



New York City Ballet in "Serenade" by George Balanchine. Photograph by Steven Caras

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## Ode to Serenade

*A Conversation with Toni Bentley*

**T**o many dancers, Balanchine is a figure so imbued with history, he's almost not real. He lives on through his 465 works, which we study in dance history classes, watch onstage, and—if we're lucky—learn ourselves. He's almost been stripped of humanity, raised up to such a high status that it's easy to forget that he—in his own words—"pulled the toilet chain for the same reason you do." Toni Bentley, and her latest book, *Serenade*, are here to remind us.

*Serenade* is Bentley's sixth book, and her fourth dealing with the New York City Ballet. She started writing it in 2007, and originally intended it to be about Balanchine and his first American work, *Serenade*. But between that time and its release this spring, it grew into what it is today: part memoir, part history, and part love letter—to Balanchine, to *Serenade*, and to a life given to ballet.

"I did a lot of research and wrote maybe 15-20 thousand words, but then I just couldn't do it, Bentley says. "I put it aside for many years and did other things, but it just kept haunting me."

15 years and a new publisher later, the shapeshifting book is no longer weighing on her. In fact, like ballet, it's lighter than air. Bentley's words dance across the page almost like they've been set to music themselves, illuminating the man, the music, and the stories that we revere, recognize, and love, but—until now—perhaps have not truly known.

We spoke with Bentley about her book, the culture of ballet, what it means to be a dancer *and* a writer, and who Balanchine really, truly was.

**You've written extensively about NYCB, Balanchine, and your story as a ballerina.**



Toni Bentley. Photograph by Clayton Cubitt

***Serenade*, though, weaves it all together. How did you approach this book differently?**

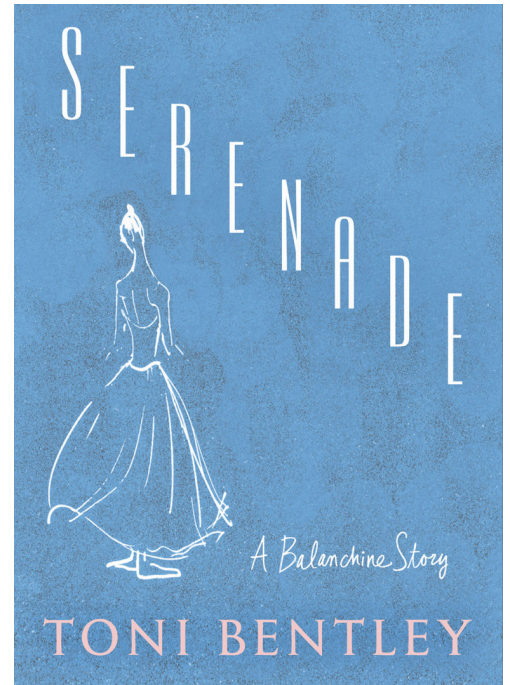
I have a horror of boring books, and certainly boring ballet books that don't do justice to the art. I feel like things like dancing are almost impossible to write about because it's an in-the-moment, three-dimensional form, so I sort of began from the position that I'd failed before I started. I didn't want to write a straight history because I'm a very personal writer, so I took this leap to do something that I didn't have the courage to do before, which is to write about anything and everything to do with this subject that I love. It was simply my choice to write about Tchaikovsky, to write about Petipa, to write about Taglioni, to write about pointe shoes, to write about turnout, and to put in my own memoir.

**And in the book, you describe the simplest of ballet steps and choreography—like turnout, parallel, and the opening formation of *Serenade*—in a way that illuminates them and inscribes a deep meaning. Have you always thought about dance in this way?**

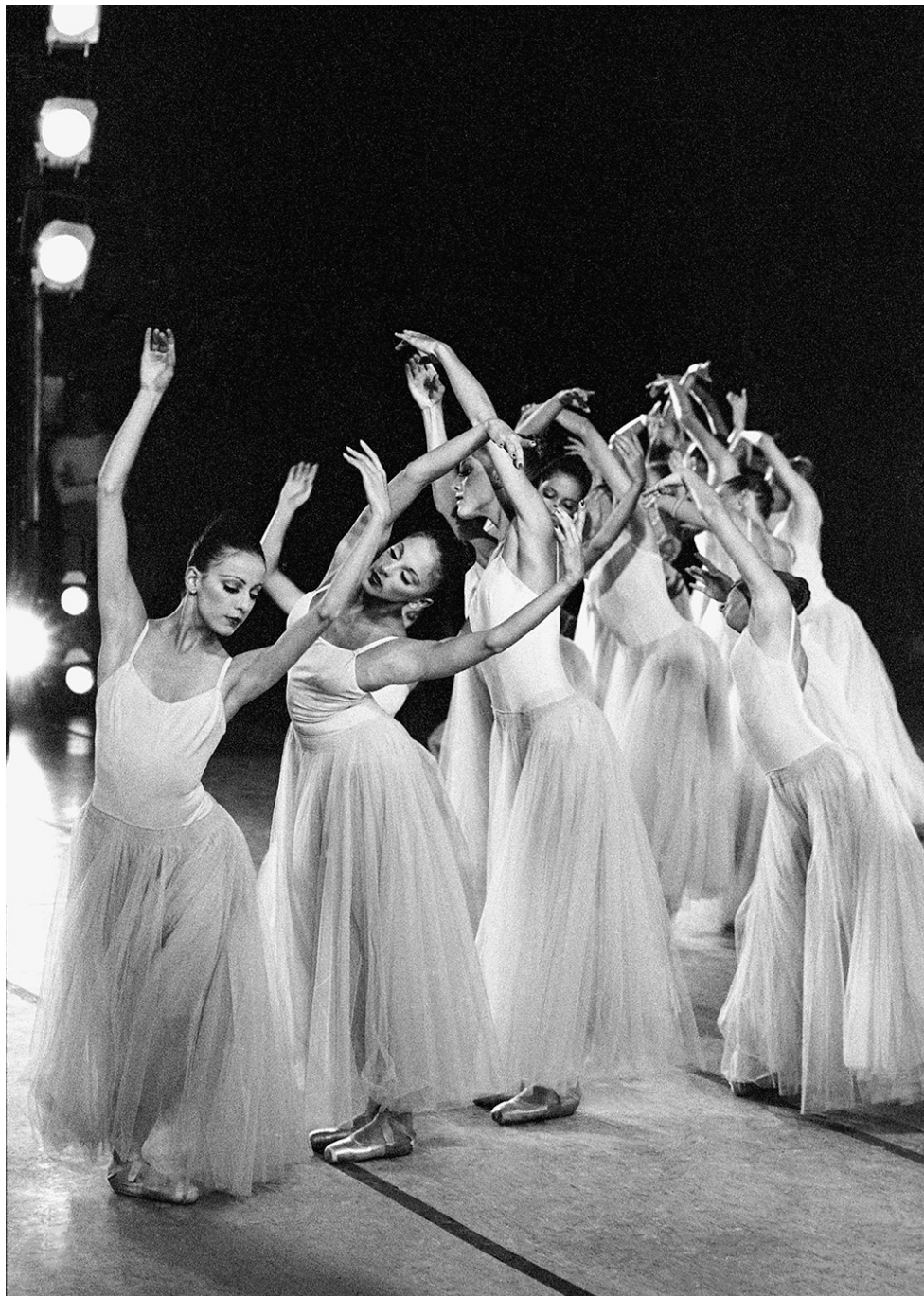
Well, no. When I was young and dancing, I was like every other dancer striving to make my tendus better, my pointe better, my dancing better. It was just all on the absolute technique and being as good as I could be. But over time, after I stopped dancing and got older, it's just how I think of ballet now. That's maybe just kind of the way it comes out of me as a writer.

**Yet you wrote and published your first book, *Winter Season*, when you were still dancing. In fact, in *Serenade*, you recall Balanchine's greeting—"Ah, the writer"—when you visited him sick in the hospital. At that point, did you think of yourself as a writer?**

No. I still don't, really. I mean, it's sort of a fact at this point, six books later, that I'm a writer. When Balanchine said that to me, *Winter Season* was very possibly the last book he read before he was too ill to do so. And I'd heard that he'd liked it very much. But in that moment, there were two things: on the one hand, I was surprised he knew who I was because you just never think that a very great person is going to recognize you, and also, I wanted to be a dancer. So while I didn't take 'Ah, the writer,' badly, it wasn't a big thrill, either. Now I see it as incredibly lovely. And perhaps he was right. I am more of an inborn writer than I was a dancer.



*Serenade* by Toni Bentley.



Toni Bentley, Bonita Borne, Barbara Seibert with dancers of New York City Ballet in "Serenade" by George Balanchine.

Photograph by Steven Caras

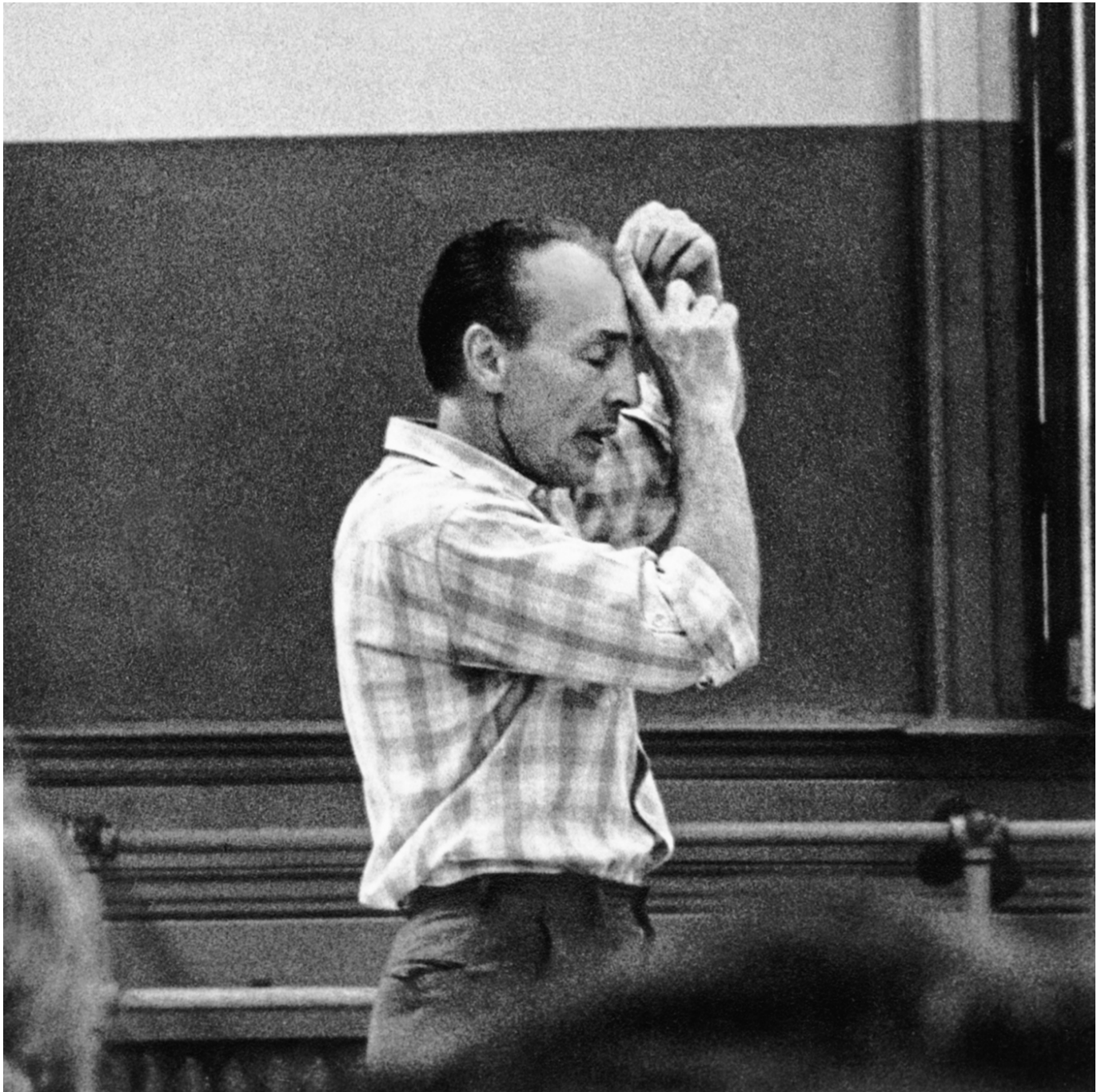
**If you didn't see yourself as a writer, what compelled you to write and publish *Winter Season*?**

I would write every night after performance, when I would go for my single big meal of the day—in typical dancer fashion—at a place called The American Restaurant on about 70th and Broadway. I would write 11-12 pages on legal pads. It was just pouring out of me because in writing I had found a place of greater freedom than in dancing, where there's so much competition and so much striving and this endless sense of not being good enough. I wasn't ever going to show it to anyone, but then I kind of had a midlife crisis at age 21 and I left the company for a few months. I started thinking and I was curious to know if what I'd written had any value besides for myself. My mother typed up five pages for me and I didn't know where to send them, except I knew that Robert Gottlieb was on the board of NYCB and he was the editor-in-chief of Knopf at the time. I took the pages and stuck them in the mail, not knowing if he'd ever get them. I eventually got this letter back from Anne Freedgood, who was a colleague of his at the time, saying that she'd like to see more pages and I had to say, 'Well, they're not typed,' and I sent the 12 notebooks over and three or four different people deciphered my handwriting in the

offices at Random House. That turned into *Winter Season*.

**Since then, you've continued to write a great deal about Balanchine, despite the fact that—especially in recent years—the dance community has had periodic outcries of 'too much Balanchine.' Yet, you're here with *Serenade*, with more to say about him.**

This is inevitable with any great artist. He's something you have to deal with. I remember Lincoln Kirstein once said, 'You may or may not like Wagner, but he's there.' It's a force that has to be dealt with. And yes, of course there's always been all kinds of criticisms that will go on to the end of time about him, but in this book, I just wrote what I know.



George Balanchine. Image from *Serenade* by Toni Bentley

**And in the book, you refer to him as an almost godlike presence, which could raise questions for some about male/female power dynamics in dance, but also underscores the fact that you know what many don't: who Balanchine really was as a person. Is there a**



difference between how people today see his power and how you—and the other dancers who knew him—saw it?

He was entirely powerful to us. If you're in the face of a powerful man that's some awful predator, that's absolutely horrendous and people should be going to court and going to jail. But if you're in the presence of a powerful man who is a very great artist and who is teaching you amazing things, you're thrilled. He didn't try to be powerful with us. He didn't want to be otherworldly and mythic at all. He knew we regarded him that way, but he did not encourage it. He was a very humble man. He had power because he gave the world a beauty they'd never seen before. He never claimed he had power; we gave it to him.

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### Sophie Bress

Sophie Bress is an arts and culture journalist based in Salt Lake City, Utah. In her writing, she focuses on placing the arts within our cultural conversations and recognizing art makers as essential elements of our societal framework. Sophie holds a Master's degree from the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism. She has been published in Dance Magazine, L.A. Dance Chronicle, The Argonaut, Festival Advisor, and more.

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