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MYTHICAL JOURNEY

Sometimes a single person is capable of transporting an audience of hundreds from the conventions of commonplace to sheer Shangri-la. Vaslav Nijinsky was one such person. Considered the greatest male dancer of the twentieth century, the Russian-born ballet legend transported his audiences — and himself — into ethereal worlds of dance. A prime example of Nijinsky's stage sorcery is his first self-choreographed masterpiece, created at age twenty-three. Set to Claude Debussy's "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune," it showcased in 1912 at Paris' Théâtre du Châtelet — a seductive portrayal of a mythical half-beast, half-human creature that tricked and pursued nymphs (and spectators). Nijinsky became a poet of the body, relaying an elegant vocabulary of movements, and his costume provided a wondrous weapon for illusion. His body was painted a soft brown with white patches, green vine leaves adorned his waist, and he had on his signature cream-coloured tights and golden antlers as the crowning touch for his graceful, androgynous aesthetic. It was a stirring mix of fashion and façade, but the conservative French ballet patrons then were not ready for Nijinsky's sensual wonderland and were scandalized at his suggestive performances. Like a true trailblazer, Nijinsky took all the slings and arrows of controversy and let them fuel his innovation. His self-choreographed works, once box-office failures, are now considered to be the foundation of modern dance. "The fawn is me," Nijinsky often said of his famous role, and the duality of his magical character spoke volumes to his half-open, half-closeted life as a gay man pursuing his art in the intolerant political climate of the mid-1900s. Ultimately, Nijinsky's fawn is a symbol of how one person can provoke and challenge the status quo with divine style. — *Elio Iannacci*