

On This Day in 1881 Anna Pavlova Was Born

February 12, 2020



Anna Pavlova **Public Domain**

February 12, 2020 marks what would be the 139th birthday of prima ballerina Anna Pavlova. The originator of several iconic roles and styles, Pavlova's name remains synonymous with brilliance in the world of ballet.

Despite her legacy as a pioneer of dance, Pavlova was far from a natural talent. Born prematurely in St. Petersburg of contested parentage (many historians speculate that her birth was the result of an extramarital affair on the part of her mother), she was a sickly child who was initially rejected by the Imperial Ballet School for her unhealthy appearance. When accepted to the school at age 10, she struggled to adapt her long, thin frame and weak ankles to the strenuous classical technique. Only through steadfast determination and grueling training was she able to rise through the ranks of the school, debuting at the Mariinsky Theater at age 18.

Pavlova would dance all over the world, touring Europe, the United States, South America, and Asia with the company that she herself founded. She originated several iconic roles, most

notably the “Dying Swan” solo in the ballet Swan Lake. She is remembered as a somewhat difficult character, with strong opinions and a competitive nature. Her most memorable demonstration of this occurred when she slapped dance partner Mikhail Mordkin, whom she felt was receiving more applause than her during a curtain call.

Pavlova is considered emblematic of the 20th-century ballerina, with her waif-like figure, emotional style of movement and painstaking attentiveness to her appearance both onstage and off. Her aesthetic shaped the image of a ballerina, a legacy that has endured to the present day.

Shortly before her 50th birthday, Pavlova developed pneumonia and allegedly refused surgery that might have prevented her from dancing again. She died shortly thereafter. Her last words were: “Get my swan costume ready.”

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