

## PREFACE

IT HAS BEEN YEARS SINCE I began chasing the phantom of the exotic Ida Rubinstein (1883–1960), an actress, a dancer, a savvy producer of sumptuous productions, a philanthropist, and a brilliant woman. Her name appeared in the newspapers and gossip columns in Paris for nearly half a century from 1909 to 1949. Audiences flocked to see her perform. Critics and writers of the time, and those who followed, were predominantly male and often decried and dismissed her both for her sex and her religious origins. Sadly, she has faded into oblivion, barely remembered by dance or theater scholars. Was it because she was Jewish? Was it because she was a woman and a foreigner? Anti-Semitism, misogyny, and xenophobia penetrated the core beliefs of French society, as will be seen in the course of this narrative.

Rubinstein became a friend and disciple of Sarah Bernhardt, but lost her luster after World War II. Her exotic hunting expeditions, her long and beautiful body clothed in the most expensive fashions of the day, and her love life—she had both male and female lovers, one of whom, Walter Guinness, the famous Lord Moyne, helped support her opulent theater pieces: all these qualities grabbed the attention of “Tout Paris” critics and journalists. And she



Ida Rubinstein, portrait painted by Romaine Brooks, 1917.

SOURCE: AMERICAN ART SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM.

was a fascinating personality onstage. I had been intrigued by Rubinstein's complex attributes and contradictory abilities, and wanting to know more about her, I began by exploring the archives for articles about her, reviews of her pieces, and commentaries on her contributions to the theater and to society in general.

In recent history, Rubinstein as a startling performer has not been entirely forgotten. A Russian pair, sister-and-brother ballet dancers Ilse and Andris Liepa, decided to tour their version of the Ballets Russes's *Cléopâtre* to Paris. At the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in late June 2009, Les Ballets des Saisons Russes gave the premiere of "Cléopâtre—Rubinstein." "The idea of bringing Rubinstein back to life on a Paris stage first occurred to Andris Liepa, the guiding spirit of this latter-day Ballets Russes, when he saw his sister, Ilse, dressed for the filming of his restoration of Fokine's *Schéhérazade*."<sup>1</sup>

In addition, I wanted to put in a personal word and speak about my own experience with one of Rubinstein's productions, although somewhat distant. When I was a dancer in the Metropolitan Opera Ballet Company, we spent summers at the Santa Fe Opera, and in 1961 I danced in Rubinstein's beguiling creation, Stravinsky's *Perséphone*. We had gorgeous scene and costume designs (designed by Vera Stravinsky), choruses and Gide's poetry that dazzled the ears, and the marvelous score conducted by Stravinsky. The lovely choreography by Thomas Andrew probably had little to do with Kurt Jooss's original version. Rubinstein's role as Perséphone was superbly performed by Vera Zorina. More recently, a London production of Ida Rubinstein's life, *Final Act*, will be launched, possibly in 2021. Starring an American Ballet Theatre ballerina, Naomi Sorkin, the solo play will evoke Rubinstein's celebratory performances and important life passages.

Some years ago, while writing a biography of René Blum, the director of the Ballets Russes, I came across Rubinstein's name and company performing in his theater in Monte Carlo, and when my good friend, the American dance historian Lynn Garafola, offered me important correspondence that she had collected from Rubinstein's Russian youth, as well as some from her early years in Paris, I was delighted and dove right into reading and figuring out what kind of a young woman she was destined to become.

For a number of years, Lynn Garafola presented papers and published articles on the enigmatic and barely known diva. She laid the groundwork in scholarly circles in the US for subsequent writings on Rubinstein. Her lively discussions about Rubinstein's productions, especially her 1994 article on *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (*Circles of Meaning: The Cultural Contexts of Ida*

Rubinstein's *Le Martyre de San Sébastien*) and other Paris performances, reveal and vivify in detail how a particular work appeared and appealed to audiences.

Another inspiring writer and early proponent of Rubinstein, Charles Mayer, wrote an essay titled *Ida Rubinstein: A Twentieth-Century Cleopatra* (1989), as well as encyclopedia articles that include extensive bibliographies. Also, I spent quite a bit of time in the Paris libraries, at the Opéra, at the Richelieu in the Arts du Spectacle, and in the Jacques Doucet and Music divisions. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts contains documents of interest, and especially the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, where John Wayne, a curator, devoted an important inventory to her life and career, having acquired many materials from her secretary, Mme Ollivier. (Elizabeth Aldrich, dance historian and curator at Library of Congress kindly led me to the LOC collection.) It was surprising that having assembled all this information about her that Wayne had not published her biography, although he had plans to do so, prior to death.

It is also a wonder that there is a dearth of reliable information on Rubinstein's life, especially in English. Vicki Woolf, the author of *Dancing in the Vortex: The Story of Ida Rubinstein* (2000), brings forth vivid details of Rubinstein's childhood and the milieu in which she grew up. Unfortunately, this work contains no footnotes or bibliography, so one wonders from where Woolf's information came. Michael de Cossart explored Rubinstein's profession and rivalry with Diaghilev in an article and in his book *Ida Rubinstein (1885-1960): A Theatrical Life* (1987). More information has come to light since these early studies. Nathalie Stronhina wrote a very revealing chapter, "Les racines russes d'Ida Rubinstein" in Lécroart's 2008 French publication *Une utopie de la synthèse des arts à l'épreuve de la scène*, but her essay and this anthology have not been translated into English.

Probably the most detailed and well-researched book about Rubinstein is also in French and is written by the French scholar, Jacques DePaulis. *Ida Rubinstein, Une Inconnue Jadis célèbre* (1995), covers many aspects of Rubinstein's life and performances and is a valuable bibliographic account of events occurring with and around Rubinstein. What I found missing in DePaulis's work and discovered in Garafola's articles and letters was a new tactic to understanding Rubinstein, an approach that addresses her as a whole woman. My methodology utilizes a psychological analysis coupled with a corporeal reading of her performances. Rubinstein was incredibly well educated, yet this fact has not been made clear. She was able to hold her own with the most revered artists of her time and to entice them to work for her

and her companies. She was both charismatic in conversation and sensually captivating onstage.

In these pages I have not written a comprehensive analysis of all the productions that Rubinstein produced or performed in. Rather, I have highlighted some of her performances, as well as her letters and writings that featured her aspirations to grandeur and her aesthetic beliefs. Since I was a dancer and approach performance from the point of view of embodiment, I comment on her physical presence and bodily movement in developing her characters onstage. Finally, I try to uncover the devastating effect of her having been born a Jew and how this affected her critics and audiences. Her disappearance could be linked to the fact that her Judaism drove some of the critics to maddeningly stupid and racist reviews.

Therefore, this manuscript seeks to redress the lack of contemporary published works on Rubinstein's significance in the worlds of dance, theater, art, and religion and to restore her legacy to the annals of history. Her life spanned a crucial time period in the first half of the twentieth century, when anti-Semitism led to the Holocaust of the Jewish people throughout Europe. Rubinstein had a complicated relationship with her religion and culture, eventually deciding, near the end of her life, to convert to Catholicism. The media, colleagues, and the public always seemed to pigeonhole her and find fault where it was not merited. For dancers and actors, Rubinstein's choices illuminated the ways women in performance negotiated their roles and their aesthetic philosophies. Here I seek to reveal how Rubinstein served as the *zeitgeist* of her era, changing the way the whole body was used and the mind engaged to fulfill her vision of an aesthetic totality of theater.