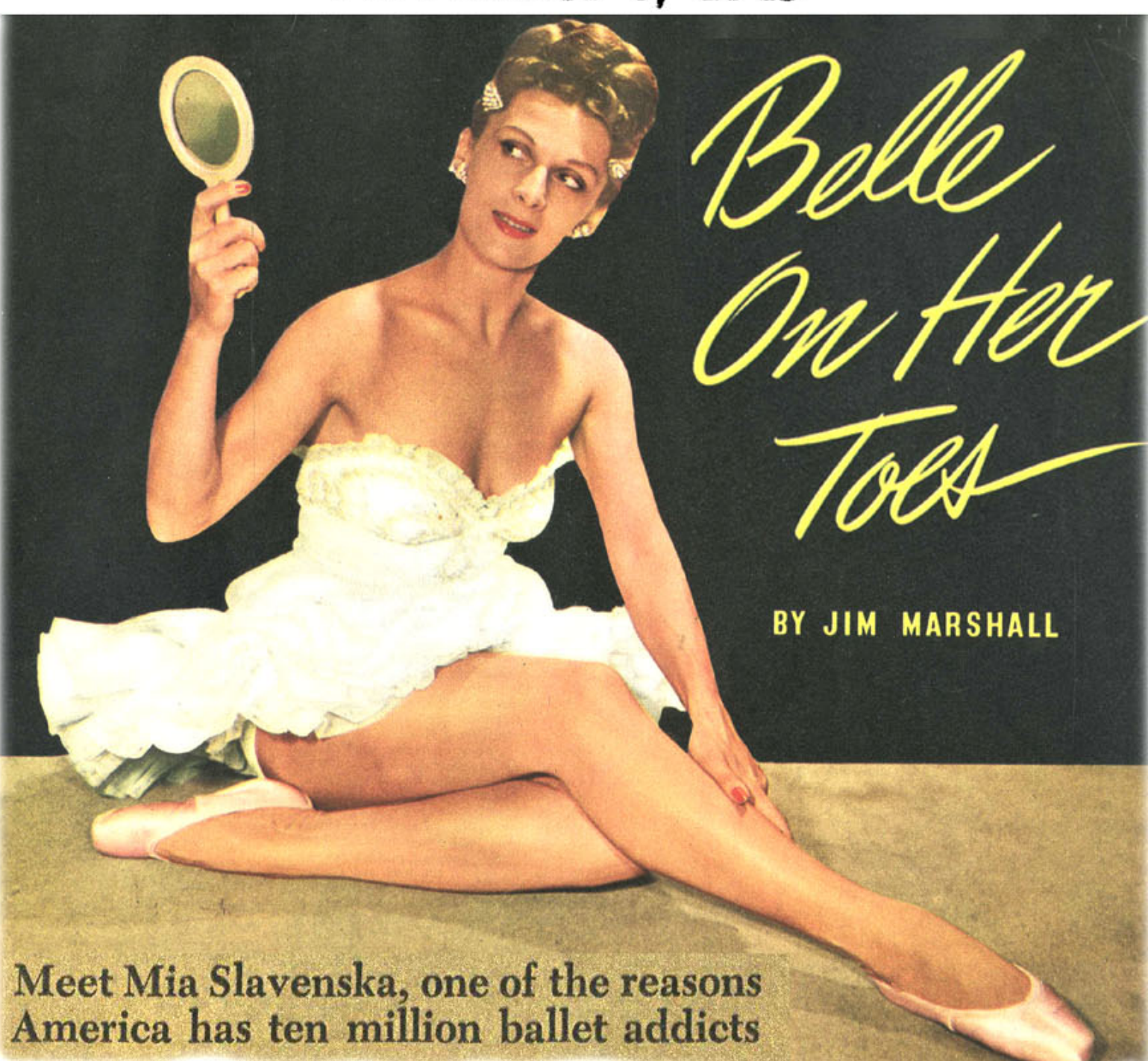


Collier's

November 3, 1945



Meet Mia Slavenska, one of the reasons America has ten million ballet addicts

AMERICA'S first ballet dancer was a man named Daniel Boone. In 1754, Mr. Boone leaped nine feet in the air, cracked his heels twenty-seven times and strangled two wildcats before alighting in the Yadkin Valley, North Carolina. In modern ballet parlance this was an *entrechat*, but in Mr. Boone's day it was just high spirits and a dislike for varmints.

No one in North Carolina or in Kentucky—where he later continued his cavortings, finally working up to four wildcats and a painter—accused Mr. Boone of balleting. It was not, somehow, the thing to do. Mr. Boone would have taken umbrage at the thought, and at a period when umbrage was not as plentiful as it is today.

Today's ballet dancers are divided into traditional and modern groups, and the traditional ones take umbrage at the moderns. Mr. Boone probably would have been classed, even in the mid-eighteenth century, as a modern, being an informal performer governed more by whimsy than by tradition.

Today, if you ask any star of the traditional ballet how many really good ballet dancers there are in America he (or she) will say: "Four. The other three are . . ." They seldom agree, though, on the names of the other three. But the name that appears on most lists, including her own, is Mia Slavenska, a slim, redheaded Yugoslav girl who came here in 1938 as a star of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Stars of the ballet are known as prima ballerinas. Slavenska is a sort of prima prima ballerina of traditional, as distinct from modern, ballet.

There are three main rules for becoming a ballerina of note: Your folks must be nuts about ballet; you mustn't start to learn before you're about eight or nine; and you mustn't be a child prodigy. Slavenska broke all three of them. Her folks didn't care two cents worth about ballet; she started when she was three; and she was a child prodigy for a decade. She probably would not have started dancing except for the fact her parents moved from Slavonskibrod, a small village in northern Yugoslavia, to Zagreb, when she was two. Zagreb is an old university town and used to be the capital of Croatia.

"My father was a pharmacist in Zagreb," says Mia. "He was interested in the theater,

OldMagazineArticles.com

Belle on Her Toes



but not in dancing. I was a scrawny brat, and Mother talked Father into letting me go to a school of the ballet instead of taking regular exercises in a gymnasium. I seemed to have a natural talent for ballet and I must have been a cute kid because Ivo Rajich, who was the John Barrymore of Yugoslavia at the time, used to carry me in his arms all over the place. He was the best Shakespearean actor in southern Europe. I didn't know this at the time, but when I grew up I became very proud of his friendship."

Slavenska went quickly to the top of the troupe in Zagreb and at nine had two ballets composed for her. Then she went to Paris to study and came back to the old home town at 16 to become *ballerina assoluta*. She was queen of the National Opera. Success followed success until she won the dance Olympiad at the Berlin Olympic Games, beating the stars of thirteen other nations. After that, she traipsed all over the world and at last joined the Monte Carlo Company as prima ballerina. She came to America in '38 and never wants to go anywhere else.

An Advocate of Tradition

Mia, a firm believer in tradition, hoots at much of the so-called modern ballet and fiercely denounces "those quacks" who charge high fees for teaching what they think is ballet.

"They learned about ballet out of a book," she says. "You cannot learn that way. You must learn from a master who learned from a master who learned from a master. . . ."

This narrows the teaching field considerably, because most of the present masters are busy all the time teaching various ballet companies.

Ballet got a start in Italy in the 14th century, the general idea probably having been brought by travelers from the Orient where formal dancing, usually religious, had been

Belle on Her Toes

going on for centuries. At first the ballets were performed at the courts of Italian princes; they were part of the pomp and circumstance by which a dime-a-dozen prince could impress the yokels. Since the more formal they were, the more important they seemed, the formality got to be pretty stiff.

The word ballet comes from the Italian *balletto*, a diminutive of *ballo*, meaning dance. In Italy the dances had no particular meaning, but when they got to France and acquired plots they were known as *ballets d'action*. Often, they were danced as interludes in opera performances and then they were called *ballets divertissements*, to divert the audience from the strain of looking at 300-pound tenors and sopranos.

During the reigns of Louis XIII and XIV in France, the ballet became the center of court spectacles. By the end of the 17th century there were more than fifty ballets, most of them with sketchy plots. Since these plots needed male characters and since ballet dancers were traditionally women, this is where what is called travesty started. Travesty comes from travesting—the wearing of men's clothing by women, or vice versa. On the early English stage, women's parts were taken by men; in the ballet the reverse was true.

But ballets still were pretty stiff and formal, and it wasn't until along about 1760 that they became pantomimes telling a story. It was more than fifty years later that a Madame Carmargo, a prima ballerina of the day, introduced the fluffy tulle skirts that have become a sort of trade-mark of ballet. Curiously enough, it was an American dancer, Isadora Duncan, who tossed out the fluffy-skirt tradition and went back to Greek draperies. Fokine, the Russian star, was enchanted and introduced the fashion to the Russian Court Ballet.

The Russians under the Czars took the ballet very seriously, maintaining an imperial school to train dancers. When the Soviets took over, the ballet was one of the few things they didn't liquidate, and it still flourishes under state patronage, although it has become quite social minded and sometimes turns up as propaganda for the proletariat.

In the years gone by, ballet was pronounced "bally" by the cruder elements in America, rowdy members of which Bronx-cheered the sophisticates who called it bal-LAY. However, it is now safe almost anywhere except in a few backward mining regions of the Rockies to say bal-lay.

In Europe, ballet has been an all-classes favorite for centuries, but in America it had a hard fight, the sterner portion of the population regarding it as not quite in the Daniel Boone-Kit Carson tradition. Its themes—dying swans, the frailties of womanhood and such subjects—never seemed quite manly west of Teaneck, New Jersey. Thousands of people who now go to look at it have only a hazy notion what it is all about, but the number of patrons who understand the general idea is growing.

There have been several attempts to interpret American things in terms of the ballet. Agnes de Mille did Rodeo, a success; Jerome Robbins produced Fancy Free, which also made good. There was also one called Billy the Kid, which was supposed to portray the adventures of the Brooklyn gunman in the Lincoln County cattle wars. These were all American products and did right well.

Belle on Her Toes

When Massine Was Off the Beam

But when Massine, the great Russian dancer and producer, turned his hand to the American scene, the result wasn't so happy. The piece was called Union Pacific. It turned out to be a bit difficult for Comrade Massine to have his dancers convey a Russian impression of a redball freight blasting out of the Omaha yards for North Platte, Ogallala and Ogden. It was as if an American producer had gone to Russia and tried to portray the soul of the Trans-Siberian Railway with the help of Betty Hutton and twelve jitterbugs.

Two things usually bother new American ballet fans: How the dancers manage to stand on tiptoe and why they turn out their feet so far.

"That traditional tiptoe pose probably started from an attempt to make the dancer seem to be reaching for something—a star, maybe," says Mia. "Some people, seeing ballet for the first time, think the dancers bend their toes under, but, of course, they don't. If they did, they'd break their toes first time they came down from a leap. It's just tiptoe, carried to an extreme. Good dancers who have developed the right muscles can stay up there a long time without discomfort."

The American Indians got better balance by toeing in on the trail, but ballet dancers achieve the same thing by toeing out. This stance is supposed to give a more graceful balance to the body in movement and probably does. Students start to learn it very early, the hardest part being to make the hips swivel instead of the knees.

"If it is not done right," says Mia, "it makes you look bow-legged."

Ballet dancers who stick to the old traditional school do not care much for some of the innovations slapped together by American enterprisers. They say that these brash New Worlders invent ballets and steps and movements without any knowledge of basic ballet, and that the result, to the initiates, is painful.

"They do not know a thing about the fundamentals," says Mia indignantly. "It is like trying to build a house without a foundation."

In the old days, ballet and opera used to go along together, and ballerinas and sopranos grew fat together. Nowadays there still are fat sopranos, but the dancers all keep trimmed down.

"It's hard work," says Mia, "and there's no sense in carrying around three hundred pounds if you can get along on less than half that. Besides, you feel better and last longer."

A Diet of Suntan and Orange Juice

Slavenska herself gets up about eight, has some coffee, orange juice and toast, and seldom eats anything more until after the evening show unless she has a luncheon engagement.

When the company is out West she takes sun baths and is proud of the fact that she's the first suntanned ballet star. More often than not she goes through her evening show on the toast-coffee-juice of the morning. After the show, in the East, she likes to eat a steak. In Hollywood, where everyone hits the hay at 9 o'clock, she goes around to a drive-in and gets outside a two- or three-deck hamburger, with beer.

People who want their children to become ballet dancers should wait until the kids are eight or nine years old before starting them

Belle on Her Toes

out, Mia says.

The usual result of starting too early is that the dancer tends to become fat in a few years. It's something to do with the glands, Slavenska thinks. And very young children find it hard to learn proper muscular control. If they don't, they become muscle-bound in a few years and wind up with knobby arms and legs, and movements that jerk instead of flow.

With the right training, a ballet dancer's body stays young. Mia, who is in her very early thirties, can leap more than twelve feet, taking off on the right toe and landing on the left toe, or vice versa. She does this when she gets a stage large enough to allow a running start; it's a sort of broad jump, but with grace. The American record for the running broad jump—not made in ballet slippers, is twenty-six feet, eight and a quarter inches.

Since the movements in ballet are exact, every good dancer has to keep working with a master. Otherwise, small errors creep in unnoticed and gradually become exaggerated. Mia works with Anton Dolin, a merciless sort of tyrant where ballet is concerned, but a pleasant enough personality at other times.

Beginners usually work on the bar, which helps them get their legs into the right positions. Every dancer warms up on the bar for twenty minutes or so before going on stage. Trying to dance "cold" results in stiffness and awkwardness.

There are more than ten million *balletomanes*—as the fans call themselves—in the republic today. They talk learnedly about point, *pas de bourrée*, *entrechat* and other esoteric aspects of ballet. But what would Ol' Dan'l Boone say about it all—Ol' Dan'l who could leap nine feet in the air, kick his heels together twenty-seven times and strangle two wildcats before lighting back in North Carolina?

THE END



Collier's for November 3, 1945