

# Crimes and Punishments: The Case of Valery Panov

Margaret Kry and Lillian Africano

On Tuesday, March 12, 1974, a special kind of birthday party was held at Plaza Square, opposite the Plaza Hotel in New York City. The celebrants—Hal Prince, Carol Channing, Julie Harris, Hermione Gingold, Paddy Chayefsky, Geraldine Fitzgerald, to name a few—resembled a delegation from a “Who’s Who” of the arts. The guest of honor, conspicuously absent, was Valery Panov. Probably one of the world’s greatest dancers, he is known best in this country for his David-and-Goliath struggle with the Soviet authorities, a struggle which has cost him most of what he values in life.

Two years ago Panov was the undisputed principal dancer of the famed Kirov Ballet, a Merited Artist of the Russian Republic. Old women brought him flowers and left affectionate notes. Prominent artists visited him and his ballerina wife Galina in their apartment on Leningrad’s Moskovsky Avenue to sip tea and talk. Within the Russian system he was a star, a bright shining one.

Now he is without position and without means of support, ostracized by his fellow dancers and teachers, condemned as a criminal guilty of treason. His once loved teacher Semcon Kaplan has been quoted as saying, “We made him, we must destroy him.”

Ostensibly it was a request for permission to emigrate to Israel that abruptly halted Valery’s career, with dismissal from the Kirov and banishment from all its facilities. But the “crime” of his Jewishness was probably secondary to the more serious offense of artistic and intellectual nonconformity. He had long exercised a freedom of speech that was dangerous. His statement, “I want a ballet where there is

thinking,” expressed his long-standing dissatisfaction with a ballet based only on perfection of form.

Russian officialdom had apparently adopted an ambivalent policy toward Panov some years ago, allowing his career to flourish within certain limits. He was invited to join the Kirov when Nureyev defected to the West. This symbolic situation was not lost on the authorities; when the Kirov left Russia to tour, it was without its *premier danseur*.

Only once, in 1960, did Panov appear in the West. As a member of a mixed concert group he danced one performance in Madison Square Garden. A telegram announcing the death of his parents in an auto accident summoned him home. The news turned out to be false, and he was never allowed to leave again. One of his former colleagues said recently, “It’s a good thing that in thirteen years he never got permission to go abroad. A trip abroad is a gift from the Party and government, and has to be earned.”

Although his talents were guarded from outsiders, traveling journalists did notice. Among knowledgeable visitors he acquired a small but influential following. In 1967 Clive Barnes wrote: “. . . his brilliance lit up the stage. Technically there are few in the world to match him . . . as a pure dancer he has genius. . . . His dance technique is fantastic, but it is his sense of dramatic conviction that truly impresses. Here is no acrobat—here is a man.”

Ultimately it was the imprisonment of his ideas that most stimulated the dancer’s discontentment. He wrote twenty original scenarios, but not one was found ideologically suitable for production. Such a restriction on his creative development was especially painful for a man who dreamed of filming his concept of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Panov once explained his interest in extending his art: “. . . films can show both the body and face closely. As an actor, I need this. Great suffering cannot be shown from afar.”

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The constant limitations on his work and a sense of his own dimension led him and Galina to apply for exit visas. Late last year, in a London *Sunday Times* interview, he said:

At the Kirov, I have given the maximum I am able to give. I have danced all their heroic, lyric roles and there is nothing more I can do. I tried to work as a choreographer and met with a completely unexpected barrier, ideology.

What I have said of Soviet ballet is not meant to diminish this country in any way, but it simply seems any individuality or original creativity just doesn't exist. It's out of step with the country's stage of development.

A person with an original vision is not wanted or needed here, and I am deeply convinced that my point of view is simply ahead of its time. Now I want to explore the tragedy of talented man in a one-dimensional society in a way that is impossible here. Man's spirit versus the shapeless reality of the state. I will dance and choreograph my own intrinsic theme, which I will liberate in the strongest terms of Western modern ballet.

Brave words, born of frustration and disappointment. But official wheels had begun to turn, and Panov's life came more and more to resemble a scenario he might have written, where "dance and suffering need not be separated." Three days after the couple requested permission to leave, Valery unknowingly made his last appearance, as the devil in "The Creation of the World." "Everyone in the concert hall seemed to know I was dancing for the last time," he later recalled, "everyone except me. . . . After the second act, when flowers are presented to the soloists, the administrators forbade them to be given to me and refused to allow me on stage. That is how my suffering started."

He was fired from the Kirov after an open session of the company marked by denunciations and accusations. Galina, a featured soloist and gold medal winner in international competition, was demoted to the *corps de ballet*. Subsequently she resigned in protest. Many attempts to isolate and demoralize Panov followed. He was subjected to a campaign of physical and psychological harassment such as the Soviet Government reserves for the strong and well connected.

Galina, who is not Jewish, was urged to save her career and freedom by abandoning her husband to a three-year prison term. For the record, the couple was denied permission to emigrate on the grounds that Galina's mother did not give her consent. Panov said later that he had come to terms with Galina's mother about their plans, that in fact she had commended her daughter on her courage.

"Strange people" visited Galina's mother, who is said to be close to the KGB. After this she completely



changed her mind and signed a statement saying her son-in-law had beaten her.

When Panov's parents received a similar visit, he wrote to Brezhnev: "My parents were terribly frightened after they were visited by certain individuals, and they drew up a document renouncing me as their son. I beg you to enable me and my wife to legally obtain documents for emigration to Israel."

The only answer was a series of interrogations and other persecutions which let up on the occasion of President Nixon's visit to Russia. After that he was arrested on charges of "hooliganism," for allegedly spitting on a soldier's sleeve and starting a fight. His head was shaved and he was imprisoned for ten days, three of them without food, in a place where criminal and invalids were kept. Some had no arms or legs, a chilling reminder of his deprivation.

Since his release, the dancer has lived a seesaw existence. Tentative hopes and dogged persistence alternate with crushing disappointments as the government checkmates each move made in his behalf. Last November 11, in the middle of a twenty-day hunger strike, Panov's papers were officially accepted for the first time, but the authorities made yet another cat-and-mouse offer. He could leave without Galina. More despair for the



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couple, who at one point contemplated suicide, it is reported.

Undoubtedly the waves of international publicity have kept them from being arrested on charges of "parasitism" (unemployment) and shipped off to some remote prison or labor camp. Ad hoc committees to free the Panovs have sprung up in London, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities, organizing rallies, petitions, full-page newspaper ads and television shows.

Many distinguished personalities have tried to help. Robert Massie, author of *Nicholas and Alexandra*, describes the lack of interest on the part of government and big business:

When I visited Panov last year, he asked me, "Whom shall I write to, who will help?" I told him to write to President Nixon. But it turns out the President and his advisors feel the fate of one dancer is not important in a time of détente.

I wrote to David Rockefeller, who recently opened a branch of Chase Manhattan in Russia. His reply says, "I share your concern, but. . . ." Clearly, Valery Panov doesn't have a friend at Chase Manhattan.

Although a variety of pressures on this side of the ocean have resulted in the cancellation of the Kirov's 1974 U.S. tour, Clive and Patricia Barnes, who head the New York committee, expressed the hope that the fragile cultural rapport between the two countries will not be lost in the wake of the Panov affair. The Barneses have consistently favored

a positive, constructive approach to the problem. With weekly phone calls, they attempt to alleviate the Russian couple's despair and to keep close contact with the reality of their situation. Employing the help of many New York-based artists, they try to sustain the public's attention and to keep up a steady stream of protest to both the U.S. and Russian governments.

In February of this year, Moscow announced the permanent revocation of Panov's visa. Beset with gastrointestinal ailments and other symptoms reflecting the tension of his life, the dancer senses each day the diminution of his physical skills, eroded by disuse. Watched day and night by six KGB men, their mail censored, their phone cut off, he and his wife exist from day to day on the handouts from a few loyal friends. With a makeshift *barre* and a small mirror as his only practice facility, Panov can only *pliée* and do simple exercises. The large dramatic movements for which he is renowned are impossible in the small apartment with its low ceiling. Each month he cannot dance increases the possibility that he will never regain use of the full range of his body.

One small piece of black-and-white movie film shows the Kirov in rehearsal and in performance. The strongest, most vibrant impression is that of Panov, leaping and twisting in the air. Even a limited sample of his genius emphasizes the universality of his loss. Unable to dance, he paints and sketches, haunting bits and pieces of a life that has become unbearably fragmented. A self-portrait, bodiless; Panov as Harlequin; Panov as his beloved Petrouchka.

Petrouchka, which his deeply spiritual interpretation has raised to new emotional levels, has become his symbol. Almost prophetically a Soviet critic commented in 1962 on this phenomenon in the making:

The gifted Valery Panov gave a tragic interpretation of the title role. His Petrouchka, though grotesque in form, is almost heroic. His movements seem to be magnified, and his dance is swift and impetuous. Panov stresses the wrath and protest of the insulted Petrouchka; he seems to be breaking the invisible threads that are pulled by his master, the Magician. It is not the wooden angularity and nervous jerkings of a puppet that Panov displays in his Petrouchka so much as the excruciating pain and fury of a human being. I believe that his is a new interpretation, at least in Russia, for he lays stress not on tragic predestination but on a burning protest against the predestination.