
Ida Rubinstein Faded into Oblivion, Why? (1883-1960)

Judith Chazin-Bennahum

Catapulted to stardom and fame in Paris from 1909 through the 1930s, Ida Rubinstein has largely disappeared from memory. Meryl Secrest, the biographer of Romaine Brooks, who painted many canvases of Ida, and was perhaps one of her lovers, wrote about the eclipse of Ida Rubinstein: "The degrees by which Ida Rubinstein ceased to be long, thin, hieratic, with almond eyes a mixture of Queen Nefertiti and the mosaics of Torcello, and became a pathetic forgotten figure, can be charted in the cycle of changing tastes, which decrees that one generation will find ludicrous posturing the art which its parents have idolized."¹

Karina Dobrotvorskaya, art critic and instructor at СПбГАТИ (The State Academy Arts Theatre in St. Petersburg), wrote in her article "The Lioness": "Rubinstein possessed a geometric body, a biblical face, the viscous plasticity of the feline family. For a cat - she was too grand and too tall. As a tigress - too graphic. A lean lioness. A greedy, imperious and insatiable one. She stubbornly did not wish to notice that her thinness and the splendor of her bejeweled clothing merely underscored the defect of the diamond which on closer inspection was only glass... She was fabulously rich, amazingly beautiful, exceedingly wealthy, and completely without talent. It seems that the name Ida Rubinstein brings only this to mind. Even the remarkable portrait by Serov, imprints an eccentric decadent woman, bare (naked) and with rings on her toes."²

Dobrotvorskaya goes on to discuss Rubinstein's complex persona: "The phenomenon of Ida Rubinstein existed in contrasts of the exquisite and the ugly, face and body, of a young and feminine idealized tsarina and the daughter of a Kharkov Jewish millionaire."³ It is probably not an accident that her wealth and religion are continually cited, as the ugly part. Though Dobrotvorskaya acknowledges Rubinstein's shrewd commissioning of great modern composers, she attacks her on many levels; her article suffers from a backward looking, Soviet style Marxism, and harbors anti-Semitic assaults.

Rubinstein lived her whole existence in dreams, in a mythic universe and in a desperate search for something more exalted, a greater purpose. She impersonated dozens of heroines and princesses, as well as male heroes, personifying their grandiose characters, living their tragedies and vicissitudes. She traveled occasionally on her yacht, the Istar, and hunted wild animals in Africa, always in the latest fashions.⁴ Only during the two world wars did she exist

in any sort of harsh reality; but of course as the savior of young warriors, she needed to be dressed in a beautiful uniform designed by Leon Bakst [Russian Jewish artist who designed many costumes for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; he had changed his more Jewish sounding name from Lev Rosenberg to Leon Bakst]. Ida was the heroic nurse, there to save lives, to assuage and to comfort. Indeed, she succeeded in this part, winning the *Légion d'honneur*, the Grand Cross of an Officer of the *Légion d'honneur*, (France's highest order of merit in military and civil life) as well as French citizenship.

Rubinstein grew up and lived in the sphere of Russian dominance until she was twenty- six years old when she moved to Paris. Her mother (Ernestina Isaakovna Van Jung) and father (Léon or Lev) and four children (Roman a brother, Ida, Anna and Rachel, also known as Irène) were together until the shock of the loss of their parents. It is said that her mother died in 1888 when Ida was five and her father in 1892 when she was nine, both perhaps of cholera.⁵ One can only imagine the destitution from losing a mother and a father as she was but a child when they died and she was taken, along with one sister, to St. Petersburg where she was raised in the opulent home of her Aunt Horovitz. One of her biographers indicated that she was baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church at a very young age, but that is not proven.

Rubinstein's upbringing included a rigorous and rich education, the study of classical languages as well as German, French, Italian, and English, and extensive readings in history, the arts, and literature. This background prepared her for her later brilliant foray into producing plays and ballets. In Nathalie Stronhina's essay on Rubinstein's Russian roots, she reminds us that Rubinstein grew up at a time in Russia with a new phenomenon, "*Il s'agit du mécénat, qui a considérablement marqué l'histoire de la culture russe, y compris la carrière d' Ida Rubinstein.*"⁶ ("It was the growth of philanthropy and philanthropists who made a considerable impression on Russian culture; this included Ida Rubinstein and her family and friends.") Money and taste provided Ida from the very beginning with the tools she needed to present performances welcomed by her audiences.

She trained as an actress for two years in Moscow and for one year in St. Petersburg giving her the fundamental tools that grounded her philosophy and vision of theatrical performance. Both Moscow and St. Petersburg were hubs for some of the most significant writers, and theater directors such as Nemerov-Danshenko, influenced



Ida Rubinstein as Zobeide, lying on her stomach on a striped couch, head dress, chin on hand, in *Scheherazade*, 1910, courtesy of Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

by Lugué-Poe, Antoine, Stanislavsky, and Meyerhold, who were staging intriguing plays and experimenting with methodologies of performance, as well as training. At the time, the impact of François Delsarte cannot be underestimated. There is no question but that Rubinstein's brilliant gestural interpretations of her dramatic roles were influenced by her understanding of Delsarte (1811-1871) and his principles of movement and gesture as well as by Vsevolod Meyerhold who championed the *commedia dell'arte* and puppetry.

The theater would be her home, the home that she perhaps felt she had lost at a tender age. There, in the theater, lay all her hopes and dreams, the spiritual and the material worlds meshed for her in an incandescent web of meaning. Nevertheless, Rubinstein's performance life suffered from a kind of abandonment, perhaps self-inflicted, so that even today few dance history students nor the teachers of dance studies have heard of her. Was the fact that she was Jewish instrumental in the back-stabbing by some of her critics, especially when she looked too "*exotique*" (exotic) or "*étrangère*" (strange) in *le Martyre de San Sébastien* (The Martyred San Sebastien), *Jeanne d'Arc*, and other roles that she was deemed by some as unworthy to play?

Ida and anti-Semitism

As a major female star, we must remember that Rubinstein never changed her name to make it less Jewish-sounding, despite her susceptibility to the misogynist and anti-Semitic attacks on her.

Let me begin with some critical comments that demean her Jewish background: In Rebecca Rossen's book *Dancing Jewish*, she recounts that Rubinstein danced the lead in two versions of her *Salomé* productions (1908 and 1912), both eliciting moments of insidious remarks about her Jewish origins, either by the clergy or the press. Rossen discloses, "When she starred in the Ballets Russes productions of *Cléopâtre* and *Schéhérazade*, Jean Cocteau described her as "the great ibex of the Jewish Ghetto." Although she was not an innocent party in her framing; her typecasting as a Jewish/Oriental dominatrix revealed growing turn-of-the-century anti-Semitism and the ways in which stereotypes about Jewishness are inseparable from gender and sexuality."⁷

In St. Petersburg, in 1908, when she acted and danced the role of *Salomé* from the drama by Oscar Wilde, it was a daring and unconventional choice, especially for a Jewish woman, and despite the criticism and the censorship, she prevailed. The Russian Orthodox Church's Holy Governing Synod, which functioned as the state Censor, banned *Salomé* as sacrilegious. But Ida was not deterred, she was able to pull strings, and though the actors were forbidden to recite Wilde's lines on stage, it was a sensation. Since Rubinstein was a first-rate mime, Bakst suggested that they do the whole production in mime. The plan went ahead, and was a genuine triumph. Michael de Cossart describes the exotic and spectacular character of Rubinstein's performance:

"Never before had the St. Petersburg public been treated to the spectacle of a young society woman dancing voluptuously to

insinuating oriental music, (composed by Glazunov) discarding brilliantly colored veils one by one until only a wisp of dark green chiffon remained knotted round her loins. Although, as Alexandre Benois revealed, this final and reprehensible moment of the dance was dissimulated by means of a lighting trick.”⁸

Sjeng Scheijen recounts how Rubinstein entreated Michel Fokine to teach her to dance in preparation for her Russian *Salomé*. Coming to ballet late in her life, Ida had much to learn. She also implored Bakst to design costumes for the performances she staged. As a dancer she lacked classical skills, but her body language was unusually expressive. “On 20 December 1908, in the main auditorium of the conservatory, she performed the dance of the Seven Veils to music by Glazunov. Alexandre Benois was most impressed. ‘To achieve her artistic aims she was prepared to test the limits of social tolerance and even decency - indeed to go so far as to bare herself in public.’”⁹

After 1909 in both Paris and Russia, assaults on Rubinstein proliferated as she became more of a starring personality in a number of plays, especially when she collaborated with Gabriele d’Annunzio and Claude Debussy in *Le Martyre de San Sébastien* (1911). Michael De Cossart wrote in his biography of Ida Rubinstein that on “May 8, 1911, The Cardinal della Volpe questioned why “the two main organizers of this profanation were Jewish in origin?”¹⁰ He was referring to Gabriel Astruc, the theater producer and to Ida Rubinstein. He neglected to mention Léon Bakst’s participation. The Monsignor in Paris, Léon-Adolphe Amette, carried out the Vatican demand and forbade all Catholics from attending the play.

Vicki Woolf reveals that, “d’Annunzio received frantic appeals from Astruc to hurry back to Paris. Already there were rumblings from Italy about anti-Jewish demonstrations on account of Ida appearing as Saint Sebastian. Astruc wrote to d’Annunzio: ‘I am rather worried because a group of ladies, representing the French aristocracy, has written to me to voice the fear that St. Sébastien, religiously speaking may give the impression of profanation. And I do not want to be accused of having crucified the Saviour for the second time.’”¹¹

An article by Barbara Jepson makes an insightful point suggesting that, “The Catholic church also may have objected to Rubinstein’s bare legs, and to the portrayal of a male Catholic saint by a Jewish female dancer. Debussy and d’Annunzio both published a statement that they were not practicing Catholics but insisted that *Le Martyre* was intended to glorify Sebastian and all Christian heroism.”¹²

Similar issues emerged one year later when Rubinstein took on the acting role of the beautiful Hélène of Sparta in 1912, the libretto written by Emile Verhaeren, a Belgian Symbolist poet. Two reviews that brought to light her immigrant situation were cited by Daniel Flannell Friedman: “The critic Judith Clavel in *La Vie* denounced

the author Émile Verhaeren for abandoning his work to Jewish foreigners, notably the director, Alexander Sanin, Léon Bakst and Ida Rubinstein.”¹³ In the fascist right-wing journal, *L’Action française*, Léon Daudet railed against the Jewish foreigners in the production, “The French public should rise up against Jewish foreigners, against their mercantile obscenity, and their obscene mercantilism; we must tear our theater from its servitude to them.”¹⁴

It was no secret that Ida was reviled for flaunting her extravagance and wealth, the proverbial Jewish entrepreneur. A producer with sumptuous tastes, Ida rented the Théâtre de L’Opéra almost every year from 1919 to 1934. Pascal Lécroart delves into the criticisms to which Ida was subjected, and concludes that “her talents were formidable and that those who wrote favorably about her counter balance the judgments of journalists at the time who were afflicted with xenophobia and anti-Semitism.”¹⁵



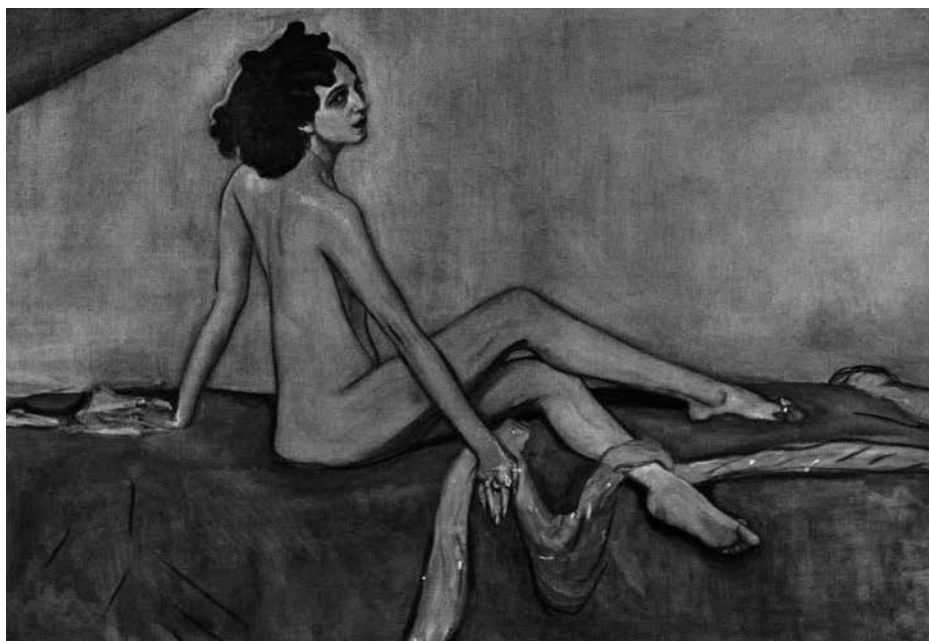
Ida Rubinstein dancing on table in Nijinska’s *Bolero*, 1928, courtesy of private collection

Rubinstein’s spectacular, but in some ways catastrophic Season of Ballets in 1928 at the Paris Opéra brought her enormous publicity. She worked with some of the most extraordinary composers, such as Stravinsky, Honneger and Ravel, and notably with the great woman choreographer Bronislava Nijinska. Ravel’s and Nijinska’s collaboration with Rubinstein on *Bolero* in 1928 was the sensation of the whole season. The reason for the disappointment on the occasion of these new ballets was that Rubinstein at the age of 45 did not have the technique that a ballerina needs and was reviled for her audacious decision to star in them. This criticism however, did not apply to *Bolero*, which was inspired by Spanish dancing in which she excelled; she did not have to execute ballet movements.

In these early years of her successes, Ida focused almost exclusively on her work and showed no interest whatsoever in politics or religion. Moreover, she certainly displayed no observance of Judaism. Gradually though, some years after the Russian Revolution and World War I, a phenomenon occurred in France and Europe, a resurgence of conversations about the importance of spirituality and religion. Ida fell under the spell of Paul Claudel’s poetry

and religiosity, collaborating with him on a production of his *Les Choéphores* (1935) playing the lead role of Clytemnestra, and in 1936 she converted to Catholicism.

In 1938, after many years of acting in dramas with Greek or French heroines, and trying her luck with running a ballet company, her final theatrical triumph resulted in the Oratorio, *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* (Joan of Arc at the Stake), also by Paul Claudel with music for chorus composed by Arthur Honegger. Once again, a Jewish woman playing a Christian saint provoked vitriolic outbursts, certainly because at this moment Jews were the targets in Europe [the Nazis already in power in Germany for five years]. It was a supreme irony that her last, signature gift to the stage was her role as the iconic Christian female martyr, Joan of Arc. The first performance in May 1938 took place in Basel, Switzerland under the direction of Paul Sacher, followed by a concert in Orléans, France in May 1939, and



Showing Ida Rubinstein naked, with back to viewer in painting of Ida Rubinstein by Valentin Serov, 1910, courtesy of Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

finally in Paris at the Palais de Chaillot, the next month in June 1939. Many of her reviews were very complimentary, as they found her musicality and the sonority of her voice with the poem and music as sublime. But there were some scandalous comments found in newspapers known for calumny and poor taste. For example, one author could not help himself from describing the Oratorio criticizing not only Rubinstein as Jewish but Hervé, the composer, as a Mason, which was supposedly a terrible indictment: "After the enemy's conquest of Orléans, Jeanne d'Arc played by the Jewess Rubinstein came on the scene. The next week, May 8th, M. Albert Lebrun and the Archbishop of Westminster came to save the city of Orléans. The deciding damage was to be the performance of *Jeanne d'Arc* with the participation of the Jewess Ida Rubinstein, the Free Mason, Jean Hervé and the musical composition by Arthur Honegger."¹⁶

The vituperative comments continued through 1939, as when Marcel Jouandeau in *Le Péril Juif* (or *The Dangerous Jew*, an anti-Semitic publication known for its incendiary comments about

Jews) wrote, "*Presque tous les chefs d'orchestre de Paris sont juifs; on ne joue que de la musique juive. MM. Honegger et Darius Milhaud, etc., pourrait avoir beau jeu, ils ont tout le jeu.*"¹⁷ In translation the author states: "Almost all the conductors of our orchestras in Paris are Jewish, here one only plays Jewish music. Messieurs Honegger and Milhaud etc. not only have a good hand, they have all the cards!" The writer assumed that Honegger was also Jewish, which he was not.

At the outbreak of World War II, Ida did not want to leave Paris. It was rather naïve of her not to see the danger she faced being born a Jew. She was determined to continue her performances of *Jeanne d'Arc*. However, she was able to broadcast on Radio Paris a live performance of *Jeanne d'Arc*, and she began touring it to several Belgian cities. But a significant partner in Ida's life and the financier of many of her productions, Walter Guinness, convinced her that she had no choice but to escape Nazi Europe. The beverage heir and British politician arranged for her flights and trips. Luckily, she fled before the *rafle* or round up of 743 Jewish intellectuals and artists in December 1941, including René Blum¹⁸ for whom she had worked in Monte Carlo, and Colette's husband, Maurice Goudekot. Finally, in May 1941, she and her secretary fled to the South of France, crossed the Mediterranean to Algeria, then to Casablanca and onto an airplane to Lisbon where they embarked for England. Guinness placed her at the Ritz hotel and paid for all her expenses during the war years.

After Guinness's assassination in Cairo by the Israeli Stern Gang in 1944 [for his supposed anti-Jewish stance preventing Jewish refugees from reaching Palestine] she became very isolated and alone in her mourning, completely leaving her sense of Judaism as she delved into the Christian mysticism and mysteries of the Catholic religion.

Although Ida originally identified as Jewish and her family's wealth was tied into good business practices inherent in the culture, eventually the religion of Judaism held no attraction for her. Nevertheless, the identification of her Jewishness obviously concerned many writers of her generation and left her legacy obscured by World War II anti-Semitism in a questionable limbo.

But today we are reminded of the singular and important figure she represents in our memories. In many ways, her body, her beautiful dancing body, became the vessel for the epitome of sexuality as it appealed to both men and women, and she used it with consummate attention to its capacity for gestural expression. Between the wars she produced and starred in twenty-nine plays or ballets in major theatres throughout Europe. It was an astonishing output.

She became along with Sarah Bernhardt, La Argentina, Isadora Duncan, Anna Pavlova and a few others, another great woman producer, hiring the most talented, even revolutionary designers, composers, writers and choreographers. She was a meticulous impresario, following every aspect of production. Letters in the



Portrait of Ida Rubinstein by Parisian Studio of G.L. Manuel Frères, photo is signed by Rubinstein, courtesy of Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Paris Opéra, the Arts du Spectacle, and formidably in the Library of Congress confirm her ferocious involvement and her generosity toward those she employed. Another aspect of her persona was her supremely ethical behavior during both wars, her need to be useful, even heroic in her nurturing care and providing of comfort and charity to wounded soldiers and pilots.

And finally, she was an educated woman, brought up with German, French, English, and Greek and reading confidently in these languages. She traveled widely to many countries, Palestine, Greece, Germany, England, France, Italy, Sardinia, Morocco, Turkey, Central Africa, Ethiopia, Eritrea, les îles Marquises or the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia, Bali, and other sites. In my view, Rubinstein has earned and deserves a revitalized memory as an artist of courage and genius who should live on into the future.

Notes

- ¹ Meryle Secrest, *Between Me and Life*, Garden City. NY: Doubleday and Company, 1974, 326.
- ² Karina Dobrotvorskaya, "The Lioness," *The St. Petersburg Theater Journal*, No. 1, 1993.
- ³ Dobrotvorskaya, "The Lioness," 3.
- ⁴ In an article "*Mes roles et mes chasses, lecture pour tous*", (My Roles

and My Hunting Adventures) *Revue*, 1913, 1-3 (Rubinstein tells the story of her youthful acting and dancing roles, and sings the praises of the Italian poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio; she then tells of her fascination for the hunt, and her description of the animals she kills).

- ⁵ Jacques Depaulis, *Ida Rubinstein, Une inconnue jadis célèbre*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995. Lynn Garafola, "Ida Rubinstein, A Theatrical Life." *Dance Research Journal*, 21:2 (Fall 1989).
- ⁶ Nathalie Stronhina, "*Les Racines russes d'Ida Rubinstein, Ida Rubinstein: une utopie de la synthèse des arts à l'épreuve de la scène.*" (The Russian Roots of Ida Rubinstein, Ida Rubinstein: A Utopia in a Synthesis of the Arts) *Textes réunis par Pascal Lécroart*. (Texts Gathered), edited by Pascal Lécroart, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2008, 166.
- ⁷ For those unfamiliar with the English word *ibex*, a synonym is wild goat, hardly a compliment. Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish, Jewish Identity in American Modern and Post-Modern American Dance*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 30-31.
- ⁸ Michael De Cossart Michael, "Ida Rubinstein and Diaghilev: A One-Sided Rivalry," *Dance Research Journal*, The Journal of the Society for Dance Research, Vol.1, No. 2 (Autumn 1983), 4.
- ⁹ Sjeng Scheijen, *Diaghilev, a Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 177.
- ¹⁰ Cassandra Langer, *Romaine Brooks: A Life*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015, 70.
- ¹¹ Vicki Woolf, *Dancing in the Vortex*, New York: Routledge, 2000, 54.
- ¹² Barbara Jepson, "This Music Befits a Sainly Legend," *New York Times*, March 30, 1997.
- ¹³ Daniel Flannell Friedman, *Ida Rubinstein, le roman d'une vie d'artiste*, Paris: Éditions Salvator, Paris, 2011, 168.
- ¹⁴ Friedman, *Ida Rubinstein*, 168.
- ¹⁵ Pascal Lécroart, Introduction to *Ida Rubinstein, une utopie de la synthèse des arts à l'épreuve de la scène*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2008, 8.
- ¹⁶ José Bruyr, *Honegger et son oeuvre*, Paris: Correa, 1947, 186.
- ¹⁷ Pierre Hébéy, *La Nouvelle Revue Française des années sombres 1940-1941*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 354
- ¹⁸ Editor's Note: see the seminal biography of René Blum by the author of this article. Judith Chazin-Bennahum, *René Blum and the Ballets Russes: In Search of a Lost Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Also note elsewhere in this issue that the French round-ups of the Jews and Blum's fate are mentioned in Laure Guilbert's article "Dancers Under Duress: The Forgotten Resistance of Fireflies".

Judith Chazin-Bennahum is the former Principal Soloist with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet, winner of the de la Torre Bueno Prize® for her book *The Ballets of Antony Tudor*, is the author of six books on dance including *Dance in the Shadow of the Guillotine* and *René Blum and the Ballets Russes: In Search of a Lost Life*. She earned her doctorate in French literature, directed the University of New Mexico's dance program and she is now Distinguished Professor Emerita. gigiben@unm.edu