

## SPIES WITH LICENCE TO DANCE

Heirs of Mata Hari, generous like Mistinguett, dauntless as Josephine Baker. From the forgetful folds of time, a legendary figure emerges. It is Alberto Spadolini, painter, dancer ... secret agent.

Marco Travaglini (Translated by Rosella Simonari)



Josephine Baker, Mistinguett, Spadolini, Mata Hari - "Der Künstlerische Tanz", dance picture cards 1933

**Alberto Spadolini** (Ancona 1907 – Paris 1972), here portrayed among international dance stars, has been defined: "...a man supported by secrets!" by director Anton Giulio Bragaglia. The spotlights have accompanied him for half a century in the theatres, cinemas, cabarets, art galleries, private life. Nevertheless, he tells very little of all this to his mother and sisters, when, after the war, he regularly goes to visit them. Only the accidental finding of his archive has allowed us to reconstruct his 'deeds'.



Spadolini "Scenografia Arena di Verona", 1972 (Private Collection)

Spadolini begins his activity as set designer assistant and painter at the “Teatro degli Indipendenti” in Rome, a privileged place for the Italian artistic vanguards, where artists and intellectuals like Giorgio De Chirico and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti often meet. At the end of the 1920s the Theatre closes for serious financial problems and Benito Mussolini’s pressure, as he badly tolerated that group of young people who had nicknamed him “the violinist”.



Spadolini: “Satyricon”, esoteric painting (Private Collection)

In 1931 we find Spadolini in the French Riviera: dirty of paint and sweat-soaked, he paints the set for a dance hall when, all of a sudden, he begins to dance as if he were possessed by a divine power. He abandons paintbrush and palette and becomes “Premier Danseur de l’Opéra de Monte Carlo”. He is acclaimed as the new Nijinsky, performs with Serge Lifar, makes Picasso jealous of him, runs away with Jean Renoir’s wife, but does not disdain to appear in charity shows to honour the Garibaldini from Argonne and the War Mutilated and Crosses.



Dancer Spadolini, photo by Dora Maar



Spadolini - Hermes, photo M. Seymour - Chicago

When Spadolini lands in Paris, in the French people's heart still reigns the legendary **Mata Hari** (1876 - 1917), who is interpreted by an insuperable Greta Garbo on the big screen. This polyglot spy dancer, who bewitched ambassadors and generals, is enrolled by the German secret services during the First World War and is cleverly formed by Fräulein Doktor. She does not disdain to give her favours even to the French counter-espionage. Caught by the "Deuxième Bureau", she is put on trial and shot in a foggy autumn morning.

Singer and dancer **Mistinguett** (1872 - 1956) wants Spadolini in the Music-Hall. During a 'carioca' dance, the famous Miss is about to fall when she is caught by Spadò, as he is now nicknamed by his Parisian friends. She does not forget his noble gesture and, after the war, she will be the patroness of his first art exhibition at the Galerie de l'Elysée-Palace in Paris.



Spadolini and Mistinguett, photo Studio Piaz

Mistinguett enters the French secret services during the First World War when his lover Maurice Chevalier is wounded at the front and imprisoned by the Germans. She heroically makes a series of journeys abroad, gets precious information from the German Prince Gottfried-Hohenlohe and the Italian king Vittorio Emanuele III. In the end she manages to set Maurice free thanks to the Spanish king Alfonso XIII's intervention.

However, what makes Spadolini famous are his performances at the Casino de Paris with black dancer and singer **Josephine Baker** (1906 – 1975), with whom he has a stormy relationship: “Paris still remembers the night during which Spadolini was discovered. It was in a revue with Josephine Baker. On the notes of Domenico Cimarosa's music, ‘Secret Marriage’, with the Chinese-like set that looks like a XVIII century canvas, Alberto entered with Joséphine dressed like a creole marquise. Marvellous vision which provoked the enthusiasm of Paris.”



Casino de Paris 1932

Josephine herself tells us of her secret war: enrolled by the French secret services as the Second World War broke out, she is given the task of bringing information of vital importance transcribed on the music sheet with invisible ink: “...she would have brought to Portugal all the information gained on the German army in the east of France, on air bases, harbours, landing crafts in order to foresee a possible attack against Gibraltar ... and on the expected landing in November 1940 of Abwehr II's agents on the Welsh coast.”

Spadolini as well is involved in the anti Nazi Resistance. In an article published in 2007, Jean-François Crance remembers “...his war [was] generous, dangerous, reckless!” Spadò performs in Germany from September 1940 to February 1941. In Berlin he embodies the ‘God of War’ in the operetta “Die Lustige Witwe”, during Franz Lehár’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, in front of Adolf Hitler and the most important Nazi hierarchs. The show also includes the participation of singer Johannes Heesters, who is victim of a terrible joke: when his house is bombed by the RAF, his friends, without giving him much explanation, send him to sleep in the legendary Salon Kitty, ‘refined brothel’ placed under the Gestapo’s direct surveillance.



Spadolini - Johannes Heesters: “Die Lustige Witwe”, Berlin 1940

It is surely not because he is distracted that Spadolini avoids the accusation of collaboration because he performed in Nazi Germany. Unlike Serge Lifar, who, after the liberation, is expelled from the direction of the Paris Opera Ballet, the Italian artist is treated with all the honours and, at the end of the war, begins again to perform at the Palais de Chaillot, to expose his paintings at the “Circle de l’Union Française”, and to be interviewed by newspapers born out of the Resistance like “Libération”. The newspapers of the period write: “Spadolini is commonly called the Apollo of the dance. He has conquered Paris, New York and the big cities in South America. His house is in Montmartre. In order for him to train, the French authorities have let him use the Palais de Chaillot along the Seine river, near the Eiffel Tower. After Serge Lifar’s fall into disfavour, due to his performance for Hitler’s troops during the German occupation of France, performance that jeopardised his career in front of French patriots, Spadolini is now considered the number one...”.

In an interview, the Russian aristocratic Alex Wolfson reveals that in Stockholm, during the Second World War, Spadolini meets a mysterious character: Yves Gyldén. However, it is only with the publication of the volume “Ciphered Code” (Bengt Beckman, Springer 2005) that we understand the role played by Gyldén in these events: of Swedish father and French mother, he spends many years in France where he studies ‘secret codes’ with passion. Back in Sweden, Mr. Gyldén continues his studies to decipher codes until the autumn of 1939, when he is called to direct the group of code experts who have the task to decipher the French diplomatic code. And this is the reason that brings Spadolini to perform at the “China Theater” in Stockholm in 1941.



Spadolini and Betty Bjurstrom (The Music and Theatre Library Collection, Sweden)

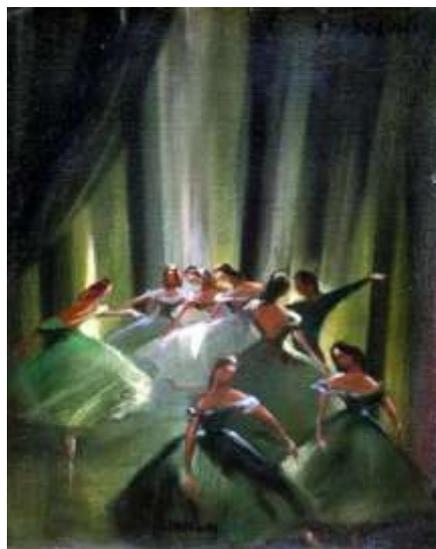
His partner is Betty Bjurstrom (1923 – 2001), splendid Swedish dancer who, in 1948, conquers the first title of Miss Europe, title that is taken away from her when it is discovered that she is married. A few months afterwards Betty will be forced to live in a wheel chair because of four gun shots shot by her husband Renato Senise. On the pages of the ‘Corriere della Sera’, journalist Ennio Caretto affirms that, by command of the OSS, Senise’s story has remained hidden until Spring 2001: “He was supposed to be Washington’s secret weapon, instead he became the American spies’ biggest defeat. Renato Senise, nephew of Ovra’s chief, Mussolini’s political police, in vain offered his help to the English services. Bigamist and chased by his lovers, he joined instead the Germans for whom, in summer 1943, he contacted the American agents in Stockholm. Under the code name ‘Philip Morris’, he gave them hundreds of pages of information worth their weight in gold. However, this information

were useless for the USA. In addition to this, the Swedish arrested him for fraud, but, after a little while, he run away. At this stage the first suspicions began to rise among the Americans. Caught in Rome in 1946, Senise first made a fantastic escape, then was caught again and spent a few months in jail. The OSS made sure that he had not caused many damages and forgot about him. Only when Senise was arrested again in Paris after he had shot one of his wives (Betty Bjurstrom), they decided to close this chapter. ‘We do not want to hear from him any longer’ says the last note from his dossier”.



Spadolini: "Folies Bergère" (Private Collection)

In the 1960s, Spadolini, to help Betty Bjurstrom who would never be able to dance again, organises a sale of his paintings at the Galleria Latina in Stockholm.



Spadolini: "Danseuses", (Private Collection)

After the war Spadolini begins a relationship with countess **Yvette de Marguerie** (1913 – 1999), dancer and actress in silent films, owner of Brignac's Castle (Seiches-sur-le-Loir), active member of the 'Mouvement National des Croix de Lorraine', Charles De Gaulle's anti-Nazi society. In this small provincial castle important figures from the aristocracy and international politics come, like the Russian prince Felix Yussupov and princess Irina, the duke and duchess of Windsor, the Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini (who was distantly related to Spadò), André Malraux, one of the great French intellectuals, repeatedly elected Minister and a trustworthy man for De Gaulle ... Yvette and Alberto' best friend is madame Jeanne Mazac "... in 1921 she works for the 'Cabinet Militaire de l'Ecole Supérieure de Guerre'. In 1939 she becomes chief of Secretary of the 'Service de la Censure' ... her role often puts her in contact with important characters of the French State. The relationships she has with the members of the Resistance will risk, in more than one occasion, to get her arrested...she has been given the most important honours: Légion d'Honneur, Mérite National ... ” .



Yvette de Marguerie and Jeanne Mazac, 1947 (Private Collection)

Recently some photographs arrived from France, portraying Alberto Spadolini in 1972, the year he died. He poses as if he were playing the role of a ... spy. In the first photograph his long white dress and sunglasses recall Lawrence d'Arabia. In the second, he wears an elegant suit, expressing a heroic and ironic glance. In the third one he is about to open a door, his eyes once again hidden by turbid sunglasses ... with Spadolini nothing happens by chance !



Spadolini, Paris 1972

The first person to suspect Spadolini's collaboration with the secret services is his friend from Ancona, Gino Mei. Back in Italy after the war, the artist avoids talking of his professional successes: favourite dancer for Marlene Dietrich and Cécil Sorel, choreographer appreciated by Maurice Ravel and Paul Valery, painter admired by Jean Cocteau and Max Jacob, actor with Jean Marais and Jean Gabin, adapter of dialogues for the London Film (the film "The Tales of Hoffmann" with Massine and Tchérina received an award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1951), short film director and scriptwriter with Carmen Amaya, Django Reinhardt, Suzy Solidor; last but not least, singer, sculptor, illustrator, restorer, journalist ... one of the most eclectic characters in the XX century.



Spadolini : « Le jour se lève » 1939

At the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, he performs with an exceptional exotic dancer, Kurdish princess Leila Bederkhan. As the New York Times highlights, a series of homicides and various mysterious deaths transformed Leila in the last heiress of the Bederkhan's dynasty. Precisely because of her religious dances, that, according to some fanatics, represent a true profanation, Leila receives death threats from Istanbul, Cairo and Kurdistan.



Spadò travels without rest across Europe, America, Asia, Africa ... nearly every year the artist, who speaks about ten languages, among them Arab, goes to Oran in Algeria, where he had numerous friends. In Sweden he is so warmly welcomed that he begins to be considered a Swedish painter; in 1948 at the vernissage for his exhibition at the Oscarsteatern in Stockholm, the stars of Swedish theatre take part; furthermore, he displays his work in Malmo and at the Bohmans Konstgalleri in Stockholm until 1972.



Spadolini: esoteric drawing (1950s)

The artist was in Viet-Nam in March 1954, precisely during the Dien-Bien-Fu battle, and he witnessed the epic struggle between the French army and General Giap's communists. Some ads place Spadolini in Saigon on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1954 for a dance performance and, always in Saigon, he displayed his paintings on May 12<sup>th</sup> 1954. Professor Philip Kearney refers to an encounter at the United States Embassy in Saigon between the Italian artist and his parents Daniel and Helen Kearney, who assisted in the organisation of a cooperative economic aid project in Viet-Nam. Mrs. Kearney also did volunteer work at refugee camps for people escaping from the North. They invited him to dinner at their apartment later that week. And on that occasion Spadolini, always a generous man, gave to his new friends an enchanting painting on dance as a gift.



Spadolini: "Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn"

Spadolini knew various people in the diplomatic world: at the 1955 vernissage, organised in occasion of the exhibition sponsored by his friend, prince Felix Yussupov at the "Galerie Bradtké" in Luxembourg, many important people took part: Pierre-Alfred Saffroy, French plenipotentiary ambassador, and the representatives from the legation of the United States, Great Britain and Italy. Among the paintings on display, some were inspired by **Margot Fonteyn's** (1919 – 1991) Saddler Well's Ballet. Recently declassified secret documents, preserved in British archives, reveal that the ballerina, whose partner on stage was for a long time Rudolf Nureyev, was enrolled by Fidel Castro to bring down the Panama government. Arrested, she spent only a few days in prison, and they say she was treated as a queen.

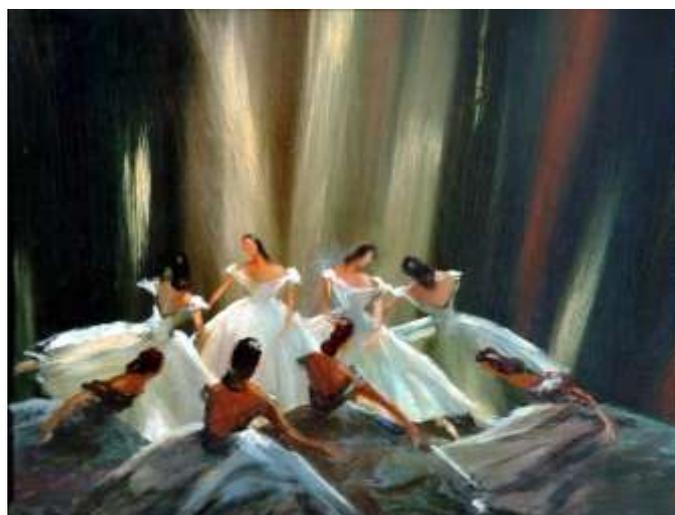


Spadolini with Liane Daydé in master Volinine's studio of (1950s)

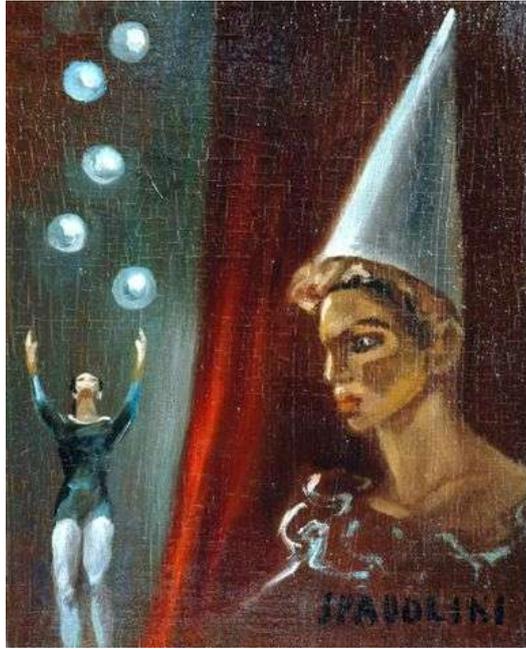


Spadolini: "Notre-Dame de Paris" (Private Collection)

Spadolini as a painter has a particular devotion for the Bolshoi and Kirov Ballets, which, during the 'cold war' were placed under a dreadful surveillance by the 5<sup>th</sup> KGB Soviet Department, obliging artists of the level of Rudolph Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, Michail Baryshnikov to run away to the West ... the one who has not abandoned her country is **Maya Plisetskaya**, prima ballerina at the Bolshoi. One of her great admirers is Bob Kennedy, candidate to the presidency of the United States after his brother's death. Kennedy usually went to the Russian ballerina's performance in America. As Plisetskaya herself specifies, this was noticed by the KGB who tried to involve her in a squalid espionage story. However, precisely because of the Soviet agents' too zealous commitment in following them everywhere, the relationship between the young Kennedy and the ballerina never goes beyond a tender friendship.

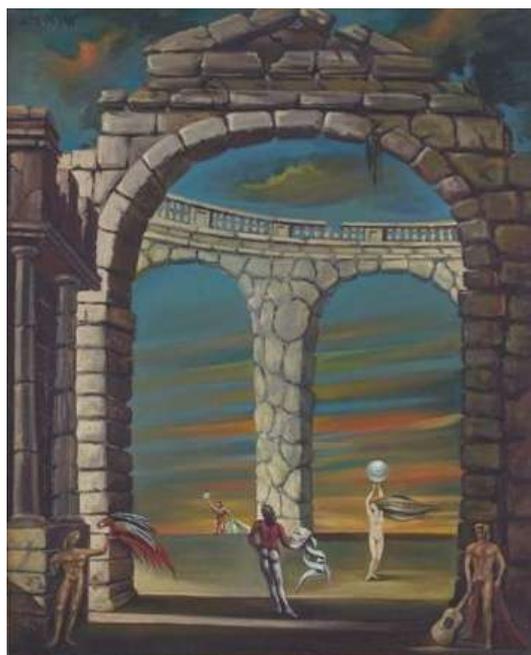


Spadolini: "Étoile de l'Opera" (1950s)



Spadolini: "Il giocoliere" (1950s)

The lights and elected friendships have never corrupted Alberto Spadolini, and we can well say that profound love, honesty and generosity are his most important values. Besides the fact that he gave his help as volunteer at the Hôpital de l'Hotel-Dieu in Paris, he has helped many friends in difficult situations. As it happened with Alex, a Jew of Russian origin, hidden by Spadolini during the Nazi occupation; or Duilio, the poor and sick boy, whom he raised as his own child; or Betty, the Swedish dancer then obliged to live in a wheelchair...



Spadolini: « Tau », esoteric painting (Private Collection)

We conclude with the image of Spadolini, ambassador of Italian art in the world, with his luggage and a cigarette eternally lit on his mouth, in the act of leaving for a new adventure.



Spadolini, 1946 (Private Collection)

## NEWS

Over the course of 2012, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death, a series of exhibitions entitled “**The secret life of the artist Alberto Spadolini**” are to be put on in Italy and abroad. On show paintings on the subject of dance, esoteric painting, sketches for stage designs, photographs of Spadolini by well-known photographers of the Thirties including Dora Maar, Roger Carlet, Studio-Iris, Harcourt, Harry Meerson, A. Novaro, and the Parisian Piaz, Cayeb from Bruxelles, Cadoux from Genève, Siegfried Enkelmann from Berlin, Maurice Seymour and Henry Delorval Green from Chicago, and Condé Nast. The exhibition will also feature drawings, sculptures and paintings restored by Spadolini, as well as some hundred documents concerning Josephine Baker, Betty Bjurstrom, Maurice Chevalier, Jean Cocteau, Serge Lifar, Jean Marais, Edith Piaf, Mistinguett, Rudolf Nureyev, Pablo Picasso, Cécile Sorel, Felix Yussupov. The elaborate costume worn by Spadolini on hundreds of occasions, when he danced Ravel’s Bolero, occupies a modest position in a corner, a haunting testament to a truly magnificent memory.

## ALBERTO SPADOLINI (Ancona 1907 – Paris 1972)



**LONDON (THE TATLER) - 21 December 1932** « Spadolini, male dancer – and most magnificent animal – dances in the foreground, his sun-tanned, muscular body, nude against the somber back-ground. »

**VARIETY NEW YORK - 27 December 1932** “Revue du Casino de Paris. Outstanding factor in the Revue in Spadolini a male dancer. He’s absolute Knock-out here and got repeated ovations.”

**VOGUE - April 1933** “Spadolini ... He as brilliant technique and great beauty of movement and pose ...”

**LONDON (THE ERA) - 3 March 1934** “Spadolini, scores in an international dancing act of distinct merit.”

**CHICAGO III. DAILY - 14 December 1934** “Spadolini, an Adonisian poseur.”

**BOSTON DAILY RECORD - April 1935** “Spadolini, is sensational novelty ... such as you will seldom see on an American stage.”

**BOSTON EV. AMERICAN - 26 April 1935** “Spadolini, extraordinary dancer.”

**STERN (VARIETY NEW YORK) - 4 December 1935** “Spadolini, who combines a remarkable body with real dancing, ability does an excellent number.”

**THE NEW YORK TIMES - 5 July 1936** “Spadolini, a young Italian dancer, is reported as having ‘achieved renown at the Royal Opera, Rome, and the Casino de Paris’. His New York début recital is to be made up of excerpts from various Italian ballets, and such independent items as a modern machinery number ‘Toscanini’ and ‘Chinese Opium Smoker’.”

**THE AMERICAN DANCER - 1938** “The American Premiere of the ‘Paris Exposition Ballets’ with Spadolini, dancer and choreographer of the Monte Carlo Opera, will be staged in Los Angeles for three performances in January. Spadolini brought here under contract to MGM, will bring his principal dancers, costumers and orchestrations from Paris.”

**DANCE MAGAZINE - 1947** “Spadolini back from the United States and ‘en route’ to South America, danced Ravel’s Bolero for the 200<sup>th</sup> time at the Palais de Chaillot this month.”

**ILLUSTRATED - September 1947** “Spadolini appeared at the London Casino in 1938, and Britain will see him again by television with the ‘London Ballet Company’ during the coming winter. He has been called the ‘Apollo of the Dance’, and likened to Nijinsky, the great Russian dancer. He fills theatres in Paris, New York and South America. He is doubly an artist for, after his dawn practice, he retires to his Montmartre studio and becomes a painter.”