

## THE ARMENIANS IN WORLD CHOREOGRAPHY

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The book presents information about more than 740 Armenian dance professionals-performers, choreographers, and teachers, as well as composers who have worked in about 40 countries, from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century till today.

The first chapters present the pre-history of Armenian stage dance and ballet, dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Armenians first encountered ballet art and performed choreographies.

The first Armenian-born person who worked in ballet was **Domenico Serpos** in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Serpos, the heir of the Armenian Seghbosyan family of Venice, staged several ballet performances in Italian theaters.

The first outstanding representative of the Armenian stage dance was **Armen Ohanian** (Sofia Pirbudaghian), who reached fame in 1910-1930 in Europe and America. Herdance was a kind of stylized fusion of modern and Oriental styles. In 1921, *Trdat the Great and Virgin Hripsime*, an extract from the first Armenian ballet was performed in Constantinople, as conducted by **Gerasim** and **Eugenie Aristakians**, the latter also known as a ballerina.

In former Soviet Russian ballet art, mainly in Moscow and Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg), a number of professionals of Armenian origin left their trace: dancers **Yevgeni Kacharov** (Kocharyan), **Nina Mirimanova** (Mirimanyan), father and daughter **Mikheyil** and **Xenia Ter-Stepanovs** (Ter-Stepanyans), brother and sister **Georgi** and **Yevgenia Farmanyants**, **Agnessa Balieva** (Balyan), **Yuliana Malkhasyants**, ballet masters **Gennadi Malkhasyants** and **Nikolay Margaryants**, etc. Armenian origin is ascribed also to the internationally acclaimed Russian ballerina and classical dance theorist, Agrippina Vaganova.

The Armenians have been the founders of stage dance and ballet art; namely, in several former Soviet Union Republics, as **Sergei Kevorkov** (Gevorgyan) in the Azerbaijan SSR and **Alexander Alexandrov** (Martirosyants) in the Kazakh SSR. The



**Armen Ohanian**  
(Sofia Pirbudaghian)

great reformer of Uzbek female dance, dancer and singer **Tamara Khanum** (Petrosyan) was the first woman in the Uzbek SSR to perform publicly and without a veil. Her sister, **Gavhar Rahimova**, was one of the first professional dancers in Uzbekistan; the other sister - **Liza Khanum**, created dances for the Karakalpak nation.

Other Armenian-born ballet professionals in other former Soviet republics were **Helēna Tangijeva-Birzniece** (Tangiyan, Latvia), **Svetlana Balojan** (Estonia), **Sergey Sergeev** (Vardanbabyan) and **Valery Parseghov** (Parseghyan, Ukraine), **Viktor Sarkisyan** (Belarus), **Suren Gorski** (Ter-Ghevondyan, Georgia), **Lev Avakov-Leonov** (Avakyan) and **Rafael Grigoryan** (Azerbaijan, the latter moved to the USA later, and established a dance studio under his name), **Edisa Sarvazyan** (Turkmenistan), **Genrikh Golovyants** (Tajikistan), **Ashot Gevorgyan** (Uzbekistan), etc.



Leon Neshanian

Several Armenian ladies, who emigrated from Russia to the West, founded ballet schools, and taught in Russian ballet traditions. Among some memorable names are Madame **Rouzanne** (Sargisyan, the teacher of renowned choreographer Maurice Béjart) and her niece **Nora Kiss** (Adamyants) in France, **Seda Suny** (Mirzoyan) and **Olga Tarasova** (Torosyan) in the U.S.A. The last three were extraordinary teachers who always brought out the unique quality of each individual and many of their students became prominent dancers or soloists.

Since the 1920s hundreds of Armenians from Armenia and the Diaspora have appeared in the international choreography scene: ballet, folk

and pop dance. As the USA holds the largest Armenian community outside of Armenia, there has been a plethora of Armenian-born artists in various fields of American dance history. Among the most eminent names in the field of Spanish and flamenco dances in 1930-1940 are **Adrina Otero** (Panossian), renowned American ballet dancers **Leon Danielian** and **Tamara Toumanova** (Armenian on her mother's side), choreographers **Bob Avian** (Hamparian), **Samuel Kurkjian**, **Christopher Pilafian**, **Ruben Ter-Arutunian**, a designer of hundreds of ballet performances, who collaborated with the 20<sup>th</sup> century noble choreographer George Balanchine. Nowadays many Armenian-born dancers work in dance companies of many American states (**Aida Amirkhanian**, **Marc Harootian**, **Maral Yessayan**, etc).

During 1930-1960 dancers **Aimee Abrahamova** (Shahparonyan), **Grant Muradoff** (Muradyan), **Sirene Adjemova** (Adjemyan), **Alice Kavookjian**, **Monique Marmatcheva** (Bek-Marmarchyan) became famous in various fields of choreographic art in France. **Michel Hallet-Eghayan's** contemporary dance company deserves a special credit.



Rudolf Kharatian

The decline of ballet in Armenia over the last twenty-five years has forced many local dancers to work in ballet companies in Europe, the Americas and Asian countries. Famous ballet dancer and choreographer of Armenian ballet, **Rudolf Kharatian** worked for several years in the USA, where he created the *Arka Ballet* company and staged many outstanding performances. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century

dozens of alumni of *The Yerevan State Choreography College* attained high positions in the Western ballet scene. The number of professional male dancers is impressive.

Among them are **Arsen Serobian**, **Sayat Asatryan**, **Akop Akopian**, **Hagop Kharatian**, **Davit Karapetyan**, **Edgar Vardanyan**, **Edgar Nikolyan** (the USA), **Davit Galstyan**, **Petros Chrkhoian** (France), **Christian Ratevossian**, **Davit Vardanyan**, **Arshak Ghalumian**, **Arsen** and **Karen Azatyans** (Germany), **Serguei Endinian** (Netherlands), **Avetik Karapetyan** (Sweden), **Vahram Hambardzumian** (Argentina), **Azat Gharibyan** (Japan), **Vanush Babayan** (China). For instance, in the early 2000s there was not a single German ballet group without an artist from Armenia. **Tigran Mikayelyan**, **Arsen Mehrabian**, **Arman Grigoryan**, **Vahe Martirosyan** and **Artur Babajanyan**, outstanding dancers, working in Sweden, Germany and Switzerland, are members of *The Forceful Feelings Ballet Group* exhibiting the potential of Armenian dancers through contemporary dance...

Unlike the high caliber of Armenian male ballet dancers, the number of ballerinas is relatively small; specifically, **Gaiane Akopian** (the USA), **Sona Kharatian**, **Victoria Ananian** (Netherlands), **Tatiana** and **Mayda Kazarians** and **Lilit Hakobyan** (Germany).

Among other international ballet dancers of Armenian descent, it is worthy to mention the names of



Davit Galstyan

**Gagik Ismailian** (Portugal), **Albert Mirzoyan** (Austria), **Mikheyil Avakov** (France), **Ashen Ataljanc** (Yugoslavia), **Garri Sevoyan** (Ukraine), **Sona Vartanian**, **Max Ratevossian** (Canada), **Pablo Aharonian** (Chile), etc. Some dance teachers include **Alexander Agadjanov** (the United Kingdom), **Janna Muradyan** (in Ukraine, then in Japan), and ballet masters - **Rafajel Avnikjan** (Switzerland).

Interestingly, some Armenian-born dancers displayed outstanding skills in Spanish and flamenco dances: **Lutyž de Luz** (Chadinian, France), **Suren Yessayan** (Spain), **Lana Der Bedrossian** (Canada), and **Lori Baghdassarian** (Spain-France).

In 1920-1930 Armenian choreography teachers **Sarkis Djanbazian** and **Elena Avetisian** became the pioneers of ballet education in Iran. In 1923 **Lydia Arzumanian** had become the pioneer of ballet education in Constantinople; among her best pupils was **Evgenia Nanasova** (Nanasyan) who for a long time appeared on ballet stage there. Later **Ani Daba** (Odabashian) was one of the founders of a professional ballet school in Lebanon, while **Sonia Poladian** was one the first ballet professional ballerinas in Lebanon and **Sonia Sarkis** (Chamkertenian) - in Egypt. **Leon Neshanian** was a principal dancer with the Iranian National Ballet Company and the Iranian Folkloric Dance Mahalli ensemble in 1950-1960s. **Mihran Tomassian** leads "Bare feet" - one of Turkey's first contemporary dance ensembles, as well as **Levon Taberyan**, who makes modern ballet performances on Armenian subjects. In the Armenian Diaspora, dance groups usually maintain national and traditional folk dances, staged and stylized; yet, there are some groups, performing modern dance shows and contemporary dance - *The Djanbazian Dance Academy* in Los Angeles under the leadership of **Anna Djanbazian**, and *The Araçnort* (Leader) dance company under the leadership of **Natalin Boz Yilmaz**.



**Serguei Endinian**



**Akob and Gaiane Hakopian**

over the world. In 1900, an Armenian dancer **Ziba** (Victoria Khachikian), participated in the *World's Fair (Exposition Universelle)* in Paris.

There are also many Armenians in the folk and pop dance scenes: **Mihran Kirakosian** and salsa dancer **Jerry Bakhchian** (USA), **Aram Arzumanyan** and Katarina Darbinyan (France), **Karina Bagmadjian** (Russia), **Varda** (Vardanush Martirosyan (Ukraine), etc.

The last chapter of the book presents Armenian representatives of Middle Eastern dance, more popularly known as Oriental or belly dance, from all





**Sarkis Djanbazian**

Many Armenian Diaspora dancers were also involved in Oriental dances as renowned performers and teachers: **Hermin** (Sanossian) and **Safinaz** (Tsovinar Grigoryan) (Egypt), **Aïché Nana** (Italy), **Karine Paronyanc** (Latvia), **Shahrazad** (Madeleine Iskandarian) (Brazil), **Anahid Sofian**, **Aziza Al Tawil** (Mahdessian), **Shamira** (Shahinian), **Anna Pipoyan**, **Torkom Movsesiyan** (the USA) and many others.

Contribution of Armenia to the world dance scene continues...