

Nina Alover: Legends of Russian Ballet
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Nina Alover is unquestionably the most prominent photographer in the world of dance since the mid-20th century. Born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), she began her career in the 1940s as curator of Leningrad's Comedy Theater Museum after graduating from university with an interest in history and ballet. This was followed by her work as the official photographer for the Komissarzhevskaya and Lensoviet theaters.. By the 1950s, she was the official photographer of the Kirov Ballet. These were her formative years, where she developed a range of particular approaches that is reflected in this survey of her work.

Her photographs are more than documents of performances. They demonstrate an affinity with the complexities of ballet, such as the appearance of effortless brought about by grueling physical prowess, a dichotomy that is not readily apparent to the viewer during a performance because the moment comes and goes too quickly. Her personal relationships with different dancers gave her unprecedented access to their character and personalities, so that she was able to photograph them in unguarded moments backstage, conveying insight into dancers and works in progress and following them through to their final presentation, where her eye for capturing the staging and set design also is powerfully voiced.

Before immigrating to America in 1977 as part of the so-called Third Wave, Alover's work was already widely renowned, appearing in many books on ballet issued by Isskustvo Publishing, as well as being reproduced in numerous magazines and newspapers in the former Soviet Union. She established special relationships with dancers Mikhail Baryshnikov, Boris Eifman, Yulia Makhalina, Vladimir Malakhov, and Nikolai Tsiskaridze (subjects of monographs she later published in the United States) as well as important cultural figures like Joseph Brodsky, Sergei Dovlatov, Vladimir Vysotsky, among many others.

This exhibition, however, focuses exclusively on her ballet photographs and spans her years in Russia through her work in America, where she worked for

Dance Magazine and *Ballet Review* and published her works in Russian-language newspapers like *Novoe Russkoe Slovo* and *Novy Amerikanets*. It reveals her particularly close work with Baryshnikov. For instance, her black-and-white photograph of him flying through the air in *Daphnis et Chloé* is a masterpiece that exudes a fluidity and elegance in stark contrast to a similar photograph of Vladimir Malakhov, who floats through space but with a more statuesque demeanor. Also in this category is Alover's later color photograph of Diana Vishneva pivoting in *Swan Lake*, where the costume becomes part of the dancer's form and gesture. In this regard, her image of Vera Arbusova in *Giselle* is a brilliant modern construction, where the dancer seems to have a body made only of fabric, which triangulates the minimal black backdrop and makes the dancer's head look like a ship's prow figurehead.

This dichotomy of the body's fluidity and rigidity is a theme that appears throughout Alover's career. Her photograph of Yulia Makhalina as Queen Mekhmene Banu presents the dancer's posture as a kind of geometric sculptural object, as does her black-and-white image of Irina Dvorovento and Maxim Beloserkovsky, whereas the photographs of Yelena Kuzmina and Oleg Markov or Valery Mikhailovsky emphasize the body's elasticity. As mentioned earlier, Alover has the ability to capture the complexity of her subject's personality, whether it's her image of a brooding Baryshnikov in *Fiesta*, Alexander Minz relaxing backstage but confronting the camera with his penetrating gaze, or choreographer Boris Eifman animatedly demonstrating a gesture for a work in development. Ballet audiences are not normally privy to these moments. Among her great achievements, Alover was able to unveil the mechanics of ballet without ruining its mystique, which is no small feat.

Time and again one finds the photographer dwelling on the importance of gesture in choreography, which may sound obvious, but in performance these gestures are fleeting moments. Alover captures that pivotal moment where gesture and emotion collide and create the beauty of the body's form. This is manifested in pictures like those of Marcelo Gomes, Diana Vishneva, Uliana Lopatkina, Svetlana

Zakharova, and Ethan Stiefel, to name some of the more dramatic works on view here.

Finally, Alover's eye for the pageantry of ballet is on display throughout the exhibition. She focused not only on the body but also on the variety of settings and costumes that create the platform and envelope for sophisticated choreography. While not comprehensive in scale, this exhibition of her work is exemplary in scope, revealing Alover's elevation beyond mere documentation into a creative realm of her own that is in close dialogue with her subjects.