



The New York Public Library  
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

**Olga Spessivtzeva collection and letters**

1949-1991

(S) \*MGZMD 102

Processed by Irina Klyagin.

## Summary

**Creator:** Fern, Dale

**Title:** Olga Spessivtzeva collection and letters

**Date:** 1949-1991

**Size:** 349 items in 41 folders in 3 document size boxes

**Source:** Purchase. Dale Edward Fern. Received: April 1994.

**Abstract:** Chiefly correspondence about and with Olga Spessivtzeva and a typescript book entitled, To Olga Spessivtzeva: A memoir of loving.

**Preferred citation:** Angna Enters Letters to Edward L. Berman, (S) \*MGZMC-Res 19, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

**Language of the Material:** In English, Russian, French, and Spanish English

**Processing note:** Processed by Irina Klyagin.

### Separated Materials:

The following items were received with the original gift but have been separated from the manuscript collection. The current location of these items (as of February 1995) is indicated.

Handmade doll of Vaslav Nijinsky in *Les Sylphides* - Location: in process

*Portrait of Giselle*[videotape] - Location: discarded

Issues of Dance Magazine ##4,5,7 of 1960 - Location: \*MGZA

Issue of Ballet News, May 1982 - Location: \*MGZA

Gold framed photograph of Olga Spessivtzeva in "Sleeping Beauty" - Location: Curator's office

## Creator History

Dale Edward Fern was born in Ottumwa, Iowa. He became interested in dance after he saw a published photograph of Olga Spessivtzeva in "Giselle". In fact, the impression made on him by her

image was so great that he decided to find out who the dancer was.

After his graduation from high school he went to Chicago, then, in 1945 he moved to NY where he started taking ballet classes, attended performances, and inquired everywhere about Olga Spessivtzeva. Nobody seemed to know where she was. Only in 1949 by mere chance he met Romola Nijinsky who told him that Olga Spessivtzeva was mentally ill (with the same diagnosis as Vaslav Nijinsky) and had been a resident in a mental hospital for almost ten years.

When Dale Fern went to see her in the hospital he found her unable to communicate, and the hospital authorities completely unaware of who their patient was.

From that moment on to Olga Spessivtzeva's death in 1991 Dale Fern remained Olga's devoted friend. For 10 years he visited her weekly in Hudson River State Hospital. His visits and care contributed a great deal to Olga's recovery at the beginning of the 1960s, and resulted in her transfer to the Tolstoy Foundation Farm in Nyack.

Olga Spessivtzeva [Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Spesivtseva] was born on July 18, 1895 in the city of Rostov-on-Don, Russia. She graduated from The Theatre School in Saint-Petersburg in 1913 and was accepted into the Maryinsky ballet company as a corps de ballet dancer. In 1916 she was promoted to the rank of soloist, and in 1918 she became a ballerina.

Even before she graduated from school Spessivtzeva was considered to be the most promising young dancer of her generation. Very soon she proved that she really was. In 1916 Olga was invited by Serge Diaghilev to join his company on its first American tour. She had great personal success and also as a partner of Vaslav Nijinsky. In 1921 she performed the leading role in the famous Diaghilev production of 'Sleeping princess' in London. In 1923 Spessivtzeva left Russia for good to dance with the Paris Opera Ballet and later, from 1927 with Diaghilev's company. After Diaghilev's death she returned to the Paris Opera, and in 1931, after Anna Pavlova's death she was engaged by Victor Dandre to fulfill Pavlova's engagements. In July of 1937, in Buenos Aires she gave her last performance.

Spessivtzeva's career was abruptly interrupted by the mental disease of which she suffered sporadically for many years. As legend has it, she lost her memory on-stage performing the famous mad scene in Giselle. In 1940 she suffered a major nervous breakdown and was taken to the psychiatric hospital. She remained in the hospital for 22 years, until she recovered and was released. Spessivtzeva moved to the Tolstoy's Foundation Farm in Nyack where she lived until her death on September 16 of 1991.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The collection of Dale Edward Fern covers the period of 1949-1991 and relates mainly to Olga Spessivtzeva's life and career.

The bulk of the collection consists of originals of Mr. Fern's correspondence about Olga Spessivtzeva with various organizations and people, and private correspondence with Olga Spessivtzeva herself, including correspondence with Spessivtzeva's sister Zinaida and her family. In addition there are letters from Spessivtzeva's colleagues and former partners to Dale Fern.

The collection also contains the typescript of an unpublished book written by Dale Fern, *To Olga Spessivtzeva: A Memoir of Loving*, clippings, original photographs and copy prints of Olga Spessivtzeva and negatives.

Included also is a silk hand sewn doll of Nijinsky in "Les Sylphides" made by Olga Spessivtzeva. This is one of a series of dolls made by Olga in the 1960s.

The collection constitutes a major source of information about the life and career of the legendary dancer, Olga Spessivtzeva. Particularly valuable is the documentation of the years Spessivtzeva spent in the mental hospital, her almost miracle cure and her transfer to Tolstoy Foundation Farm in New Jersey.

Language: English, Russian, French, some Spanish

**Arrangement:** The collection is organized in two series: I. Correspondence II. Book

## **Key Terms**

### **Subjects**

Ballet dancers

### **Names**

Fern, Dale

Dolin, Anton, 1904-1983

Lifar, Serge, 1905-1986

Spessivtzeva, Olga, 1895-1991

DHCA

Hudson River State Hospital

Tolstoy Foundation (U.S.)

## Container List

### I. Correspondence:

Correspondence series was generally left as arranged by the collector with a few necessary rearrangements. Files are alphabetical, by name or title. Within the files letters were arranged chronologically. There are a number of translations into English attached to Olga Spessivtzeva's letters written in Russian. Some letters remain untranslated as is indicated on the folder. This series also includes Spessivtzeva's abstract thread designs and a diagram sent to Dale Fern with the letters.

- b. 1 f. 1 American Harp Society, Inc. 1983 (1 item)  
[see also Marinel, Inna]
- b. 1 f. 2 Bace, William C. 1991 (1 item)  
[see also "Bakst Museum"]  
"Bakst Museum" 1983
- b. 1 f. 3 [letters: to John Hopkins University, The Evergreen House Foundation  
William C. Bace, Attorney at Law] (8 Items)
- b. 1 f. 4 photographs n.d. (18 Items)
- b. 1 f. 5 Birsky, Socrates 1983-84 (2 Items)
- b. 1 f. 6 Brown, Leonard 1983 (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 7 Dolin, Anton 1960, 62 (4 Items)
- b. 1 f. 8 Edgerton, Earle 1983 (5 Items)
- b. 1 f. 9 Hellenic Orthodox Church 1956 (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 10 Hudson River State Hospital 1952-62; 83 (25 Items)
- b. 1 f. 11 Ivanova, Alexandra, Dr. 1972 (2 Items)
- b. 1 f. 12 Kniazeff, Boris 1955-56 (4 Items)
- b. 1 f. 13 Lifar, Serge 1956 (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 14 Mann, Edmond L. 1949-63; 83 (11 item)
- b. 1 f. 15 Marinel, Inna n.d. (2 Items)
- b. 1 f. 16 Michaut, Pierre 1955 (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 17 Petrov-Spessivtzev, George 1976-88 (8 Items)
- b. 1 f. 18 Rothschild, Howard D., [incl. let. from Boris Petrov-Spessivtzev] 1983-85 (8 Items)
- b. 1 f. 19 Schaikevitch, Andrei 1956 (2 Items)
- b. 1 f. 20 "Sleeping Ballerina"[film] 1965 (1 item)  
"Spessivtzeva"[article] 1960
- b. 1 f. 21 Branitzka, Natasha (2 Items)
- b. 1 f. 21 Fonteyn, Margot (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21 Grigoriev, Serge and Liubov (2 Items)
- b. 1 f. 21 Lifar, Serge (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21 Markova, Alicia (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21 Nijinsky, Romola (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21 Obukhof, Nikolai (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21 Pavloff, Michel (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21 Viltzak, Anatole (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21 Vladimiroff, Pierre (1 item)

I. Correspondence: (cont.)  
"Spessivtzeva"[article] (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 21 Volkova, Vera (1 item)
- b. 1 f. 21a letters with compliments on the article 1960 (3 Items)
- b. 2 f. 22 Spessivtzeva, Olga, [early] n.d. (2 Items)
- b. 2 f. 23 1962 (24 Items)
- b. 2 f. 24 1963 (10 Items)
- b. 2 f. 25 1964 (12 Items)
- b. 2 f. 26 1965 (4 Items)
- b. 2 f. 27 1966-69 (15 Items)
- b. 2 f. 28 1970-79 (21 items)
- b. 2 f. 29 [incl. let. to Spessivtzeva from Dale Fern] 1980-89 (13 Items)
- b. 2 f. 30 translation of sel. letters into English n.d. (10 Items)
- b. 2 f. 31 diagrams and thread designs n.d. (3 Items)
- b. 2 f. 32 Spessivtzeva, Zinaida, [incl. letters in Russian + English trans.] 1959-61 (8 Items)
- b. 2 f. 33 Tchernicheva-Grigoriev, Lubov 1962 (1 item)
- b. 2 f. 34 Tolstoy, Alexandra, Countess 1976 (3 Items)
- b. 2 f. 35 Tolstoy Foundation, [incl. map with directions] 1962; 82; 86 (10 Items)
- b. 2 f. 36 Tolstoy Foundation Nursing Home 1982-84 (8 Items)
- b. 2 f. 37 White House 1962 (3 Items)

II. Book

The Book series consists of a typescript of a book, clippings and photographs, and copy prints.  
The copy of the typescript was donated by Doris Hering.

- b. 3 f. 38 To Olga Spessivtzeva: A Memoir of Loving (1 item)  
Typescript of an unpublished book by Dale Fern]
- b. 3 f. 39 Suggested ill. material (35 Items)
- b. 3 f. 40 Photos, negatives (22 Items)
- b. 3 f. 41 Clippings, incl. sample of the Tiffany's engraving (20 Items)