Foreword

Lynn Garafola

SOVIET DANCE HISTORY is full of muted voices, artists who spent decades in creative silence while keeping inner faith with the modernist ideals of the 1920s. Among this courageous group was Leonid Yakobson. A choreographer as crotchety as he was resolute, Yakobson was an artist of contradictions, a modernist who shed his early proletarian skin but continued to make war on ballet and use unconventional movement, even as he worked with Russia's greatest ballet dancers. He made dances for the leading Soviet companies, but struggled for years to establish his own troupe, which became the first of its kind in the postwar Soviet Union. He was a Jew who created his first Jewish-themed dances in the late 1940s as Jews were being arrested as "rootless cosmopolitans" and "bourgeois nationalists," yet he refused to emigrate even when it became possible to do so. He was a man with a profound sense of irony who seemed unfazed when a

work of his disappeared at a censor's pen stroke. He had an unquenchable desire to make dances. Denied a studio, he wrote libretti; even on his deathbed he awoke from a nap and told his wife that he had just made up a new ballet. He choreographed because he had to, and he believed that ballet mattered.

This contradictory and fascinating artist is the subject of *Like a Bomb Going Off: Leonid Yakobson and Ballet as Resistance in Soviet Russia*. Janice Ross, who teaches dance history at Stanford University, has already written two important books, both with an American twist. *Moving Lessons: Margaret H'Doubler and the Beginning of Dance in American Education* (2000) is about the educator who established the first U.S. college dance department, and *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance* (2007) focuses on the experimental California choreographer who became a pioneer of the dance healing movement.

In her most recent book, Ross ventures far from these American modern dance subjects to explore the rich and complex history of twentieth-century ballet and the even more complex history of the expressive arts in the Soviet Union. A tightly focused and fascinating study of Yakobson's work, the biography presents its subject through the multiple ideologies of which he was both a product and a critic, offering a view of him as an artist, a citizen, and a man of high-minded principle. A "voice of dissent," as Ross calls him, Yakobson crossed swords with censors and cultural bureaucrats, "staging resistance from within the most public vocabulary of compliance."

Yakobson launched himself into the debates of the late 1920s as a proletarian artist, a maker in dance of the new Soviet present. As the 1920s turned into the 1930s, however, the ideological ground began to shift. Ballet after ballet was held up to a distorting mirror of ideologies. Soon, artists and intellectuals began disappearing. During these years, Yakobson staged relatively little for the professional stage. Much of his choreography was for students and hence scrutinized less for ideological correctness. He was also dispatched to the provinces to transplant ballet culture from the metropole, an example of the ethnographic populism that went hand in hand with Soviet cultural imperialism beginning in the 1930s.

Until the mid-1940s Yakobson behaved like an exemplary Soviet artist. True, he was Jewish, but this did not appear to alter the trajectory of his career; it was simply one aspect of his identity. As Jews became the target

of anti-Semitic campaigns in the late 1940s, however, Yakobson's position grew increasingly tenuous. He was denounced as a "cosmopolitan" and in 1951, only weeks after winning the Stalin Prize for his ballet *Shurale*, dismissed from the Kirov Theater. Meanwhile, attacks on "formalism" were stepped up, and the screws on artistic expression tightened. After World War II only a fraction of Yakobson's ballets reached the stage. While others might have lost heart, Yakobson persisted. He became "increasingly adept," Ross tells us, "at playing with totalitarian discourse and challenging the idea that it was a completely suffocating ideological container for artists." His heroism was that of the *résistant*.

Despite the constraints, Yakobson kept up a steady stream of work. For a new Moldavian folk ensemble in Kishinev, whose Jewish population was decimated by the Nazis, he choreographed a suite of Jewish dances that sought to preserve "a vanishing culture" through performance. He created dances inspired by Isadora Duncan's technique, which was still taught in Moscow in the late 1940s. By far his most important project of the 1950s was *Spartacus*. With music by Aram Khachaturian, who dithered for more than a decade, and a libretto by Nikolai Volkov, the ballet was a plum assignment that came to Yakobson only when Fyodor Lopukhov became director of the Kirov after Stalin's death in 1953.

A success at home, *Spartacus* flopped abroad. Opening the Bolshoi's 1962 New York season, it became entangled in Cold War discourse, with Allan Hughes at the *New York Times* and Walter Terry at the *New York Herald-Tribune* taking potshots at the ballet's "dull" pageantry and "non-dancey" choreography. Yakobson was devastated. It was the first time he had been allowed out of the Soviet Union, his first time in New York since 1920, and he had counted on American plaudits to bolster his position at home. Now his "tormentors" had been handed a trump card. In ballerina Maya Plisetskaya's dressing room at the old Met, Yakobson wept.

The "Thaw" that followed Stalin's death allowed a modicum of artistic and intellectual freedom. Books like Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) were published, and the music of once-proscribed composers was heard in concert halls and on the ballet stage. As historians dug into modernism's forbidden past, Yakobson staged *The Bedbug* (1962), based on the 1929 satirical play by Vladimir Mayakovsky, a hero of Yakobson's youth. Two years later he returned to early Soviet subject matter in *The Twelve*, inspired by Alexander Blok's 1918 poem. In Yakobson's hands,

both works acquired a critical sting, a raw emotionality, and a movement style that shattered the idea of ballet as an exemplary, academic practice. Both, moreover, were perceived as fiercely anti-Soviet, mocking the Revolution and attacking Soviet cultural arbiters and corrupt bureaucrats. *The Twelve* was pulled after its first performance, and it was only after endless sparring with censors that Yakobson was able to restage *The Bedbug* for his own company.

He received permission to organize this restaging only in 1969, by which time the Thaw had given way to the “Era of Stagnation.” But Yakobson, now in his mid-sixties, was reinvigorated. His company, which he named “Choreographic Miniatures” because of its focus on short rather than full-evening works, was the first in Russia led by a choreographer since the 1920s. Over the next six years, all that remained of his life, he choreographed nearly two dozen works, in addition to restaging earlier ones. Had circumstances been different, his reputation, Ross speculates, might have been the equal of his early contemporary George Balanchine.

In some respects Yakobson remained an essentially Soviet artist, wed to the libretto, to characters rooted in time and place, to commissioned scores and lavish scenery. In others he refused to conform. In a system that exalted “objective reality,” he insisted on following the promptings of his imagination, in creating ballets that looked at the world from a personal viewpoint. He peopled his most biting works with the flotsam and jetsam of Soviet society rather than socialist heroes, and in his Jewish cycle of works evoked the Yiddish folkways of the shtetl at a time when Soviet Jews were being aggressively persecuted. He was a throwback to the 1920s, when a Soviet artist could also be a nationalist artist, a time when modernism flourished and choreographers made some of the first plotless dances. It was also the decade when Yakobson walked into a ballet studio and found his calling. That studio and the innumerable ones that followed became his life. It was where he lived and worked, found family and friends, and created a singular body of memorable dances that spoke to the Soviet condition. In *Like a Bomb Going Off*, Ross brings to life the hidden history of this courageous artist, while revealing ballet as a medium of power that could challenge despotism and offer hope to those who dreamed of a better future.

Like a Bomb Going Off