DANCE

## Related, By Devotion, To Balanchine

By TONI BENTLEY

N Jan. 22 I received an e-mail from an unknown address with no subject heading. I opened the e-mail. There was no text, just a link. Risky. That moment is like buying a lottery ticket when you know you won't win, but the paradoxical desire both to procrastinate and to hope fuse into an irresistible force. I clicked.

I was taken to YouTube, and as a video loaded, I was on the verge of closing it when Dvorak's charming "Humoresque" (Op. 101, No. 7) began, its jaunty notes bouncing through my earphones. For the next 3 minutes 22 seconds I was pulled into a lyrical sequence of slowly expanding black-and-white images of George Balanchine, starting with him as a young man and proceeding to his final curtain call. It was his birthday. He would have been 108. And given what he told us — "I am Georgian, and we live forever" — he should still be here. But he died in 1983 at a mere 79.

I spent my young life in Balanchine's world, training for seven years at his School of American Ballet and then dancing for him during the last years of his life as a member of New York City Ballet. It has been almost 30 years since we all kissed his forehead in his open coffin, but his presence, for those of us who knew him

The ballerina Tamara Toumanova, right, in the George Balanchine ballet "Cotillon" (1932) and below, with Balanchine in a Monte Carlo pool.

COLLECTION OF TAMARA TOUMANOVA



even just for a short while, seems to have grown, becoming not only ever-present but also, somehow, all pervasive. He was, after all, the biggest thing that happened to any of us.

Twenty seconds into the video my eyes welled up at the image of the young man in bowler hat, high boots and jodhpurs standing beside a horse, holding the reins, his two slim legs between the horse's four, all six at the ready. Ah, how Balanchine, the consummate jockey — the light touch with the force of steel — held our reins! But he did not rein us in; he reined us out.

This portrait of Balanchine is made by one who saw his beauty deeply, his otherworldly beauty, his transcendent art but, more unusually, his human beauty, so singular. The video focuses on his face, a countenance of sculptured grace and solitary dignity, its lines cut so precisely, so cleanly, that his is a rare case in which an artist's visage emanates his art.

Who remembered his birthday? Who made this little treasure? The credit rolled: "With Love and Respect From Tamara G. Pkhakadze 22.01.2012."

I Googled to find out who was this Tamara G. Pkhakadze. I found her, of course, on Facebook. I sent a message of thanks.

Tamara is now 13 years old — 12 when she made the video — an only child who lives with her parents in Tbilisi, Georgia, a curious fact of place given that Balanchine's father was also from Tbilisi, and that Balanchine was fond of saying that he was not Russian but Georgian. (Hence the immortal claim.)

The plot thickened: Young Tamara was named after Tamara Toumanova, one of the famous Baby Ballerinas chosen by Balanchine in Paris in the early 1930s. Toumanova was Tamara's father's grandfather's first cousin. So young Tamara comes to Balanchine as family. And her middle "G" stands for George. Go figure.

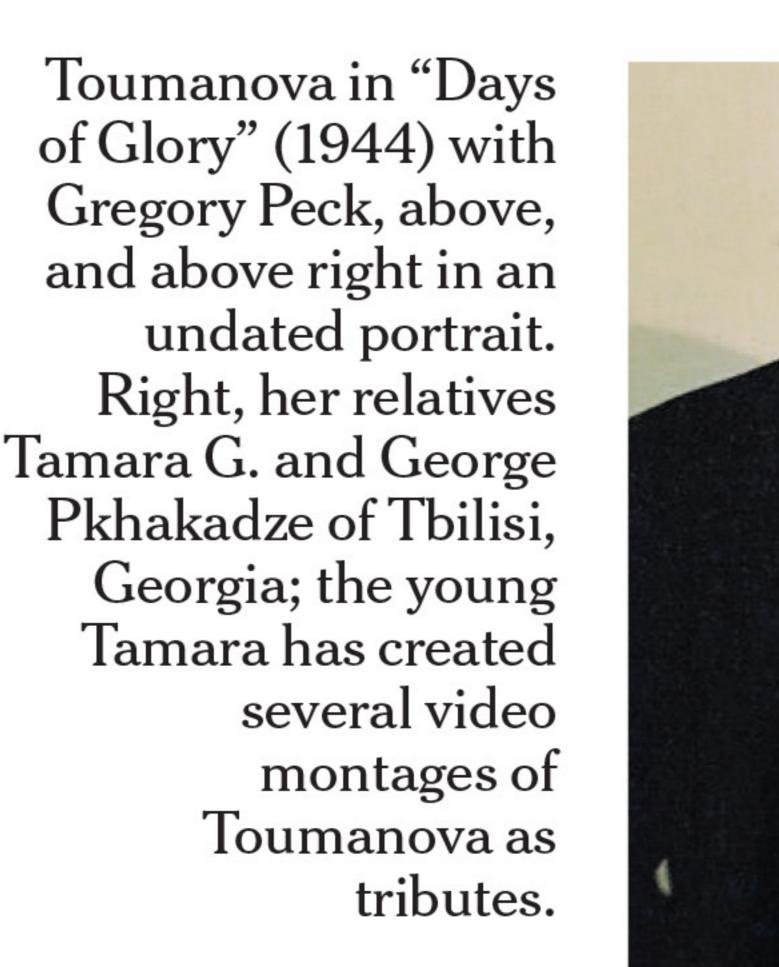
I found this out after contacting her father, George Pkhakadze, who assured me by e-mail that Tamara did indeed make the YouTube collage and was named after the ballerina relative. One minute into the video is a rare photo of a very young Balanchine looking unusually puckish and wildly alive. He is in a swimming pool — probably in Monte Carlo — his wet hair a veritable pirouetting tornado as he hugs a bright young Toumanova, crowned not in her usual tiara but a rather stolid rubber bathing cap. They are laughing like children. He looks so happy. It is said that Balanchine, 15 years her senior, wanted to marry her, but it was not to be. She had a formidable mother, and she was only 13 years old when he chose her to dance for him.

Toumanova was born on a train in 1919, speeding across Siberia between Omsk and Harbin, in China, in an eerie parallel of Rudolph Nureyev's birth 19 years later — Russians forever fleeing, born on trains and landing on a stage with a birthright of true grit. Her mother, Princess Eugenia Toumanishvili, was escaping the Bolshevik Revolution from her home in Georgia.

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**GURAM TSIBAKHASHVILI** 

Princess Eugenia's father was murdered on his estate two years later, and in 1934 her brother was imprisoned for five years by Stalin, while her nephew and his family were exiled to camps in north Russia. "Mama," as she became known throughout the ballet world, did well to escape.

En route to China Princess Eugenia's husband, Toumanova's father, died of infection, and Eugenia gave birth alone to her daughter in the boxcar, giving the child her own surname. After traveling to Shanghai, Cairo and various refugee camps, mother and daughter, and a second husband picked up in China, landed in Paris, where there were many Russian émigrés. There, in the class of the Russian

teacher Olga Preobrajenska, Balanchine first saw the child dancer and hired her for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo.

He made many roles on her, including the Young Girl — no acting necessary — in the 1932 "Cotillon," for which she wore a long tulle skirt brimming with shimmering stars, designed by Christian Bérard. Never has a gown so sparkled with the sweetness of innocence on the ledge of loss. For his famed but short-lived company, Les Ballet 1933, Balanchine made his first version of "Mozartiana" on Toumanova, a ballet that he choreographed again in 1981, his last masterpiece, presciently set in the court of Heaven. For Toumanova he also made "Balustrade" in 1941 and then designed the ecstatic second movement adagio of Bizet's "Palais de Cristal" ("Symphony in C") on her in Paris in 1947.

Toumanova said years later. Balanchine, she said, "was like an ocean; the waves kept coming to him."

"What he gave was the likeness of the sun and the moon. Both," she said. "I think he saw kinship with me, with my tristesse, with my being part Georgian."

Alongside her stage career Toumanova took the rare grand jeté, like Moira Shearer, to film roles, making "Torn Curtain" with Hitchcock and "Invitation to the Dance," in which she performs a multiple cigarette lighting with Gene Kelly of such steep erotic suggestion that it makes Paul Heinreid's cigarette duet with Bette Davis in "Now, Voyager" look elementary.

Most memorably Toumanova starred opposite Gregory Peck in "Days of Glory"

(1944). She was that beautiful. Tamara Pkhakadze, the young disciple, has made, in the last year or so, about 20 such tributes, including several in homage to her namesake. These montages are in-

CONDÉ NAST ARCHIVE/CORBIS teresting from one so young. They are not about current or even recent stars, but the great immortal ghosts, the haunting Wilis Anna Pavlova, Olga Spessivtseva — of

20th-century classical ballet.

If Tamara Pkhakadze has a sophisticated cultural leaning for her years — most 13-year-old girls are more interested in Bieber than Balanchine — she comes by it honestly. Her father is a masterly painter, his New York exhibitions being the cause of his daughter being born in America.

As we talked on Skype, Tamara proudly flashed her American passport in front of the computer screen, the eagle-head watermark securing Tamara's citizenship in a country she hopes to visit one day; she left one month after her birth and has never been back. She is ready: Her English is fluent, and besides, she admitted, almost embarrassed, "I have never seen Balanchine's ballets alive." She added that "it is my dream," holding up to the screen a much-fingered book she has about him, Robert Tracy's "Balanchine's Ballerinas: Conversations With the Muses."

From books and the Internet she gathers the photos (all in the public domain) for her videos, she said, and then places them in "a special order": childhood and family images followed by work and dancing images. After choosing the music, "I focus on the rhythm and appropriate images to the moments of music," she wrote in an e-mail. Several years ago her mother taught her how to use Photoshop, Corel and Moviemaker, the computer programs she uses. She frequently "discusses and argues" with her parents about the various art themes, she said.

She noticed a few years ago that "very few documentary videos" on Toumanova exist, "so I decided to make some myself. This is a way for me to tell people about this great choreographer, the composers and ballet dancers whose names are not popular today in wide society." She added: "I am too tall and heavy for ballet, and these videos are a way for me to have a relation with this art. For me ballet is the essence of royalty, reminding me of the Renaissance and its charming ladies with their exquisite manners."

Perhaps Balanchine's claim about being "All the ladies were in love with him," Georgian and living forever was true; young Tamara of Tbilisi — with her American nationality like his; Georgian heritage like his; and bloodline to Toumanova, one of his first beloved ballerinas — makes it so somehow. Why else would a teenager a world away, not even a dancer, "love and respect" him not only so greatly, but, more surprising, with such clarity?

> "I could not let his birthday pass," she wrote, "without a little tribute for this BIG BEAUTY."

Why, I asked on Skype, did she use "Humoresque," by Dvorak, a composer Balanchine never used, as the video soundtrack? "Oh, I just love that music," she said. She is an accomplished pianist, having attended music college in Tbilisi since she was 5, graduating last year at 12.

Maybe Balanchine was waiting for Tamara, born 16 years after he died, to use this joyous, mischievous music with its melancholy interludes for her portrait of him. For their shared tristesse.