova suffered the terrible trauma of seeking to disguise the abuse.

Her mother, who had wanted to study ballet in St. Petersburg but not been allowed by her bourgeois parents, decided that her daughter would do what she had been denied. While she forced Baronova to study ballet at the age of seven, at least the child escaped her daily wrath. Mme. Majaiska, who was a former Corps de Ballet dancer of the Maryinsky Theatre, and a Russian refugee herself, offered to give Baronova ballet lessons. The lessons were given in Mme. Majaiska's tiny one room house where the kitchen table was used as the ballet barre. Baronova writes, "My mother's dream, her love, her passion, was ballet."

When she was ten years old, the family moved to Paris where Baronova was taught by both Mme. Olga Preobrajenska and Mme. Kschessinska. By 1930, Baronova made her debut at the Paris Opera at the age of eleven. Just a few months short of her thirteenth birthday, Baronova was selected by George Balanchine to dance in the newly formed *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo*, and from 1932 to 1939 she danced under the management of Colonel W. de Basil. Baronova, remembered for her golden locks and delicate features, conveyed elegance coupled with energy on the stage. She was described as a vivacious wholesome beauty with indelible classical style and virtuosic technique. It was proven by Toumanova and Baronova, who tossed off pirouettes like effortless spinning tops, that Mme. Preobrajenska produced strong centered dancers who were capable of executing multiple fouetté turns. Baronova credited Mme. Preobrajenska with her great versatility, citing that Mme. Preobrajenska had condensed her own seven years of study at the Maryinsky Ballet

School into three years for her pupils knowing they had to begin work soon to support their families.

In 1936 Baronova eloped with the company's Associate Manager, German Sevastianov. In 1941, Sevastianov became the Manager of *Ballet Theatre (American Ballet Theatre)*, and Baronova a ballerina for the new American company. Like Toumanova, she dabbled in Hollywood making two films during this time, *Florian* (1940) and *Yolanda* (1943). Soon after the couple divorced, and Baronova married Cecil Tennant, a British Theatrical Agent. Prior to their marriage Tennant insisted that as a condition of their union, Baronova give up dancing and never see any of her ballet colleagues for at least five years. He gave her 48 hours to decide, and she complied with his request. So at the age of twenty-seven, Baronova completely retired from the stage and the ballet to devote herself to her husband and three children, Victoria, Irina, and Robert.

In 1967, Tennant was killed in an auto accident, and Baronova moved to Switzerland where she returned to the ballet and began teaching master classes throughout the world. After visiting her daughter in 2000, who lived in Byron Bay, New South Wales, Australia, Baronova decided to settle in Australia to live near her family. She died in her sleep at Byron Bay on June 28, 2008 at the age of 89, and is survived by her children, six grandchildren, and a great-granddaughter. Baronova was said to have been the youngest and most graceful of the "Baby Ballerinas," as well as one of ballet's most acclaimed stars.