

JOWITT: Time and the Dancing Image

FORWARD TO PETIPA



“You discover,” said George Balanchine, “that what stays with you are the essential things. You discover what you are doing is really Petipa.” Petipa revitalized, expanded, stripped of all but the essentials, and delivered in the accents of modern America. The “ballet-ivanich” under consideration in 1953 turned out to be *Agon*.

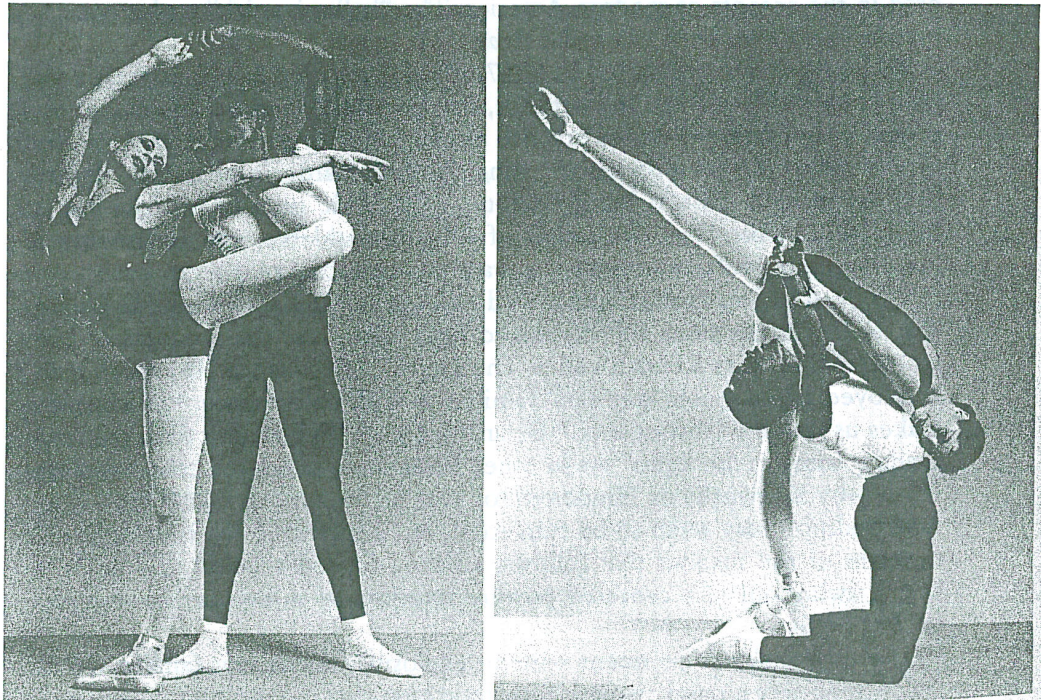
When *Agon* was premiered in 1957, it was perceived as a dazzlingly contemporary work—dense and yet lean, like Stravinsky’s score. No fancy costumes, only black-and-white practice clothes. No fat on the dancers, no fat in the steps. Rapid, propulsive, stinging. And hardly nineteenth-century Russian in tone. Edwin Denby wrote, “The basic gesture of *Agon* has a frank, fast thrust, like the action of Olympic athletes, and it also has a loosefingered goofy reach like the grace of our local teenagers.”

Yet even as Stravinsky’s music paid homage to the dance forms of Bach’s day, Balanchine’s steps acknowledged both these and the precepts of late nineteenth-century Russian ballet. The kind of “dissonance” that both men employed presupposes our ears’ familiarity with consonance. “Dissonance makes us aware of consonance,” Balanchine said. “We cannot have the cool shadow without the light.” As in other Balanchine ballets to contemporary music—by Stravinsky or Hindemith or Ives or Webern or Gershwin—classical tradition may seem to be subverted, but a turned-in leg is understood in terms of the turnout that follows, a flexed foot in relation to a pointed one; a swing out of a centered posture imprints its in-balance counterpart on our brains.

The Stravinsky score opens with an explosive, discordant fanfare. To it, Balanchine sets a rapid sequence for four men that bursts from unison into

canon and back to unison. Whirling, lunging, striking out from their separate spots in space, the men seem to be tugging the stage this way and that; yet the whole resolves as boundless symmetry. Later, in the second *pas de trois*, Stravinsky sets imitation as strictly as Bach might have, but although the precision is baroque, the dissonance and sharpness supply a pressure that's unmistakably contemporary. Balanchine's two men follow each other through a canon so compressed that one seems to be shadowing the other, daring him to widen the gap.

In *Agon's* duet, a man bends his partner into positions far more extreme than any dreamed of by Petipa. Gently but firmly he lifts her leg up behind her and presses her head back, as if to see if they will touch. The rhythm of his manipulations suggests a pensive testing of his partner's range. Yet, although he holds her in intricately knotty ways and handles her with a matter-of-fact intimacy that would have seemed shocking at the end of the last century, his behavior refers to the supported *adagios* of that time. He promenades her in *arabesque* on pointe; only he is lying flat on his back,



Diana Adams and Arthur Mitchell in the *pas de deux* from *Agon*. Photographs by Martha Swope.

while she grasps his upraised hand, her leg sweeping above him like a compass needle. It is Petipa inverted, Petipa harried, Petipa atomized. Petipa with more than a nod to a vernacular of American cheerleaders, bred in studios where little girls studied balletaptoeacrobatics. But Petipa nonetheless.

Of course, ballet scholars probing the origins of Balanchine's style can cite other influences. Mikhail Fokine's expansion of classical deportment and vocabulary surely had some impact on the young Balanchine. It is known that, as a budding choreographer in Russia, he was excited by the work of the classically trained Constructivist Kazian Goleizovsky, whose cool, erotic-gymnastic études and interest in American jazz stimulated the Russian art world of the twenties. Serge Diaghilev, whose last ballet master he was, exposed Balanchine to the Western European art scene, past and present. You can also postulate that his work for *Charles Cochran's Revue* in London and his stints on Hollywood movies and Broadway musicals during the thirties and forties had some effect when you note the jazzy hip thrusts and the one-knee-turned-in, pinup-girl stances that—exuberantly reconstituted—appear in certain of his ballets. Couldn't his occasional pretzely solo or duet (like that in *Agon*) be construed as witty and imaginative nods to ballet-acrobat Harriet Hoctor, for whom he choreographed a couple of dances in *The Ziegfeld Follies* of 1936? * You can remember that he once said that Fred Astaire was “. . . the most interesting, the most inventive, the most elegant dancer of our times.”

Certainly Balanchine's take on Americans and America affected his style as profoundly as his background, as profoundly as the music that inspired his various ballets. Barely a year in the United States, he told Chicago critic Claudia Cassidy, “There is that love of bigness that is so important a part of the ballet. The skyscrapers, vast fields, gigantic machines, all make for thrilling spectacles.” The scale may have reminded him of Russia, but he translated it into space less clogged and gestures larger in scope than anything on the Russian stages. He seems to have noticed the pace and complexity of our cities, and given them back to us as speed and density: into his choreography, he packed more steps per running foot than Petipa did at his most vivacious. Jean-Pierre Bonnefous, the French dancer who was a NYCB principal from 1970 into 1980, told writer Barbara Newman, “To dance his ballets, I think you have to learn to be part of New York.”

Balanchine characterized the American spirit as “cold, luminous, hard as

*Some of Balanchine's very first ballets were created on Russian dancer Olga Mungalova, who was noted for her acrobatic abilities. It's conceivable that her image lingered with him.

epa-
that;
as de
ough
sure
ther
her,

eme
hind
thm
Yet,
th a
the
He
ack,

by

light." Let us say that those were the qualities that attracted him. (Petipa too, it is said, liked a reserved performing manner.) He saw and liked something full-throttle and brisk and no-nonsense about the American character that he wanted to bring out. When he caught a dancer in his company mooning over the music and steps, he made dark mention of "Gisellititis." He wanted almost everything danced to the hilt in terms of energy and scale and precision. Tanaquil LeClercq, one of the first ballerinas to be trained from childhood in Balanchine's School of American Ballet, spoke this way about performing *The Four Temperaments* (1946):

It should look maximum, 100 percent everything: move 100 percent, turn 100 percent, stop dead. Kick legs as much as you can, straight knee, pointed toe. Zip 'round. Fast. Nothing slow, no adaaahgio . . . Kick, wham, fast, hard, big. You have certain steps to do in a certain amount of time and the certain steps give it a certain flavor. But you can't interpret because you'll be late, you won't be with the music.

Not all Balanchine ballets have the fierce propulsiveness dictated by the score that Paul Hindemith wrote for *The Four Temperaments*, but the recommended lack of indulgence, the concentration on dancing and music are the basic equipment of Balanchine dancers, whether the ballet is *The Four Temperaments*, or an elegant essence-of-Petipa one like *Theme and Variations* (1947), or as poignantly romantic as the Brahms *Liebeslieder Walzer* (1960).

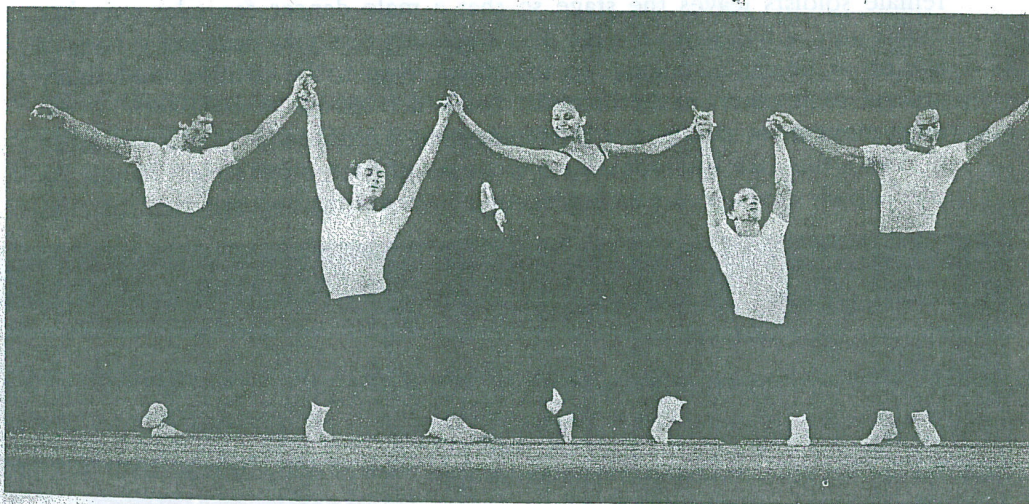
Petipa drew his images from plot or from pictures he collected or patterns he worked out with little figures on his dining table; Balanchine culled his almost wholly from music—working both from his profound understanding of musical structure and from his intuitive responses to musical atmosphere. Not that Petipa wasn't musically educated, but he planned his ballets before a score was composed to suit. Even the single great composer he worked with, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, received instructions from him (these are for *The Sleeping Beauty*): "From 16–24 bars, which develops into another tempo. For Aurora's entrance—abruptly coquettish 3/4. Thirty-two bars. Finish with 16 bars, 6/8 forte."

Often Balanchine upheld the Petipa tradition of hierarchies, moderately ceremonious entrances, and patterns of ink-blot symmetry, but his rationale was different. He was not echoing the decorum of an elaborately stratified society, he was acknowledging the relations of parts within a musical composition. Quite often the members of the corps de ballet are indeed

working behind the principal dancers, their dancing less complicated, their roles less individual, but this is simply because they are following a bass line or the chords that accompany a melody. And, even in such cases, their patterns tend to be more complex than those that Petipa made. As if Balanchine had taken to heart the equality implied in the American Constitution, he created the illusion of a company of equals, filling the available jobs allotted by the music.

Sometimes the ensemble assumes the prominent role. In the turbulent "Melancholic" section of *The Four Temperaments*, two demi-soloists propel the male soloist toward a far corner of the stage, and, as the string ensemble declaims the theme, four corps women advance toward the man on a diagonal; each swings one leg high before her, then jabs the toe down into the floor, swings the other leg up, jabs that toe down, thrusting her hips forward, as together the women bear down on the man. Responding to the powerful swing of Hindemith's music, Balanchine has given the women the force of avenging angels, women with thighs of molten iron. The theme invades the musical ensemble; the women take over the stage.

The little entourages of four who accompany each of the four soloists in the Stravinsky *Violin Concerto* onto the stage don't always maintain the respectful distance or the subsidiary role they might in a Petipa ballet. One woman (Kay Mazzo originally) prances with her four men, holding their hands, allowing them to hold her up and weave rings around her. They are

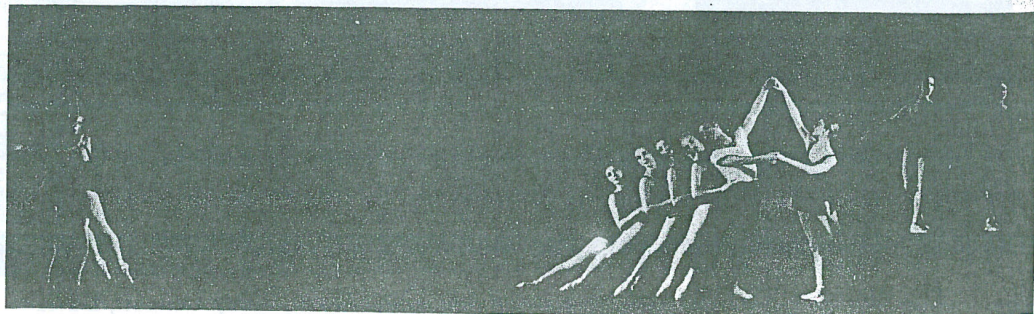


Kay Mazzo in *Violin Concerto* with (from left) Nolan Tsani, Tracy Bennett, David Richardson, and Michael Steele. Photograph by Martha Swope.

never anything but polite; their behavior suggests a witty hybridization of *The Sleeping Beauty's* four cavaliers and a number in a twenties review. Four fraternity boys back up the prom queen while she does her song-and-dance.

In *Concerto Barocco* (1941), it is the job of the ensemble women to lay out the vocabulary before the two female soloists enter (with the violins of J. S. Bach's Double Violin Concerto) to begin their witty canonic bantering. It is the ensemble women who first fall from the stiletto line of fifth position on pointe into a sideways lunge, then swing back to fifth—the source of a myriad variations. It is they who affirm the rapid, even march of *piqué plié* that will turn out to be one of the ballet's most prominent motifs.

Balanchine's reading of musical structure, harmony, and dynamics causes odd and mysterious images to surface in his dances. For the first movement of *Concerto Barocco*, he embodied the two solo violins as two women, perhaps because the virtuosic speed and sharpness of the music made him see pointework, and the way Bach mingled and separated their lines made him see equals. In the tender and romantic *largo*, however, the two instruments often exchange roles in a subtle follow-the-leader; and in contrapuntal passages, the deeper-toned melody of the second violin flows under that of the first violin—as if supporting it. Therefore, at the beginning of this second movement, as the corps women matter-of-factly regroup, one of the female soloists leaves the stage so that a male dancer can take over her violin part. As the two violins play together, one may suspend a note as the other begins a melody, so that they seem to be twining unendingly around each other, never breaking free. In response to this, early in the *largo* movement, Balanchine choreographed a profoundly tender sequence in which the man and woman never let go of each other's right hands. As they slowly revolve and embrace, their linked arms become arch, barrier,



Tanaquil LeClercq, Nicholas Magallanes, and the ensemble in the second movement of *Concerto Barocco*. Photograph by Roger Wood, London.

support, love knot, and it is difficult to fathom what is a beginning for them and what an ending.

The music that began the *largo* repeats toward the end of it; and the woman from the first *vivace* movement enters and threads her way serenely through the group, simply in order to leave as she did before, and let the duet begin all over again. The device is sheer musical gamesmanship, but because of the gentle, dreamy passion of the *largo*, it creates an impression that the whole event is being rewound in memory, the way lovers recall their first meetings.

More often, it isn't gamesmanship but Balanchine's intuitive and subjective response to a musical fact that creates passages resonant with indefinable emotion. Charles Ives's *The Unanswered Question*, which Balanchine used for a section of his *Ivesiana* (1954), is a restless, yearning call of a melody that never resolves. Played first by a single horn, it seems suspended above a shimmering, featureless terrain. The choreographic response was a procession of four men who carried a woman aloft (originally the very young Allegra Kent, who appeared both innocent and mysteriously voluptuous). Standing at first, she lets herself fall backward into their arms. They walk on, bearing her as if she were an enigmatic harem beauty on a palanquin. But there is only air underneath her. They bend her gently, twist her into fantastic shapes, make her curve upward, or dip her down so that her unbound hair brushes against the solitary man who follows wherever she goes, oblivious to everything but this distant, carefully guarded beauty. Luminous as a beacon in darkness, like the melody, she never touches the ground.

In Petipa's day, style didn't wander far from what was taught in the classroom, although what was taught might reflect new discoveries. Even the various character dances employed a known lexicon of steps. Petipa spoke in one voice, Balanchine in many, partly because of the latter's interest in, and access to, a broad range of music. For Balanchine, musical style inevitably transformed the classical vocabulary in diverse ways; and some of the steps he created for the stage would be unlikely ever to appear in the classroom. Even in his most "abstract" ballets, his responsiveness to the music's texture engendered diverse images of people and society. (Beyond his initial delighted vision of American culture, any contemporaneity in his work seems to have filtered through his reaction to contemporaneity in music, rather than to have occurred in response to social or political events.) Stravinsky, he said, made ". . . time that shows how the small parts of our bodies are made." That response to the atomization in the music engendered the nervy pointillism of many of his ballets to Stravinsky's music.

The sparse, shrilling microtonal strings in Toshiro Mayuzumi's score for *Bugaku* drew from him a flow of serene yet contorted postures for the central couple that recall the elegant drawings of Japanese erotic art. *Who Cares* teases the purely classical steps out of equilibrium and syncopates them to evoke the carefree, impudent climate of orchestrated Gershwin tunes. In the first half of the no-longer-performed *Metastaseis and Pithoprakta*, great sloppy swarms and chains of people heaved about like a single convulsing organism, in keeping with the density and unpredictability of Iannis Xenakis's clouds and swirls of "aleatoric" music.

This last ballet would have fooled any contestant in a guess-the-choreographer contest. You would sooner have imagined it to be by Merce Cunningham than by Balanchine, and it certainly would have taken Petipa aback. Yet if a few of Balanchine's works seem unrelated to the tenets of Russian classicism, both in their designs and in some cases—such as *The Prodigal Son* and *Variations pour une Porte et un Soupir*—in their vicious, acrobatic heroines, dig down to bedrock in most Balanchine ballets, and you find Petipa. Chatting with Walter Terry in 1950, on the latter's interview series at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York, Balanchine remarked that the London critics had found the dancing in *Jones Beach* terribly acrobatic, but that everything they thought strange was derived from old Petipa steps.

The connections—and the differences—between the heroes and heroines of Balanchine and those of Petipa are nowhere more striking than in the Balanchine ballets that seem, wholly or in part, to be essays on Petipa. Arlene Croce has eloquently pointed out the kinship between *Theme and Variations* and *The Sleeping Beauty*:

Evocations of the great Petipa role pass before us—pas de chat/pirouette, a rhythmic lunge striking tendue positions in fourth while the arms sweep through directional changes, and, in the finale, a pas couru ending in the dainty, girlish, tendue-front pose that Margot Fonteyn had her picture taken in a thousand times.

The ballerina of *Theme and Variations* is ". . . Aurora rewritten in lightning."

Abstracted, too, are the visions of womanly virtue and graciousness embodied by Petipa's good fairies. Balanchine shows us four demi-soloists, each flanked by two other women, who scroll around her with chains of *bouffées*, kneeling to support her *arabesques*, standing to build bowers over

her head. Later the ballerina turns and dips and blossoms into new shapes at the center of a garland of eight women who support her. Petipa's choreographic rendering of the briar hedge around the slumbering Aurora was a vision of formal clusters and waves of attendant nymphs, framing and concealing a dream princess before the Prince's enraptured gaze. In Balanchine's ballet, the ballerina is as intimately connected to her attendants as a Rambler rose to its vine.

At the beginning of the Stravinsky *Symphony in Three Movements*, women in white leotards arrayed along a diagonal whirl their arms, lunge, prance in place, paw the air, while a male soloist vaults into the air in front of them. As critic Nancy Goldner pointed out, they make you think of a Broadway chorus and a machine at the same time; it's the implacable destruction-machine in *Giselle* that they bring to mind most vibrantly, even though they're anything but wan and fated: "space-age Wilis," Goldner called them.



The "space-age wilis" of *Symphony in Three Movements*. Photograph by Martha Swope.



Gelsey Kirkland and Conrad Ludlow in the Second Movement of *Symphony in C*.
Photograph by Martha Swope.

Images that recall *Swan Lake* surface in several ballets. In *Piano Concerto No. 2* (originally *Ballet Imperial*) and *Diamonds* (the last third of *Jewels*), they must have been summoned up for Balanchine by the Tchaikovsky music. In the case of the *adagio* in *Symphony in C*, he may have been struck by the resemblance between the haunting oboe melody that George Bizet made the heart of his second movement and the oboe melody that tells of the enchanted maiden Odette in *Swan Lake*.

In the *adagios* of all three ballets, the ballerina seems affected by something outside the circle of her partner's arms, something beyond the confines of the stage, whether it is a thing she appears to desire—as in *Diamonds*—or an inevitable force drawing her—as in *Symphony in C* and *Piano Concerto No. 2*.

The second movement of this last ballet might almost be a distillation

and reassessment of one of the dilemmas of *Swan Lake's* hero: to be world-weary and disinterested in the marriageable princesses presented for his approval and to desire an enigmatic and probably unattainable woman. But unlike Siegfried, this "prince" doesn't act polite boredom, restlessness, desperation. He lifts his arms, and small chains of women attach themselves to him on either side, as if summoned. When he presses his arms forward or back, the women *bourrée* in response. Because those farthest from him have farthest to go, he seems to be lashing ribbons of women about, or trying to use them as wings, scarcely aware of what he's doing. The woman we know to be his partner appears. After they dance a tender *pas de deux*, she *bourrées* backward away from him, down an avenue of women, and disappears. He lifts his arms, and the women re-form their chains. Although acting has played no part of this, you see loss, resignation, proffered consolation. As Balanchine once said of both music and his kind of dancing, "The dramatic elements are there, of course, but they are fused and transfigured."

And the dancers' "story" doesn't carry over into the first and third acts of the ballet, where they are every inch the happy rulers of this opulent kingdom of dancing.

When Balanchine presented his first work in America, for what was initially called The American Ballet,* he had to make do with the dancers he could get, choosing the best of those who were trying out his classes, recruiting from, say, Catherine Littlefield's new company in Philadelphia. The men had varied backgrounds: Lew Christensen came from vaudeville and Broadway; Charles Laskey had been in the Humphrey-Weidman company. There were strong and personable performers among these first "Balanchine dancers"—Leda Anchutina, Holly Howard, Gisella Caccialanza, Annabelle Lyon, William Dollar, Christensen, and others. But as for the corps de ballet, a snapshot of a spacing rehearsal for the first performance of *Serenade* in 1934 at Felix Warburg's estate in White Plains, New York, shows a group of predominantly chunky women in bathing suits and shorts,

*The original company founded by Kirstein and Balanchine made its official debut in 1935. From 1935 to 1938, it was the ballet company of the Metropolitan Opera. In 1941 it merged briefly with Ballet Caravan (1936–1939), a company founded by Kirstein to represent ballets on strictly American subjects, and, as American Ballet Caravan, toured South America. Between 1935 and 1946, Balanchine freelanced as a choreographer of opera, musical comedy, film, and ballet, was associated with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo from 1944 to 1946. In 1946 he and Kirstein came together again in Ballet Society, which, in 1948, became a constituent of the New York City Center, under the title of the New York City Ballet.

far removed in terms of training and self-image from today's lithe, long-muscled dancers. (The life was different too: today, NYCB dancers tour little and by jet; those earlier dancers had to drive to performances, maybe load and unload the bus, occasionally change the gelatins on the lights.)

During the forties and fifties, dancers who came to Balanchine from other companies began to adjust themselves to an image of what they sensed he needed. He wanted speed, flexibility, long lines, and no star manners. The ballerina he had most admired during his St. Petersburg student days had been the atypically slim and cool Elisaveta Gerdt. "You make yourself a Balanchine ballerina by dancing his ballets," said Melissa Hayden. "Your legs change, your body changes, you become a filly."



George Balanchine teaching a professional class at the School of American Ballet in the forties. Mary Ellen Moylan is first at the barre.

As school and company developed, it gradually became apparent that dancers could be chosen and prepared by the teachers to Balanchine's specifications—as if being selectively bred. People watching rehearsals are often surprised to find that the women are not *all* extremely tall and thin with long legs, a short torso, a long neck, and a small head ("pinheads," the critic R. P. Blackmur called them). Among the advanced students in the School of American Ballet, you can see already the widened rib cage, the high extensions, the slightly hollowed back (as if when the women lift their legs behind them in *arabesque*, one buttock will somehow fold up into that "pocket"). Their feet on pointe are strong but almost prehensile; Balanchine had said they should be like an elephant's trunk. He wanted "big girls with long legs. Not small girls with big heads." He got them. He wanted men with feet as quick, extensions as high, bodies as flexible as the women's, and as American society began to temper its disapproval of ballet as a career for men, he got boy students young enough to mold that way. As much as the principal male dancers vary, the men in the corps de ballet tend toward short, broad torsos and slim, articulate limbs—a look that's emphasized in Balanchine's "practice clothes" ballets by the black tights and white T-shirts that they wear.

When you watch the New York City Ballet dancing, the women's pointework doesn't come off as a stunt. It enables them to move more rapidly; it elongates their silhouette. Balanchine's appreciation of bigness, his desire to enlarge the scale of classical dancing involved other adjustments, some of which violate the strict academic principles that Petipa honored. Balanchine dancers are musically precise, precise in terms of energy, but not always precise in terms of "placement." They lift their hips in order to get their legs higher. They veer off the vertical plumb line. Their hands tend to flap, their chins to tilt. Their *port de bras* aren't always gracefully curved like those of the English dancers; Clive Barnes chided them for that once. But the strain of Russian classicism cultivated by such British choreographers as Balanchine's peer, Frederick Ashton, fits the English landscape and the English temperament; things are held slightly in check, moderately scaled. The British dancers seem to take up less space—to feel that they have a *right* to only so much space, however brilliantly they may fill it. As Balanchine has commented, English gardens and meadows are less expansive and more precisely laid out than waving Russian wheatfields. Perhaps the American sense of space reminded him of home.

It is no secret that George Balanchine adored women dancers. He told Lincoln Kirstein he'd come to America because it was the country that had

e, long-
ers tour
maybe
hts.)
n other
used he
rs. The
ays had
rself a
"Your



Ballet

produced Ginger Rogers. He married four of "his" dancers—Tamara Geva, Vera Zorina, Maria Tallchief, Tanaquil LeClercq—and was romantically attached to several others, including Alexandra Danilova. Muses were essential to him, but even dancers he didn't fall in love with, like Melissa Hayden, received roles tailored to their particular gifts or designed to extend them away from what was comfortable and toward what he saw as their essential nature.

Petipa, coping with royal favoritism, had to satisfy his leading dancers. Balanchine, answerable to no one on artistic matters, often did. "Which leg would you rather lift, dear?" "Which way do you want to turn?" Dancers new to roles often inspired him to alter choreography, or even reconsider issues of ballet technique. Suzanne Farrell thinks that an injury that made it temporarily impossible for her to work on half-toe, although she could manage full pointe, led him to expand his lexicon of pointework. Mary Ellen Moylan, who worked with Balanchine during the years he choreographed for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in America, says that Marie-Jeanne's way of thrusting her hips forward, rather than simply arching her back above the waist influenced Balanchine dancers of the 1940's. Did Balanchine teach this to Marie-Jeanne or appropriate it from her?

Even though company style and choreography alter subtly over the years, Balanchine ballets still resonate with the image of the ballerinas who created the leading roles in them: the powerful and icily shimmering *Firebird* with Maria Tallchief, for example, or *La Valse* and its doomed, slightly decadent young girl with Tanaquil LeClercq, or the subtle coquetry of *Gounod Symphony* with Violette Verdy, or the elaborately erotic *Bugaku* with Allegra Kent (in LeClercq's affectionately irreverent view, "a rubber orchid"). The dazzling footwork of *Ballo della Regina* comes from Merrill Ashley and the springy dash of *Square Dance* from Patricia Wilde. The list could go on and on.

Balanchine's last major muse—the one for whom he created many glorious roles, the one whose influence on company style has been most obvious is Suzanne Farrell. During her first years with the company (1963–1968) and after her return from several seasons with Maurice Béjart's company in Brussels, Balanchine seemed to want to see what light her dancing would shed on almost every role he ever made. As Arlene Croce has pointed out, her success led first to eager, often clumsy imitations of her, and finally to a deeper influence. Farrell's musicality, her recklessness were inimitable, but the luxurious scale of her dancing, the alluring blend of speed and softness could be attempted.

Geva,
ally at-
essen-
ayden,
them
sential

ncers.
ch leg
ancers
nsider
made
could
Mary
oreo-
farie-
g her
l Bal-

years,
cre-
rebird
ghtly
unod
Al-
id").
and
o on

glo-
nost
63-
om-
cing
nted
ally
ble,
and



Suzanne Farrell in *Don Quixote* (1965). Photograph by Martha Swope.

Farrell combines the insouciant, occasionally vulgar athleticism of a drum majorette with an elegance and purity that look native to her. She was up to any aspect of Balanchine's vision of woman: the spun-sugar ladies who dance the "Fairy Variations" in Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty*; muse—angeli-

cally tender, but unattainable; enchantress; hoyden; precocious nymphet.

It is one of the curious and rather deplorable facts of the ballet world that performers are known as—and often call themselves—“boys” and “girls.” In Petipa’s day, dancers had long careers; today’s accent on youth and ballet’s athleticism usually force a dancer into retirement around the age of forty, so prolonged youth is cultivated. But Balanchine always adored very young girl dancers of brilliance—ones who have the appearance of beautiful women, but seem as yet touchingly unaware of their own power. (The revealing metaphor he fetched up in an interview with Simon Volkov was that of Parmesan cheese: he preferred it young and moist, not old and hard.) His appetite for dewy dancers was already strong in 1933 when he chose Irina Baronova, Tamara Toumanova, and Tatiana Riabouchinska—fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen respectively—for René Blum’s *Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo*. But those three were baby divas, their worldly glamour combining piquantly with their presumed innocence. Tanaquil LeClercq, who made her debut in 1946 at seventeen, presented a different sort of girlish image: sometimes the impudent, crazy-legged tomboy came to the fore; sometimes she had the vulnerable elegance of a young girl at her first grown-up party.

It was perhaps LeClercq who made plain a kinship between Balanchine’s image of woman and that of contemporary fashion designers. There were significant differences, of course: the designers were more interested in androgyny, but just as they thought that their garments hung most appetizingly on tall, boyishly thin bodies, so he thought that dancing draped on a lean frame became purer and more legible. (And many men in the audience found that look alluring, equating what may have been actual hunger on the part of the dancers with sexual appetite, or remembering the coarse old saw “The closer to the bone, the sweeter the meat.”)

The men in the New York City Ballet are slim, but not unnaturally so. However, for the women, extreme thinness has become the norm, despite the relish Balanchine occasionally took in generously proportioned dancers like Gloria Govrin or Jillana. If anything, the sleek, pared-down look has intensified. As Violette Verdy says, “These days everybody’s a greyhound.” And when, according to a recent study conducted by Dr. L. M. Vincent, many ballet students’ physical maturation is delayed because of a low percentage of body fat, it’s possible for a five-foot six-inch dancer to weigh under one hundred pounds, and have no breasts or hips to speak of.

Yet, perhaps because dancers always look larger onstage than they actually are, the Balanchine woman in performances today rarely looks like a large, starving child. She tends to appear extremely slender, but also volup-



Balanchine rehearses Tanaquil LeClercq and Francisco Moncion in *Symphony in C*.
Photograph by George Platt Lynes.

tuous. Her technical largesse imparts a kind of maturity to her stage persona. This bevy of contemporary nymphs is innocent but worldly, passionate but cool, soft but strong. Kent and Farrell were the prototypes. Their pale, sweet, blunt little faces and mousy hair could make their powerful sinuous limbs seem to be acting out passions beyond their comprehension. Yet they could move with great strength and speed and authority, their musicality imbuing them with a semblance of spiritual knowledge. They are, in a way, the fulfillment of an image of American dancers that Balanchine articulated in 1944 when he praised the way they could express "clean emotion angelically . . . a quality supposedly enjoyed by the angels, who, when they relate a tragic situation, do not themselves suffer."

* * *

THE ACADEMY RENEWED

APOLLON MUSAGÈTE

(*Apollo, Leader of the Muses*)

June 12, 1928

Paris

Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt

Priority:

Since Nijinsky's *Jeux* (1913), the classic academic traditional idiom enjoyed slight impetus forward. Diaghilev's revival of Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* (1921) confirmed the vitality of an inheritance without extending it. Léonide Massine's best work (1915–23) depended on revivals of past styles or national motifs expressed in pantomime. With *Apollon*, George Balanchine, in the guise of inverted homage to *la danse d'école*, recapitulated three centuries of formal development while projecting an unlimited future. Supported by Stravinsky's reillumination of many of ballet's most articulate composers, *Apollon* is a synthesis of an academy transformed and launched toward twentieth-century classicism. Focusing on four first-dancers, one male virtuoso with his trio of ballerinas, Balanchine, in a cumulative succession of solo variations, duets, and supported adagio, introduced unfamiliar silhouettes and novel plasticity, renovating patterns assumed outworn by inventing sequences of an intimate and, at the time, outrageous originality. Newness caused laughter; deformation or inversion of classroom routines evoked dismay, providing Diaghilev with still another proof of his power to shock, and revitalize.

Son of a composer famed as the "Georgian Glinka" and a skillful classic dancer, Balanchine graduated from the State Ballet School, Leningrad, in 1921, and later studied at the Musical Conservatory. After leaving Russia in 1924, he abruptly became Diaghilev's final ballet master, despite his extreme youth. From the beginning, Balanchine had been closely associated with Stravinsky, with *Pulcinella* (in Russia, 1920) and *Le Chant du Rossignol* (for Diaghilev, 1925), and

the continuing association between choreographer and composer over fifty years has resulted in the dominant international repertory for the second half of the century.

Precedent:

Le Pas de Quatre (1845), canonizing four Romantic ballerinas, is a forerunner, with one important difference. Music had been tactful but unimportant; emphasis was on a capitalization of four exploitable personalities. In *Apollon*, transformed echoes of Lully, Handel, Rameau, Glinka, Delibes, and Tchaikovsky distilled, reversed, enlarged, and partnered designs grander than any single star dancer's requirements. *Apollon* emphasized dancing, not dancers, being no flashy divertissement, but a coherent extended composition. Its atmosphere was like that of some unhurried *ballet de cour*, from deliberate narrative prelude to crowning apotheosis. Stravinsky, fixed in the mind of the public as a Slavic nationalist, tried "to find a melo-dism free of folk lore." His subject suggested "not so much a plot as a style."

The year before, Jean Cocteau and Stravinsky had produced the nobly static oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, its text in Latin; Picasso's recent monumental paintings reminiscent of Pompeian murals and incised Greek mirror backs led to a Neoclassic revival. But allusions to antiquity in *Apollon* were less pictorial or decorative than metrical and rhythmic and lay ultimately in the serene ambience of its steps. A modern Parisian rather than a Hellenistic or Napoleonic vision of Parnassus, it invoked echoes of the Versailles of Louis XIV, who also danced the Sun.

Politics:

The Library of Congress, Washington, awarded Stravinsky the commission (1927), stipulating, due to its small stage, no more than six dancers. Adolph Bolm (1884–1951), a former important character

dancer for Diaghilev, then teaching in Chicago, made dances suitable for his own students. Diaghilev availed himself of the published score after the American première. His company, now in exile and separated from Soviet sources, was no longer strong in soloists, although he had recruited some excellent English dancers. With Balanchine came a handful of well-trained Russians from the Leningrad school, including Tamara Gevergeva and Alexandra Danilova. Serge Lifar (b. 1905), a pupil of Bronislava Nijinska in Kiev, interested Diaghilev, who wished to display him as a potential star. Balanchine took advantage of Lifar's brusque coltish athleticism with such insight that sometimes it was assumed Lifar was *Apollon's* choreographer as well as hero.

Diaghilev was pleased with his success, but claimed Balanchine's variation for Terpsichore was "too long" and temporarily cut it. The real reason was that he was enraged by Lord Rothermere, the press baron, who had paid for two seasons in London and was promising a third. He had demanded his protégée, Alicia Nikitina, be given a leading role, which was done, although Balanchine desired Alexandra Danilova for Terpsichore. When Rothermere unexpectedly withdrew his support, Diaghilev vented his fury on the dancer, eliminating her exquisite solo.

Plot or Pretext:

Stravinsky wrote: "The real subject of *Apollon* . . . is versification, which implies something arbitrary and artificial to most people, though to me art is arbitrary and must be artificial." Hence, its drama derives from an ordering in art.

I. Prologue: Night. Birth of Apollo: on a high rock, his mother, Leto, in birth pangs, delivers him. Bound in swaddling bands, he is freed by attendant nymphs, who bring him his divine lute. Tentatively he starts

Kirstein: Four centuries of Ballet

to move, from infantile hesitance to mature proficiency. The nymphs, setting his hand on a lyre, demonstrate music's power. The young god teaches himself to dance by measuring rhythm, tone, and accent.

II. Parnassus: Sunlight. Apollo, still boyish and angular, grows to full godhead. Calliope (poetics, metrics, rhythm), Polymnia (mimicry), finally, Terpsichore (gesture, dance) offer their symbols—scroll, mask, and lyre—and are recognized by his divine authority after each shows her special talents. Calliope's variation, with cello solo, was suggested by one of Pushkin's Alexandrine couplets. Polymnia's *allegro* scurries on toe points. Terpsichore's *allegretto* is climaxed by four huge sustained attitudes. The muses quit the stage for Apollo's grand variation: broad leaps, delicate beats, sweeping arms—a huge, complex definition of the modern male dancer as heroic athlete. The ensuing duet with Terpsichore, his chosen companion, leads logically from the final pose of Apollo's variation to an echo or "quotation" from Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, in which God's fingertip summons Adam to plastic life. Their *pas de deux*, punctuated by peculiar and ingenious supporting figures, also suggests flying and swimming.

In the lively coda, Apollo drives the Muses, harnessed à la *troïka* for his chariot, to a brisk gallop. Then, in grave procession, the god ascends Parnassus. In the original, a horse-drawn quadriga descended from heaven.

Production:

Diaghilev, desiring to distinguish a reborn classicism from outworn versions of Greece formulated by such archeological painters as Alma-Tadema or Puvis de Chavannes, commanded scenery from a Sunday painter, André Bauchant, in the line of the Douanier Rousseau, but blander. In truth, Diag-

hilev had need of a contemporary Poussin, and such décor was finally provided by Pavel Tchelitchev for the Buenos Aires production of 1942. In 1928, however, fearful of identification with such "Greek" works as *Narcisse* (1911), *Daphnis and Chloe* (1912), or *Midas* (1914)—to say nothing of Nijinsky's *Faune*—Diaghilev wished a naive, or at least a new, eye on traditional antiquity. Bauchant provided equivalent to neither music nor dancing.

The costumes, after several compromises between full-length ballet skirts and modern sport dress, were designed by the great *couturière* Madame Chanel, who bound the Muses' bodices with men's cravats. Apollo, wiggled in gold, wore a scarlet tunic. In recent revivals Balanchine eliminated all adornment, concentrating on naked structure, as generated by melodic and rhythmic plasticity in the music. He said: "A choreographer can't invent rhythms; he only reflects them in movement. The body is his medium and, unaided, the body will improvise for a short breath. But the organization of rhythm on a grand scale is a sustained process. It is a function of the musical mind."

The élite at the first Paris perform-

ance was shocked at both musical style and substance. Stravinsky used only strings. After *Le Sacre* and *Les Noçes* with their full apparatus, this was taken for poverty. There were but four soloist dancers. Detection of echoes from three centuries was interpreted as an anthology of familiar quotations; homage to Delibes and Debussy was all but insulting. Educated by Stravinsky's cacophony, had we not got beyond revivalism? The score was dismissed as pastiche, the choreography as perverse. Diaghilev had tamed a hypersnobbish Parisian public, which followed fashion at one remove. It was the index of his daring that he led rather than listened to it.

In spite of this, *Apollon* enjoyed a *succès d'estime* among the *cognoscenti* whom Diaghilev always commanded. Stravinsky attributed the ultimate triumph and lasting power "to the beauty of Balanchine's choreography, especially to constructions such as the 'troïka' in the coda, and the 'wheelbarrow' at the start, in which two girls support a third carrying Apollo's lute. . . . *Apollon* was my first attempt to compose a large-scale work in which contrasts of volumes replace contrasts of instrumental colors."



429. Balanchine and Stravinsky. New York, 1957.

320.

390.

435.

429.

APOLLON MUSAGÈTE, 1928



430. 431.



432. 433.



432, 433. "Greek" costumes, 1796 and 1900.

430. Apollo. Greece, c. 320 B.C.

431. Apollo. France, c. 1750.

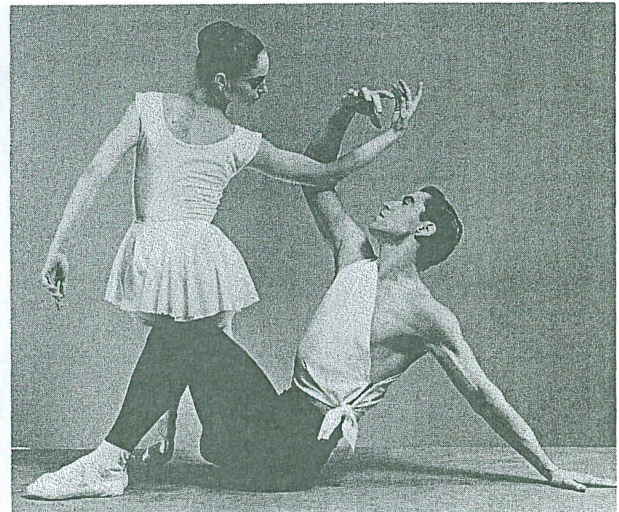
434.



435.



436.



437.

434-37. *Apollo*. New York, 1956-65.