

**ELEANOR ANTIN /  
ELEANORA ANTINOVA**

During a recent stay in New York, Madame Eleanora Antinova held an intimate soiree where she read from her Memoirs and talked about her life experiences as a young black ballerina in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Madame Antinova blends reality with fiction with a flair that is both dignified and entertaining. Her articulation of the role of the black American woman sharing in the romance and poverty of the Russian Ballet during the 1920s enraptured her small audience through a skillful weave of humor and poignancy. The now has-been ballerina recalls her adventures with art, poverty, European snobbery, the poet lover, patronage, and youthful passions of all sorts. The small, rather fragile Madame Antinova tells a story which portrays the complexities of the young artist's situation, communicating the combination of strength, dedication, scheming, and patience which it takes to "make it." The story is specific, yet Antinova's faultless and relaxed delivery suggests the correspondences between the trials and conquests of the black ballerina and those of the beginner artist any place, any time. Roles within roles and

Eleanor Antin.  
Eleanora Antinova Reminiscing  
about her Life with Diaghilev. 1980.  
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.



subplots within plots accomplish the transformation from specific to general even as they provide moments of awe, humor, tears, and wonderment. Perhaps one of Antinova's greatest strengths is that she speaks openly as a woman to women while at the same time transmitting her compassion and understanding for men. Her poet, Mitya, is a wild and crazy fellow; one need not realize the witty connection to Baudelaire and his

black mistress to see the syndrome of the creative couple struggling for the next bottle of wine, the next poem or ballet step. Then there is the patron, the Scotsman, Gray Bobby, and his proliferating sweater "gifts" to Antinova and everyone around her. The artists cannot understand why this Scotsman would want their old slippers or souvenirs in exchange for a brand new, brightly colored sweater. The Scotsman always refers to these sweaters —trades as "gifts." Eleanora is loved by two men; she provides them with physical and psychological necessities; she gets sweaters and fits of temper in return. Through all this, her dancing matures. She uses the chance for stardom given to her, the "practical American," when all the other ballerinas meet with some accident or incapacity, like pregnancy or tripping over Antinova's foot. "I was merely doing some *battements tendus* to work out the cramp in my instep," Madame reminisces with a flourish.

Antinova finishes her reading, "A Romantic Interlude from Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev." She walks resolutely through the audience to a slide projector and shows photographs of the five roles she played with the Ballets Russes: *L'Esclave*, *Pocahontas*, *Prisoner of Persia*, *The Hebrews*, and *Before the Revolution*. Some were disasters, others a success of some sort. But Madame Antinova's days as a young ballerina, and an American black one at that, are gone. She grasps some copies of her book, sips her apéritif, and addresses her audience: "Please approach me afterwards if you want to buy my book. I'm available for soirees, lectures, discussions." Eleanora Antinova has transformed the performance into a reality which is so deeply felt and lived by her that it can be utterly moving and real to her audience. It is addressed especially to the problems of the young, yet it also portrays the problems of the old, their fragile grasp of dignity and their wisdom gained through experience. The presence of Madame Antinova will be missed in New York, but she'll be back, with new adventures, perhaps as a Gypsy King or who knows what. (Ronald Feldman, October 18-November 16)