

Curtain call

Paris

Valerie Lawson

Valerie Lawson encounters some of the 19th century's great dancers in their final resting place.

So close to the vibrant life of the Moulin Rouge is a still and silent corner of Montmartre. If the residents rose from their graves, what a party it would be, for the cemetery of Montmartre is full to its depths with the great artists and writers of the 19th century.

Jacques Offenbach could reprise his can can for the high-kicking creator of the dance, Louise Weber. Both are buried here, along with Adolphe Sax, the creator of the saxophone. In another room at the party, Leo Delibes would discuss his ballet scores with Hector Berlioz, who died one year before the premiere of Delibes' big hit, *Coppelia*. Now earthbound, once airborne, Vaslav Nijinsky and Marie Taglioni could reprise their dancing days, he taking her in his arms for one last pas de deux.

Emile Zola, Alexandre Dumas jnr and Stendhal might discuss "Stendhal's syndrome", the dizziness or madness caused by too much viewing of too much European art in too little time.

My morning at the cemetery, one cold day in early summer, was not so much a visit as a pilgrimage. Battling a slight case of Stendhal's syndrome myself, it seemed inconceivable that so many illustrious figures from the world of dance could be buried in one place. But then again, Paris was the centre of ballet from the 17th century, when the Italians exported the art form to the court of Catherine de Medici.

The dizzy sense of being among the giants was not eased by the confusion of graves. The cemetery map does not follow a logical plan: the only way to find the graves you seek is to clamber through the stairways and explore all the pathways - grandly called "avenues". Among them is the Avenue Hector Berlioz, home to the composer's black marble tomb.

The tombstone of Edgar Degas, painter of dancers, is easy to find. Less so are those of two of the creators of the ballet *Giselle*: the writer, Theophile Gautier, and the composer, Adolphe Adam. Gautier was inspired by a poem by Heinrich Heine, also buried here.

The resting place of Marie Taglioni is tucked out of sight, set back by three graves from Avenue Samson. Her elusiveness in death does not reflect her role in life. Taglioni was the best loved and most feted ballerina of the romantic age.

Taglioni wore pointe shoes, one of the first dancers to do so, but she balanced on pointe only briefly, due to the lightness of her shoes. (She appeared to fly, yet her art was partly an illusion created by gas lighting, wires and an audience primed by the spin doctors of the day to sigh and gasp.)

After she retired, Taglioni lost her fortune and was forced to teach ballroom dancing in London before spending her last years in Marseilles, to be close to her son, Georges. Did he bring her body to Paris, I wondered. The nameplate on her grave is broken, with a crack running through the letter T, under which is the inscription "A sa mere bien aimee" (To his [or her] well loved mother).

On her grave, placed within a wreath of pink and purple china flowers, were a pair of ancient pointe shoes, blackened by the elements and bound to each other with satin ribbons. The shoes had weathered into a sacred relic, as fixed and formal as the sculpted flowers.

At Nijinsky's grave (pictured) he is shown as a sculpture, a clown. Seated, he cups his weary head with his left hand. He wears a ruffled collar and boots, resembling the title role he danced in *Petrushka*. Nijinsky created the role of the lovesick puppet who dies but whose spirit rises again.

He last danced in 1919, then spent the next three decades of in mental hospitals. He died in London in 1950, but his body was brought to Paris three years later to be buried in a grave commissioned by the French dancer and artistic director Serge Lifar.

Naturally, Nijinsky is named on the cemetery's map of celebrities, but many other artists are not. Missing from the list of the famous is Emma Livry, a dancer of great beauty who died from dance. Her costume caught fire in the theatre and she died from her burns months later.

Two hours were enough for this Montmartre pilgrimage. In the next few days, I spent many hours at the Palais Garnier, home of the Paris Opera Ballet. One day I glimpsed four dancers rehearsing *Pas de Quatre*, in which Taglioni starred in 1845. Dressed in long white tutus with flowers in their hair, these new messengers of romance appeared as living memorials.

The cemetery retreated. It was time to bury the memories of dancers past. As Samuel Beckett wrote: "Dance first, think later. It's the natural order."