

the DANCE i n s i d e r

In Memorium, 1-6: The Teacher, the Dancer Farewell to Svetlana Afanasieva

By Aimée Ts'ao

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Svetlana Afanasieva, one of the Bay Area's most prominent ballet teachers, died on December 30, 2003 at the age of 63, of an apparent heart attack while on vacation with her family in the Lake Tahoe area.



Svetlana Afanasieva coaches a City Ballet School student in "The Nutcracker." Photo courtesy Aimee Ts'ao.

Born in Moscow on August 12, 1940, Ms. Afanasieva survived the hardships of World War II to go on to study at the famed Bolshoi Academy of Ballet. After graduating, she joined the renowned Moiseyev Dance Company. She performed with that troupe for five years, touring internationally. She also met Mikhail Alexandrov, another dancer in the company, whom she married, and together they had a daughter, Galina Alexandrova.

Missing classical ballet, she left the Moiseyev and joined the [Stanislavsky Ballet](#) as a principal dancer. For fifteen years Ms. Afanasieva danced the important leading classical roles. When she retired from the stage, she was accepted into the teacher training program at her alma mater, the Bolshoi Academy of Ballet. She joined the teaching staff of that prestigious institution on completion of the five-year course. She also was a guest teacher for many companies in Europe, particularly in the Eastern Bloc.

Galina, her daughter, after graduating from the Bolshoi Academy of Ballet danced with the Bolshoi Ballet for seven years. While on tour in San Francisco Galina met her future husband, Kenneth Patsel, who was working at the War Memorial Opera House. After emigrating here and getting married, she joined the San Francisco Ballet. Eventually, her parents, Ms. Afanasieva and Mr. Alexandrov, moved to be closer to her.

Soon Ms. Afanasieva was teaching again. First giving company class for Smuin Ballets and working with young students at the Marin Ballet School, under director Mikko Nissinen (now director of Boston Ballet). She began teaching her own independent class in the mornings and taught for the San Francisco Dance Center and gave company classes to Alonzo King's Lines Ballet.

Many principal dancers and soloists from San Francisco Ballet came to Ms. Afanasieva's class, as well as modern dancers from Robert Moses' Kin, Kunst-Stoff and ODC/SF. Her immense body of technical expertise and the depth of her artistic understanding drew loyal students and she was greatly loved. Though she spoke limited English, without words she immediately communicated her love for dance, her joy in teaching, her creativity in composing combinations, and her deep understanding that the design of the class itself could teach you many technical details without verbal explanations. She possessed a diamond sharp intelligence, glittering in its many facets, and an inner strength that keep her going in spite of her emotional vulnerability in the face of a difficult personal life. Last summer, Galina took over City Ballet School from Damara Bennett, who moved to Portland to assume the position of school director of the Oregon Ballet Theatre, under Christopher Stowell's artistic leadership. Ms. Afanasieva began giving classes to aspiring young dancers and helped with City Ballet School's production of "The Nutcracker." At the end of October, she also moved her morning class from the San Francisco Dance Center to the City Ballet School's new studios.

Svetlana's passing leaves a deep chasm in the landscape of the Bay Area dance community. She taught one of the few Vaganova style classes that was accessible to everyone, not limited to those enrolled in professional training programs.

A Russian Orthodox service was held Monday morning at the chapel of the Serbian Cemetery in Colma, where Svetlana was buried with her mother, Pelageia Afanasieva, and her husband, Mikhail Alexandrov, who both died in early 2002. She is survived by her daughter Galina Alexandrova, son-in-law Kenneth Patsel, and three grandchildren, Sasha, Katia and Natassia Patsel. Donations in Svetlana Afanasieva's honor can be made to City Youth Ballet, c/o City Ballet School, 32 Otis Street, San Francisco, CA 94103.

--Aimee Ts'ao