

## Anna Pavlova

Anna Pavlova was a famous Russian ballerina of the late 19th and the early 20th century. Her name along with that of Nijinsky is synonymous with the art of ballet. Pavlova is a legend largely remembered for her famous dance *The Dying Swan* and because she was the first ballerina to travel around the world and bring ballet to people who had never seen it.

Pavlova was born in St. Petersburg. Her passion for the art of ballet was sparked when her mother took her to a performance of Marius Petipa's original production of *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre. The lavish spectacle made a profound impression on the young Pavlova, and at the age of eight her mother took her to audition for the renowned Imperial Ballet School. She was rejected due to her age and for what was considered to be a "sickly" physique, but she was finally accepted at the age of ten. She made her first appearance in a ballet as a cupid in Petipa's *Un conte de fées (A Fairy Tale)*, which the Ballet Master staged especially for the students of the school.

Pavlova's years at the Imperial Ballet School were difficult. Ballet technique did not come easily to the young Pavlova. Her extremely arched feet, thin ankles, and long limbs clashed with the small, compact body which was at that time in favor for the ballerina. Pavlova trained relentlessly to improve her technique. She took extra lessons from the great teachers of the day - Christian Johansson, Pavel Gerdt and Nikolai Legatand. During her final year at the Imperial Ballet School, she performed many soloist roles with the principal company, performing small roles in many of the *grand ballets* of the era. She graduated at age 18, being allowed to enter the Imperial Ballet a rank ahead of *corps de ballet* as a *coryphée*. She made her debut with the Imperial Ballet performing a variation in Pavel Gerdt's *Les Dryades prétendues (The False Dryads)*, set to music taken from Cesare Pugni's score for Jules Perrot's romantic ballet *Éoline, ou La Dryade*. Her performance garnered praised from the critics, particularly the great critic and historian Nikolai Bezobrazov.

At the height of Petipa's strict academicism, the public was at first somewhat reserved in their reaction to Pavlova's unique style - an unusual combination of an extraordinary dance gift that paid little heed to academic rules: she frequently performed with bent knees, poor turnout, misplaced *port de bras* and incorrectly placed tours. Such a style in many ways harkened back to the time of the romantic ballet and the great ballerinas of old.

Pavlova rose through the ranks quickly, she was a favorite of the old Maestro Petipa. She was second soloist in 1902, *Première Danseuse* in 1905, and finally *Prima Ballerina* in 1906 after a resounding performance in *Giselle*, for which Petipa revised the Ballerina's dances especially for her in 1903 (they are still performed today in this version at the Mariinsky). Petipa would revise many *Grand Pas* for the Ballerina, as well as supplemental variations (among them, the famous variation to a solo harp danced by the lead Ballerina of the famous *Paquita Grand Pas Classique*, to the music of Riccardo Drigo, which Petipa choreographed for the Ballerina's debut in *Paquita* in 1904). She was much celebrated by the fanatical balletomanes of Tsarist St. Petersburg. Her legions of fans called themselves the *Pavlovatzi*.

All her life Pavlova preferred the melodious "*musique dansante*" of the old Maestros such as Cesare Pugni and Ludwig Minkus, and cared little for anything else which strayed from the salon-styled ballet music of the 19th century.

By the mid 1900s she founded her own company and performed throughout the world, with a repertory consisting primarily of abridgements from the Imperial Petipa works, and specially choreographed pieces for herself. The ballet writer Cyril Johnson described that "*her bourrées were like a string of pearls*".

While touring in the Netherlands, Pavlova was in a train which malfunctioned and had a mild derailment. Dressed only in pajamas and a light scarf, she got out and walked the length of the train to see what had happened. Three weeks later she died of pneumonia, three weeks short of her 50th birthday. Reportedly, she said "If I can't dance then I'd rather be dead". While holding her costume she spoke her last words; "Play the last measure very softly." The end for Pavlova came in the hotel Des Indes in The Hague which shows a plaque on the wall near entrance.

In accordance with old ballet tradition, on the day she was to have next performed, the show went on as scheduled, with a single spotlight circling an empty stage where she would have been.