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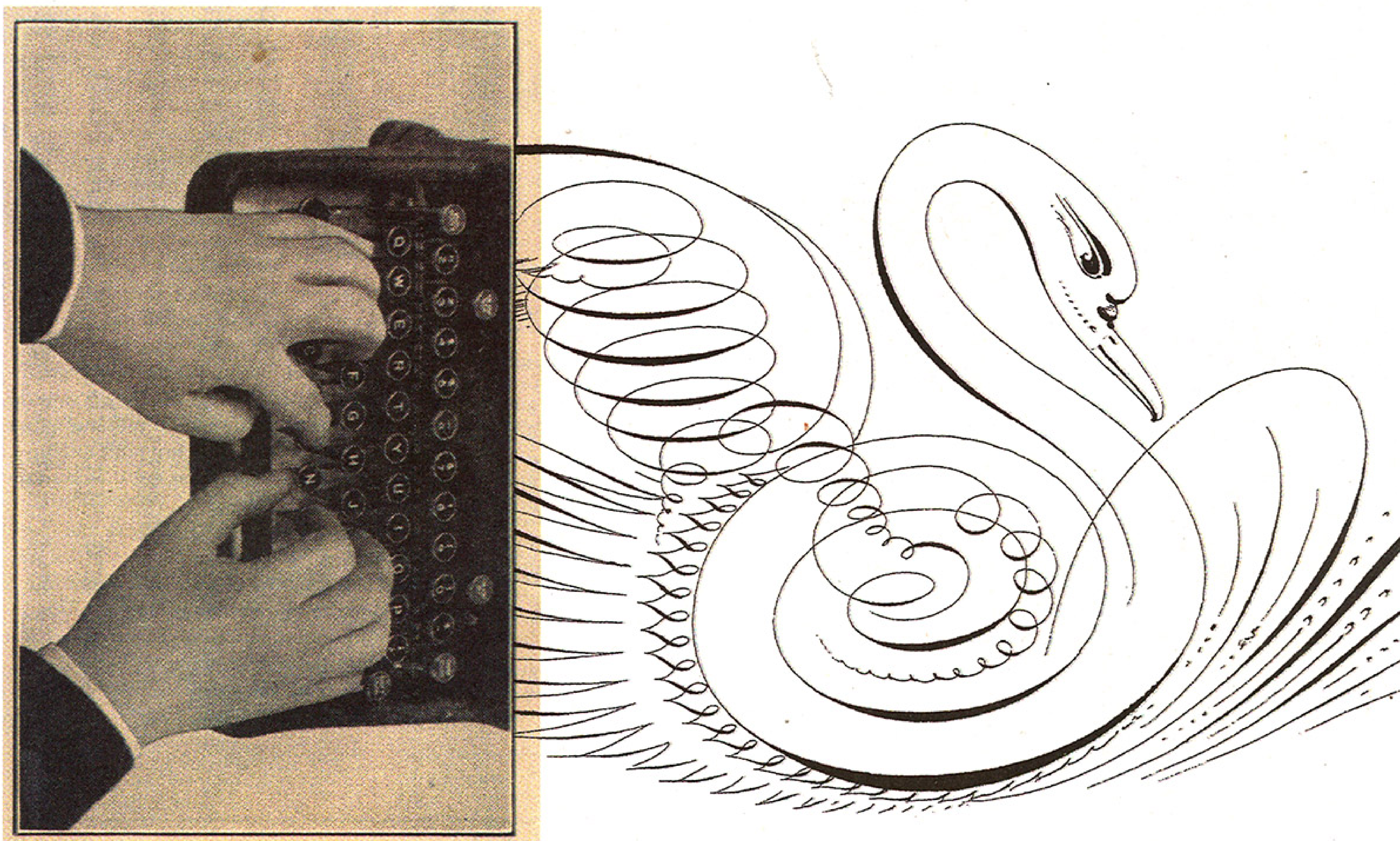
ABBOTT MILLER

Appraising Grace

By Toni Bentley

BALLET'S MAGIC KINGDOM Selected Writings on Dance in Russia, 1911-1925. *By Akim Volynsky. Edited and translated by Stanley J. Rabinowitz. Illustrated. 288 pp. Yale University Press. $35.*

This is a fantastic book. We find out not only about the vicissitudes of Pavlova's alimentary canal but also about the skeletal structure of her knees, the size of her arch, the height of her jumps, her "sensuous" lower lip and the slope of her "ravishing" shoulders. All this and a clear explanation of the layers of her ample soul. What more could one want to know about the ballerina, long dead, whose name evokes, more than any other, the art she practiced — the art that plumbs the depths of the physical to reach, on occasion, the mystical? "Ballet's Magic Kingdom" is the first English-language edition of the dance writings of Akim Volynsky, one of the greatest writers on ballet (don't worry, nobody has heard of him) in the whole 350 or so years of the art form's relatively brief history. The book, covering the years 1911-25, has been lovingly edited and translated by Stanley J. Rabinowitz, a professor of Russian at Amherst who directs the college's Center for Russian Culture and holds the Henry Steele Commager professorship there.

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Appraising Grace

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The list of great writers on dance is short; a three-dimensional, nonverbal art, existing only in transient live performance, provides an excellent disincentive to use language. Not since the precise and furious writings of Lincoln Kirstein have we read (in English) such informed, cultured and unapologetically opinionated prose on ballet. This book is indeed, as Rabinowitz writes in his excellent introduction, Volynsky's "hymn to the sublime art of dance." His uncompromising, impassioned stance is a refreshing reminder of classical ballet's ability to transcend the corporeal — especially while we endure our current long dance recession, when most dancers are just, well, dancing. (Looking for the next Balanchine, who died only 26 years ago, is an exercise in nostalgic vanity: we haven't had another Shakespeare yet, and he died almost four centuries ago.)

Volynsky, perversely and rather irresponsibly, does not refer to Louis XIV, whose Académie Royale de Danse (founded in 1661, 45 years after Shakespeare's death) codified the classical ballet language — pas de basque, jeté, glissade, piqué, cabriole, fondu, rond de jambe, gargouillade. He prefers to trace the art back to classical Greece and believes, as Rabinowitz wrote in The Russian Review in 1991, that "balletic dance alone preserved the character of the Hellenic sense of plastic art." Volynsky finds in it the fruition of the philosophies of Kant, Spinoza and Nietzsche. This guy is not confusing tutus with froufrou.

The book is a must for anyone claiming a love of ballet, but it is also the perfect antidote for anyone — I know you're out there — who still thinks ballet is merely a pretty spectacle with pretty girls (not that it also isn't). If you can wade through Volynsky's sometimes dense but always hugely entertaining and surprising text, you will never look at a toeshoe, a tiara or a tendu, not to mention an entire ballerina sporting all of the above, in the same way again. You will realize that you are looking, according to Volynsky, at a being truly not of this world, but here, for now, in this world, who can show you a kind of beauty and truth you will not find anywhere else — not in a book or painting, not in science, not in meditation, prayer or jogging, not in organic hibiscus juice and not even in death, should you survive it.

But then Volynsky was there, in the audience, witnessing firsthand the mythic Russian ballerinas of the early 20th century who have come to symbolize that otherworldly creature from a magic kingdom who twirls on the tips of her toes and then, inevitably, ineffably, bourrées away into the wings of eternity where she resides. Clearly, he was there for us, to bring a real sense of just who were Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Mathilda Kshesinskaya, Olga Preobrazhenskaya, Agrippina Vaganova, Elizaveta Gerdt, Vera Trefilova and the haunting Olga Spessivtseva. He reports on Isadora too, and, despite an eye wounded, offended, by her overt rejection of ballet's lexicon, he allows that in her, culture "has become flesh," and "from her ardent heart she has erected an icon to the personal." Not that he valued the "personal" very highly; Volynsky was a classicist to the core.

CHAIM LEIB FLEKSER was born in 1861 into an Orthodox Jewish family of booksellers in Ukraine. At 18 he moved to St. Petersburg, where he lived for the rest of his life. He became a lawyer, with a dissertation in philosophy, but quickly got involved in the bustling cultural life of the city. For the next 40 years he was a highly respected, always controversial editor and prolific modernist critic, publishing under the name Akim Volynsky. "Only idealism — the contemplation of life through the idea of the spirit, through the idea of divinity and religion — can explain art," he wrote. "I value books more than life," he stated, and wrote ones on Dostoyevsky, Leonardo da Vinci and the novelist Nikolai Leskov. There was a brief early marriage.

By the first decade of the 20th century, Volynsky's exacting literary standards, arrogance and strident pronouncements had alienated everyone — and most publications — so he turned to his beloved ballet, devoting himself to its cause for the remaining years of his life. In 1917 he took over the directorship of the School of Russian Ballet and gave to it, in the words of an acquaintance, "his last coins." At his death he left more than 350 dance articles; a treatise on classical ballet, "The Book of Exaltations" (which constitutes the second half of this book); and a "monumental" unpublished book on Rembrandt. He lived like a monk in what was described as "an empty room, with a solitary kitchen table in the middle of it, and an iron bed." He needed space for an interior existence of such passion and idealism as to make one feel that furniture is a bourgeois distraction from life's true treasures. Like Anna Pavlova.

"Pavlova speaks and sings in her dancing," Volynsky writes in 1911. "Her ebullient personality, full of fire and light, does not prevent her from magically falling into the flow of the pure modern figures that flow one from the other with the same lightness and naturalness with which ideal similarities of mathematics conceptually grow and silently combine in their beautiful dance of elevated and looping truths." One of the delights in reading Volynsky is his complete comfort in moving from global, spiritual concerns to penetrating detail of an almost too intimate nature:

Pavlova, whom Volynsky analyzed adoringly from arch to eyebrow.

"Pavlova's foot is charming — small and narrow. The structure of her leg is right, but somewhat concave in the knees. Her kneecaps almost touch. This is why Pavlova lacks the perfect turnout one finds in Vera Trefilova. . . . Pavlova's legs are lanky and muscular, taut like a goat's. . . . In reality, Pavlova's elevation, if strictly measured, would not outdo Vaganova's. . . . Onstage she flies at rapid speed up and down, obliquely, near the floor, against all logic, against all the laws of gravity, with her widely opened, dark brown eyes, in which fire burns."

Finally, Volynsky gets to the nitty-gritty of this woman, who he says is "more . . . from God than from nature," with an astonishing report on her eating habits. "Pavlova furiously flits around all day," he writes. "She has breakfast and then eats nothing until the evening. But 15 minutes before the curtain goes up, she quickly gulps down five ham or roast-beef sandwiches. And then she flies onto the stage." Five? Like a goat?

Volynsky's commitment to Pavlova is sorely tested by her decision to travel outside Russia, to those "degrading . . . nightspots" we call theaters. It was, however, on these missionary voyages that she brought the art form to millions, in all corners of the world, like no one before her. He suggests that she is whoring herself to money, while in fact she whored herself to Terpsichore. "The rays of light cast into the soul of this artist by the Creator of the universe," he insists, "will undoubtedly be replaced there with the pathos of market transactions from which one can mint a fortune. A column of dust circles the eaglet, which has fallen onto the road of vanity and deceit." Capitalist horrors aside, one feels in Volynsky the agony of an abandoned lover.

He gives us a rare and gripping close-up of the 18-year-old Georgi Balanchivadze (before he was George Balanchine) as a new member of the Maryinsky company, dancing the Candy Cane in Act II of "The Nutcracker." It is worth quoting at length:

"I must mention the great success provoked by a still quite young and unusually musical artist. Balanchivadze dances the buffoon with a hoop . . . with an energetically expressed and folksy rhythm. He stands in the hoop slantwise, in profile to the audience, and totally sparkles in the silvery design of his costume. His face is deathly pale from agitation. The youth is tall and full of wild intensity. He waves the hoop and tosses it under his feet. Then he encircles himself with it and rushes downward like a hurricane. In his day Romanov won fame for this number, but now Balanchivadze has gained the upper hand with his young, lively and superbly disciplined talent."

Volynsky writes the following year, 1923, of his longing for "a ballet master for the new epoch" when "everything in classical dance, with its characteristic means and indigenous voices, will burst into an eternal Hyperborean hymn. Everything will be explained and justified in the rays of Apollonian sunlight: the toes, turnout, the hidden wisdom of the human body itself." Five years later — two years after Volynsky's death, in 1926 — as if answering that call, Balanchine would choreograph Stravinsky's "Apollo," and the age of Hyperborean Balanchine was begun.

In his assessment of individuals, Volynsky brings to much-maligned elitism an invigorating level of disdain and demonstrates truly top-notch ruthlessness. He really has it in for Mikhail (Michel) Fokine, calling his choreography in "Carnaval" "pantomimic bric-a-brac" and in "Les Préludes" simply "painful to think about." Fokine, he declares, "carries out a policy that abandons the spiritual for the everyday, the great for the trivial. It is clear that we are dealing here with a catastrophe on the stage." In "Egyptian Night," "the blunders continue," Volynsky reports from the end of his rope, "and there are totally unnecessary bas-reliefs." I, too, hate unnecessary bas-reliefs.

He of the take-no-prisoners school of criticism says of Agrippina Vaganova, whose name graces the school of the Kirov to this day, that she is "remarkable," but then writes of "her flaws in conscious moral substance"; still, "one should not demand from a talented person what is impossible for her." Ouch!

Aside from priceless portraits of dancers, Volynsky devotes himself to the language of ballet and its meanings. If you've never been quite sure what an arabesque really is, Volynsky explains: "The leg thrown back into an arabesque is, of course, nothing but a symbol of consciousness in its forward rush." In fouettés, he writes, "the soul becomes the arena of the most intense feelings, from healthy and natural to pathological and demonic." ("Swan Lake" requires 32 of these demonic interludes in quick succession, resulting, historically, in more than a few pathological ballerinas.)

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PHOTOGRAPHS: HARVARD THEATER COLLECTION, FROM "BALLET'S MAGIC KINGDOM"

Olga Spessivtseva in 1924. She left Russia that year, shattering Volynsky.

As for the poor pirouette, often "a lamentable fiasco on the stage," Volynsky does not find its best exponents in "the inhabitants of the Scythian-Sarmatian valleys. The Russian woman, marvelous material for psychological novels, is too capriciously unsettled and insecure in her aesthetic emotions, too bifurcated between good and evil in the internal structure of her character. Pirouette requires a monolithic character, the exultation of the infinite, and absolute integrity and faithfulness to the guiding center." And in those binding, merciless satin slippers — pointe shoes — that allow a dancer to scale the summit of human height, Volynsky finds the apotheosis of "vertical culture," culled from Kant, where "everything will ascend upward, . . . the conscious spirit in its highest moral and individual soaring." The body, to Volynsky, is "a scroll of ideas," and ballet a moral quest or nothing.

In "The Book of Exaltations," Volynsky provides a mesmerizing discourse covering everything and anything in classical dance. We get the positions, the classroom, the ballets, the types of dancers, the music, the choreography, the exaltation of it all. He delves into the deeper meaning of turnout, upon which all ballet is based, and sees it extending not just over the legs but "over all parts of the body," including the eyes, where "contact is now made not only with the woman's body but with her soul. . . . The hysterics of desire vibrate within us, passing through laughter and tears. This is what turned-out eyes are!" Some might call them roving eyes, but I bow to Volynsky.

He connects a dancer's elevation to "the sensation of flight" and then proceeds on a delightful flight of his own: "Man is born with Taborian cliffs within, with cupolas, steeples and all kinds of heights, and from childhood his will crawls and clambers higher and higher unless its natural growth is prematurely interrupted by a bad education or tragic fate." (Mount Tabor, in Galilee, is said to be the place of Christ's Transfiguration.) The poetic sequences continue rather sensuously with his commentary on woman — "a botanical creature" — and her body, which for him, like Balanchine, is what ballet is all about. "A kind of invisible aquatic element flows through a woman's body," he writes, "and when you come close to her you feel the fresh spray of this everlasting cascade. When you find yourself among women, especially at balls, you literally begin to swim in the living, collective fluid of life that surrounds you." Whoa, boy! A neoprene tux, perhaps?

IT was, in the end, the "botanical" ballerinas who owned Volynsky — and one in particular. "In your articles there is something immortal," Gorky wrote to Volynsky, "a sadness about the meaning of life and a regret over its shallowness in our day, a passion for the mysteries of existence and much beauty and pain." And nothing produced more ecstasy, or despair, for Volynsky than the divine Olga Spessivtseva, the ballerina he called "the weeping spirit":

"This is a talent completely harmonious, balanced and consummate in its appearance, which is where all its wealth has gone. . . . Her gentle, slightly protuberant forehead — somewhat in the spirit of Carlo Dolci — is feminine and charming, like an oval of a delicate plant. . . . The permanent stamp of undying childhood lies in this artist. . . . This is a spirit that weeps about its limits. . . . She does not ignite the audience with the fire of her talent but extends over them the palpitating cover of all those tears, as yet unborn but already tormenting her heart."

Volynsky's acute sensitivity proved prescient about this numinous dancer's fragility. Spessivtseva spent 20 years — long after Volynsky's death, from 1943 to 1963 — institutionalized after several nervous breakdowns, and then lived the remaining 28 years of her long, sad life cloistered at the Tolstoy Foundation nursing home in New York State. She died at the age of 96, forgotten by all but a few.

The young composer Valeriyan Bogdanov-Berezovsky described how Volynsky, Spessivtseva and he often had tea together in St. Petersburg in the early 1920s, when she was at the height of her career. Volynsky "was already an old man, unattractive, wrinkled," Bogdanov-Berezovksy wrote, with "a slightly sagging lower lip and a penetrating glance that seemed less to photograph than to X-ray you. . . . Next to the incomparable beauty of Spessivtseva he produced the impression almost of a Quasimodo. . . . He was tormented by her, he tried to get closer to the object of his adoration."

But as his words reveal to us now, Volynsky was Spessivtseva's Cyrano, and through him we know her, his "weeping spirit." Ultimately, Volynsky's writings depict a profound love affair between a deeply refined man — perched on his Taborian cliff with his "looping truths" — and the vaporous sylphs who externalized, and verticalized, within the frame of a gilt proscenium, the beauty of his own ecstatic and despairing soul. □