

YOU, FASCINATING YOU

Based on the true story of Hungarian ballerina Margit Wolf
and Italian composer Pasquale Frustaci,
aka “the Italian Cole Porter”

GERMAINE SHAMES

**Pale Fire
Press**



They say ballet chooses the dancer. I, Margit Wolf, am twice chosen.

My father Mano Wolf worked as master tailor to the Hungarian State Opera. We lived a few doors away at 28 Andrásy út, an elegant address despite its dearth of plumbing. At every window flocked hosts of pigeons blown inland by a moody Danube, and in the parlor, between the spinet piano and my mother's heirloom curio cabinet, stood the sewing machine that dressed half the Romeos east of the Alps. All the greatest actors, the greatest dancers of the day would come to our flat to be suited out as princes, satyrs, sylphs... The sewing machine occupied the center of the living room. Clients would disrobe behind an oriental screen and step out transformed, standing tall with self-importance while my father crawled at their feet on all fours, his mouth barbed by straight pins.

"Make like you're on the stage."

The players would strut a soliloquy, the baritones belt out an aria, the ballet dancers camber and curtsey testing the reinforced seams, inspecting the flawless drape of the fabric. The tailor was no less an artist than his clients, yet he received no accolades, only more orders. He seldom left his machine. All the perfect little stitches, the dull and niggling little stitches, and the contraption chirring, always thirsty for oil.

I hoarded the scraps—silks, velvets, damasks. The feel of them spoke to me of worlds stitched together not with thread but light. Let others wield the needle, I would wear the fine costumes, I would make the hemlines sway and billow like a nimbus.

At the age of four, while my brother József learned the leather trade and my sister Rosa fine stitchery, I began training as a ballerina. At seventeen, having attained the swan-goddess ideal—spine elongated, execution flawless, ambition forged—opportunity trod on my heels. His name: Pippo Buffarino. Buffarino of Milan, who had the gumption to call himself an "impresario."

A commanding figure the Italian was not. He had the dimensions of a milk crate with legs poking out. He parted his hair down the center and smoked pencil-thin cigars from an ivory holder the length of a billiard cue. Having no business with the administration, he loitered at the stage door. "*Scusi! Scusi!*" When we dancers walked out he would charge forward, bow in reverence, and proffer a card monogrammed in gilt letters. Then came the one Hungarian phrase he had rehearsed to perfection: "*Keziticsokolom.*" I kiss your hand.

My companion Karola and I stepped out together that night linking arms, radiant after a second curtain call. Finding no way around the little man, we took his card and studied it in the scant light of streetlamps: *Impresario, La Scala, Milano...* words to quicken the pulse.

"I was in the audience tonight, *signorine.*" The stranger spoke a patchwork of languages punctuated by hand gestures. "I have seen you dance. Such talent, it humbles me. Wasted here. In Italy we know how to appreciate exquisite ballerinas like yourselves, we worship at the altar of your talent. That is my business."

"You work at La Scala?" Karola replied in the archaic French of classical ballet.

"Let us say I have connections. If I say, give this goddess an audition, she gets an audition."

"Whether we dance like goddesses or scrubwomen makes little difference," said Karola. "However hard we work, we languish in the chorus."

"A waste, a waste..."

"We have trained from the time we could walk, we have had no life apart from ballet, and what can we look forward to? A dancer's prime lasts no longer than a few seasons."

"What role do you covet, tell me?"

I stood by while my friend, her dimples deepening, plucked a bit of lint from Buffarino's lapel. "Any role will do, so long as I am prima ballerina. But it's starting to rain. Why don't we discuss this over a coffee? The Lukács' nearby."

"With pleasure, *signorina*, but I'm not a man to make small talk. I return to Milan within the week. I have space for four ballerinas. Accompany me, both of you, and I will strew your path with roses. You will have all Italy at your feet."

I could keep silent no longer. "For a chance at La Scala, I would dance the Firebird on a tightrope!"

Karola and the Italian turned to look at me, but I couldn't see their faces. The streetlamps cast them into silhouette, dark masks behind which comedy and tragedy mingled.

Buffarino gabbled rather than laughed. "A tightrope, eh? Why not? I can make something of a girl like you."

He gave a parting bow, faintly clicked his heels, and hurried off on his ten-pin legs, puffing smoke into a sky bare of the palest star. Gazing after him, Karola breathed into the fox collar of her coat, "This is it, our ticket out of here."

"And your family?"

"My mother will cry, my father will get drunk, and in the end neither can do a damn thing to stop me. I'm eighteen. I pay my own way."

A year her junior, I could only wonder at her bravado.

She turned to me and said with complete assurance, "My parents would run off themselves given half a chance."

Unloved Budapest. People were always leaving—to escape hunger or persecution, to seek their fortune. Somehow I always knew that I would leave, too. The winters were endless, the summers a mere glimmer, and everywhere the same weathered facades, averted eyes, locked doors.

There was no question of sleeping that night. Beside me in the trundle bed we shared, my sister Rosa curled like a drying leaf. I lay awake and thought of my first ballet master, Nicola Guerra, whom I'd known only briefly but whose face I pictured vividly with its meteoric changes of expression, brooding one moment, playful the next. "*So, little mouse, you want to be a ballerina? I will make you one, but first you must bring me the moon. It's closer than you might think.*" At six, I heard my mother rouse from sleep and pad to the kitchen to start the hot chocolate. Minutes later, my father followed, silent but for the shuffling of his leather slippers. I rose from bed, washed, and took my customary place beside him at the kitchen table.

"Up so early? How was the performance last night?"

"Nothing special."

"Szidonia," he said to my mother, who stood stationed at the wood stove, "come feel her head. She looks flushed."

"I'm fine. You'd think I was an invalid the way you pamper me."

"The late nights, and you hardly eat."

"There's something you should know. A man came to the theater last night, an impresario, and he's offered me a place."

"An impresario? In Budapest?"

"A Milanese from La Scala. He's offered me a place at La Scala." This wasn't entirely true, of course, but why trouble my parents with nuance, why torment them with doubt? They had little enough to believe in.

My mother turned from the stove with more than her usual gravity, both hands already wringing her apron. "Can we trust this man?"

"Perhaps he has references," my father, shrug-shouldered in his worn dressing gown, suggested.

"I could ask."

"Fine. Good. Ask."

He drank his cocoa hurriedly, fussing with the cuffs of his robe. My mother busied herself with breakfast. They would never stand in my way, I knew, would never pit their loss against my ambition.

I saw Buffarino again after the next performance.

"So, my firebird, what have you decided?" He stood, cigarette holder in hand, looking more theatrical than foreign.

"For me, there is no decision to make, but my father—what have you in the way of references?"

"Your father, I take it, has never traveled? Anyone in Milan, in Paris, in Vienna could tell him about Buffarino and his ballerinas. Name any of the grand opera houses and my girls have danced there."

"Of course, but is there someone he might wire? Someone familiar with your reputation?"

At that moment Karola stepped out from the stage door, and his attention fixed on her like a precision lens. "The goddess herself! Breathless you leave me."

Whether or not I joined the troupe mattered little to the Italian, who could easily have left Hungary with a dozen dancers as avid and well trained as I. The slightest hesitation might have lost me my place.

"This Buffarino is no small fish," I told my father at breakfast the next morning. "Colleagues say he launched Grisi—Carlotta Grisi, the Italian prima ballerina—and also Fanny Elssler, the Viennese. Took her all the way to America."

He sat expressionless.

"Your chocolate's getting cold."

His eyes fastened on my hands, which had acquired grace without losing a natural restlessness. I strained to hold them still. Having given me to ballet, my father could only admire its effect. "I don't like to think of you so far away," he said.

"You won't lose me, *apa*. I know my way home."

"Go, Margit." He looked so small across the table, emptied of whatever it is that gives a man stature. "Go as far as your talent will take you. I'll be here."

By week's end, our quartet of hopefuls—Karola, Teréz, Ilona and I, known throughout the ballet academy as the *Pas de Quatre*—had cast its lot with the itinerant Buffarino. Four girls who had entered the school awkward and unformed, and gravitated toward one another for no apparent reason. We had nothing in common apart from ballet—but then, what else was there? Long hours at the barre, at rehearsal, waiting in the wings... we seldom saw daylight. The same rigid alchemy had been worked on us all. Ilona, double-jointed with slanting eyes, could be moody; bottom-heavy Teréz stubborn; Karola, dimpled, everyone's favorite, vain. But at night, when we lay down to sleep, we dreamed the same dream: to dance center-stage with all eyes upon us, to receive the bouquet of roses, to be *loved*. To be loved as only a Giselle or Juliet could be.

Having rent the family fabric and said our goodbyes, we piled into Buffarino's waxed Fiat. Its roof sagged under the weight of all we could not leave behind. Pushcart vendors shuffled past, street sweepers with their boar-bristle brooms. My brother József came to see me off, carrying the tin trunk that held my favored possessions. He took in the Italian through narrowed eyes, shook his hand with some reluctance, and said, "Take care of her. We know people in Italy."

We didn't, of course. Buffarino emitted one of his gabbling laughs. "Relax, relax, I treat your sister like the Queen of Sheba."

The car engine backfired and we lurched forward. József stood in the middle of the street with one arm in the air, not waving, still as a paving stone. I called out to him, "Kiss mama, kiss papa..." but we were all shouting something, all sobbing and giggling, and the engine drowned out everything but the fanfare inside my head.



It was late on a Sunday night when we pulled into our first Italian city of some size. All the buildings stood shuttered. Prostitutes posed on the curbs. The sky was tinged fuchsia and warm rain seeped from it. Having been motion-sick from the time we left Budapest, I slid to the pitted sidewalk and swayed on my feet.

“This is it?” Ilona said, sounding as deflated as the Fiat’s tires.

“We must be on the outskirts.”

“The guy’s a pimp,” muttered Karola, “he’s brought us to the red light district.”

As if on cue a woman in stilettos and a lace petticoat glanced in the Italian’s direction and spat.

“That must be one of his harlots.”

Buffarino, oblivious of our mounting panic, began to offload luggage. “You like risotto? How about a nice veal cutlet? I got an appetite like a herd of charging bullocks.”

Ilona’s chin rose in the direction of a seedy hotel. “That must be the brothel.”

“Let him go first,” whispered Teréz. “If you see red satin, make a run for it.”

“You girls got your figures to worry about, but not me. We’ll start with antipasto—you like anchovies? I like anchovies. Washed down with a little *vino bianco*...”

“I’m going to be sick.”

“If he tries anything, go for his male parts.”

“You like tripe soup? Nothing like it. Secret’s in the oil. And Gorgonzola, I’ve known Hungarians to swoon over the Gorgonzola...”

“Excuse me, Mr. Buffarino.” Karola tapped him on a shoulder.

“Pippo,” he corrected her. “Call me Pippo.”

“I’ve seen photographs of Milan, Mr. Buffarino. We’ve all seen photographs. They don’t look like—like *this*.”

“Smart girl,” the Italian said with condescension. “You’re right, Milan is bigger. Milan’s got the Duomo, etcetera. We’re not in Milan.”

“Not in Milan?”

“This is Novara, my goddesses.”

“But I’ve never heard of Novara.”

“Never heard of Novara?” The Italian let out a gasp. “Some of the greatest ballerinas of all time got their start in Novara: Taglione, Duncan, Pavlova... and then on to Milan! The critics are already lining up. Never fails.”

We looked at one another, doubting.

“Why the long faces? I’ll put you in a nice pension, get you a hot meal. Tomorrow you’ll wake up and say, ‘That Pippo, what a prince!’ You’ll thank me. Now, could you just give me a little hand? What do I look like, Charles Atlas?”

Not knowing what else to do, we gathered up the luggage and tramped after him into the dank lobby of the *Ostello Buona Notte*. The night clerk roused from a nap and eyed us with a brand of lechery that stung at first but would soon become familiar.

“Your latest?” he said to Buffarino.

“Mind your business,” rejoined our protector, jabbing at the hotel register with a leaky Ancora. “And wake up the cook. I got an appetite like the Huns storming Constantinople.”

“Wasn’t there a famine in Constantinople?”

“Smart guy. Just get me the cook.”

In daylight Novara looked less threatening, a town not without charm, but our spirits had deflated and could not be buoyed by promises. Buffarino drove us to what he called the “opera house,” a boxy edifice with posters glued to every inch of wall. Inside, a motley assortment of entertainers—singers, actors, a trained poodle—moped in the wings, waiting for a chance to rehearse. An orchestra tuned up. The stage bore the scuffmarks of every foot that had ever crossed it.

“Excuse me, Mr. Buffarino,” Karola started in again, “but this isn’t an opera house. We all know what an opera house is, we grew up in one. *This*”—she made a sweeping gesture not unlike a *rond de bras*—“this is no venue for a ballet.”

“Not an opera house? But only last month I attended an opera under this very roof.” The Italian broke into a pout. “If it’s not an opera house, what is it?”

“A music hall,” I said flatly. “You promised us La Scala and brought us to a music hall.”

“I brought you out of Babylon to the Promised Land! You’ve been so long in a backwater that you don’t recognize culture when you see it. Your sensibilities aren’t attuned. Drop your airs, my goddesses. They’ll do you no good here.”

We saw no more of our deliverer that day. The conductor, a jaunty figure with hair like Valentino’s, winked in our direction, and I had the impression that he was amused by our plight, had been a witness to it countless times before. Indeed, no one seemed inclined to offer the least sympathy. A wardrobe mistress, whose name we didn’t catch, led us through a massive storeroom, gradually disappearing behind an armload of gaudy costumes.

“I won’t be seen in these bits and bobs,” said Ilona, swiping away tears with a lace-edged hankie. “We’re classically-trained ballerinas, not can-can dancers.”

“*Were*, you mean.” Karola’s voice went glassy. She took a hand-rolled cigarette from her satchel and lit-up. “We’ve got no ticket home. We don’t even know where we are. That this place—call it what you will—lacks category, who but Buffarino would think to debate? But even if it’s nothing but a fleabag, when that curtain goes up I’m going to dance.”

“You’ll disgrace yourself, disgrace the art, and for what?” Ilona was weeping openly by then, her tartar eyes dark as drowning pools. “We’ll never see the inside of La Scala. We’ll be less than whores.”

“You talk like my mother. This is 1928.”

“Some things don’t change.”

Karola dragged on her cigarette and turned to follow the costume mistress. “What the heck else can we do? If you’re so virtuous, tell me what to do.”

We spoke no more about it.



Have I mentioned Pasquale? The orchestra leader. Maestro Frustaci, a native of Naples, was working at that theater in Novara when the four of us arrived. Not a braggart exactly but unabashedly Neapolitan, the maestro held sway from the first note of the overture until the final ovation, at which time he’d promptly vanish from the theater, always with a woman on his arm. He favored dancers. That much was common knowledge. He treated me no differently from any other: a polite nod to my face, a discreet glance at my posterior.

“Watch out for that one,” counseled Karola, who from her first performance in Italy was besieged by suitors. “A wolf and penniless besides. Just look at the women he goes with.”

Teréz, already on a first-name basis with the industrial scion she was fated to marry, took a more indulgent view. “Have you seen the way he ogles Margit? Poor boy’s smitten.”

At seventeen, I’d had no experience of men. What I knew about love I learned from ballet librettos: two people are brought together through circumstance, the imps work their magic charm, and one is struck senseless—like a sleeping beauty, like a sculptor succumbing to his own creation. Choice plays no part. Had it been otherwise, I would not have chosen Pasquale Frustaci, who aside from his cockiness had already begun, at twenty-six, to lose his hair.

Those first days in Novara, the maestro formed the hub around which the production, such as it was, took shape. The dance director, a former circus owner whose idea of ballet was to send us donkey-kicking across the stage with our skirts in the air, seldom made an appearance. The maestro ruled his orchestra with a seemingly light hand. His perfectionism would rear up only at dress rehearsal, which stretched on into the night until every note satisfied. He did not limit himself to overseeing the music but kept an eye on us dancers, gently coaxing a synchrony of

melody and movement. Whatever polish our performance gave off must be credited to him—which is not to excuse his peccadilloes, thick and public as they were.

I took Karola's advice and avoided him. After the show, while the others went out to clubs, I would linger at the theater to do floor exercises and then walk the few blocks back to the pension, where, if my timing was right, the proprietor might warm-over that evening's dinner. Another month, I told myself, and the maestro would fade from my life like confetti in a scrapbook. One month, the time it would take to fulfill my contract and bring down the curtain on a dream in shambles.

"Working at this hour?" The maestro, fedora in hand, spoke from the wings. "I stopped back for my wallet. Never could hold on to money." Which explained his presence, if not his sudden attentiveness. "But what's wrong, eh? Homesick?"

"What means homesick?"

"You miss a sweetheart, maybe?" He joined me onstage, assuming a role of his own making. One footlight had been left burning and he positioned himself in its beam. "It's a lonely life, the comedies. And you, a stranger—but you're learning. Your Italian is good."

"Not so good."

"Okay, contradict me. But tell me what's wrong? I walk in and find you crying. You should be out celebrating with the others. Come, I'll take you to them." With practiced gallantry he extended his arm.

"I have not the party feeling."

"I'm not much for parties myself." The arm dropped soundlessly to his side and he looked, for a moment, boyish, shy of his limbs. "Don't believe the things you hear about me."

"About the women?"

"Okay, so I like women. I respect them, too. But I'm not the bohemian people take me for. I've got ambitions."

"I, too."

"Do you?" He did not dissemble his interest but studied me as one might a futurist painting. "Tell me about them."

"This dancing is not art."

"So, that's why you're crying?"

"Because the men, the way they look at me. Is not art."

"But you mustn't be ashamed. Why, you grace the stage! You're above it all."

"The men, they make whistle."

"It's what they know. They come to be entertained. Me, I make music, songs people hum while they work, songs that make their day a little lighter. Why ask if it's art? If my music makes people tap their toes, then that's enough for me."

"I do not believe you."

"So, call me a liar." He threw up his hands, a stage gesture. "Sure, I'd like to be Arturo Toscanini, but I'm a practical man. There's nothing noble about starving. And besides, show me a livelier audience than at the comedies. People lose their cares here."

"Is not serious."

"Exactly, is not serious."

"You make the fun of me."

"Not at all. I just wanted to see you smile. We're friends now, eh? What's your name—not your stage name, the name they call you at home?"

"Manci."

"Around here they call me maestro, but to my friends I'm Pasquale. We are friends, aren't we, Manci?"

I couldn't feel offended by his presumption.

"But you're a *bambina*, a baby. When were you born, eh?"

"Nineteen-ten."

“The same year as Markova. Come to think of it, you look a lot like her.”

Admirers never failed to note the resemblance. Markova had the good fortune to be born British. Her father was an Orthodox Jew and her mother Irish, converted. Yet Markova danced everywhere, and the Queen conferred upon her the title *Dame*, which made her royal in her own right. Marvels like that could happen elsewhere.

“Come, let me play something for you.” Again the maestro extended a hand, and this time I took it and allowed him to lead me down into the orchestra pit, through a maze of music stands, to the grand piano. “Chilly, no? Here, take this.” He draped his big-shouldered suit jacket across my back, took his seat on the piano bench, and patted the place beside him. I sat. A moment’s stillness, and then his fingers began to dance along the keys with contained frenzy. The familiar strains of “Hungarian Rhapsody” filled the theater.

“You know Liszt?”

“Not personally,” he said and gave me one of his maddening winks. “But I know his country, and yours”—he paused for effect and then added, “*babuci*.” An endearment meaning little doll.

“Is not bad your pronunciation. How you learn this?”

“You know the New York Café in the seventh district?” There was not a more elegant venue in Budapest, nor one more infamous. The most flamboyant artists and writers of our day congregated there to rub against the status quo. “I played piano for a while, got to know the city. It felt like a second home.” His hands leapfrogged each other, building toward a crescendo. “You like Italy?”

“I like. La Scala very beautiful.”

“I see, so you’ve got your sights set on La Scala. You *are* ambitious. Me, I keep my ear to the Atlantic.” And for a moment he seemed to gaze out through the walls toward that aqueous horizon I had yet to glimpse. “Now, you tell me, what is the difference between this and *this*?” “Blue Skies,” I believe the song was. Mindful of being watched, he played it stylishly, wrists arched, mouthing words he could not have understood. “Irving Berlin,” he pronounced with gusto, “*Americano*. Is art, is not art?”

“Is modern—is good.”

“And this?” “Make Believe,” also popular at the time. “Jerome Kern, *Americano*. How about this?” “Someone to Watch Over Me” with all the flourishes. “George Gershwin. Is good, no?”

“Thank you, but I prefer Liszt.”

The maestro’s fingers jarred silent. I could feel his eyes trace the downward slope of my torso, discreetly, one might even say reverently. Mustering resolve, I slid to my feet and narrowly escaped my first seduction.

“Don’t go.” His hand closed on my wrist.

“I think, Pasquale, it is you the lonely one.”

“One day,” he promised, “I’ll compose a ballet just for you, a terribly serious ballet, and then you’ll see who I am.” He stood up, whisked his jacket from my frame. “Lonely? Me? I’ve got more friends than a mutt’s got fleas.”

“Too many friends can be no friend at all.”

“What time is it, eh? I’m expected at the Paradiso.” He hesitated and could not keep the disappointment from his voice. “Goodnight, *babuci*.”

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