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‘Serenade’ Review: Balanchine’s Art in Formation

An unabashed, heartfelt love letter to the famed choreographer and the first ballet he set for American dancers.



The New York City Ballet during a 2016 performance of ‘Serenade.’

PHOTO: PAUL KOLNIK

By Moira Hodgson

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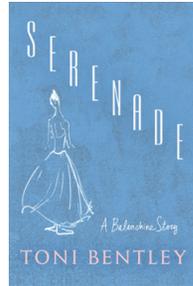
In 1934, a few months after his arrival in New York, George Balanchine choreographed “Serenade.” It was his first ballet for American dancers, a seminal work that marked the way he was to reshape and streamline classical ballet over the next five decades. “Serenade” was Romantic yet revolutionary. It had no “story”; there were no sylphs, princes or fairy tales.

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years, performing in “Serenade” more than 50 times. In this beautiful, affecting book she writes: “Never before had a ballet moved like this,

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Serenade: A Balanchine Story

By Toni Bentley
Pantheon
320 pages

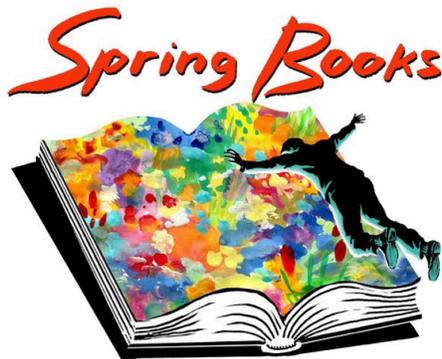


like peeling waves of ocean,
like rising and falling tides,
with eternity always near, not
as illusion but as place.”

Set to Tchaikovsky’s lush
“Serenade for Strings in C,”
the curtain rises on a tableau
of 17 women in pale-blue calf-
length tulle dresses, aligned in
two diamond-shaped
formations. They are standing

still in an evanescent moonlit night, their right arms raised to the side with their palms facing the audience. Slowly they lower their arms as if to shield their faces from the moon’s rays. It is as though they are facing some “intolerable lunar light,” wrote Lincoln Kirstein, the company’s co-founder, who had brought Balanchine to America. Balanchine told one dancer it was the light of God, too bright for humans to bear.

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Thirty years old and barely
speaking English, he had come
from St. Petersburg via Paris,
where he’d choreographed for
Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets
Russes, among other projects.
As a child in the czar’s Russia,
Balanchine had been a dancer
at the Imperial Ballet School,
but during the revolution he
faced starvation. He left for
Europe in 1924. In 1929, the
year Diaghilev died,
Balanchine came down with
pneumonia and tuberculosis.
Portions of his lungs were
permanently damaged. But he
survived, and in October 1933
he arrived in New York.

With Kirstein and the
philanthropist Edward Warburg, Balanchine founded the School of
American Ballet. That same year he created “Serenade” to teach his
students how to dance, improve their technique and learn his style. He
choreographed it one morning on 17 girls because they happened to be
in the studio at the time. Another day, nine more girls came, so he
added a dance for them, then for six more. When a girl fell during one

rehearsal, Balanchine famously retained the fall. “And so by chance,” Ms. Bentley comments, “this became a remarkable moment in the ballet, and quite possibly changed the entire trajectory of the piece as we now know it—later he has another dancer fall to the stage floor twice more, to even greater effect.” He continued tinkering with the ballet until 1981—two years before his death—changing costumes and sets and adding six men.

Ms. Bentley lovingly describes the work as a map of Balanchine’s soul. “The cartography within its music, its steps, and its dances of loss, of love, of blindness, of destiny, of fortitude, of a beauty that defines beauty. In its portraits of women—its glorious, untethered women who display such tenderness, such vulnerability, and yet are propelled by a ferocious independence—lie a vision so clear as to render ‘Serenade’ his autobiography, a story carved in three dimensions, when he was just thirty but already fully born.”

The author was 17 when she first performed in “Serenade.” When it begins, the women are instructed to stand with their feet parallel, not a classic ballet position. Quite suddenly, they all turn their feet out. It is a dramatic moment. “We did as we were told.” Ms. Bentley writes. “But never, never before in all our many years of training (most of us, like myself, had already been dancing for over a decade) had a teacher asked us to stand in parallel. Ballet is turned out. Always. Turnout—the rotation of both legs from the hip sockets in opposite, outward directions, simultaneously—was everything, the core of ballet itself. It was what we practiced in class all day, and then in our beds all night. I often went to sleep with my feet together and both knees bent and pointed to the far sides like a little frog to be even more turned out in the morning.”

Ms. Bentley, a poetic writer, eloquently captures the essence of “Serenade.” “Here are the jazzy hips; the fleet of Amazon women; the protean nymphs; the unattainable beloved; the mad running, running, running; the lavish sways; the off-balance turns; the dangerous leaps into destiny; the falls of rebirth; the transient romance; the less transient tragedy; and the terrible solitude of it all.”

She dissects this 32-minute ballet in precise, unflinching detail, interweaving reminiscences of her time at the School of American Ballet, which she attended from the age of 10, and life inside the New York City Ballet. She was dismayed by her feet. “How I envied the other girls for their voluptuously curved feet. They became, to me, the members of a club I could never join. I was always standing in the portal of that arched cathedral with my half-flat feet looking in at those blessed girls whose parents’ genetics had not failed them.” Feet are an issue for dancers. I once heard the British ballerina Beryl Grey in a

rehearsal berating a group of sylphs for having feet like “kippers.”

Ms. Bentley retired at the age of 27 after developing arthritis in her hip. Decades later she shocked the doctor by asking him to give her the joint he'd removed (she helpfully provides the recipe for its preservation). She keeps the bones in a small wooden box Balanchine had painted black and decorated with small red flowers and green trellises. “And now it is the casket of my career. What enabled me disabled me.”

After she left dancing she became a full-time writer. She has published five books, among them her excellent “Winter Season: A Dancer’s Journal” (1982), written when she was 22 and still in the company. In “Serenade” she alternates her descriptions of the ballet with revealing biographies of Tchaikovsky, the great choreographer Marius Petipa (“Swan Lake,” “Sleeping Beauty,” “Giselle”) and Marie Taglioni, the first ballerina to dance on the tips of her toes. Ms. Bentley also provides a brief history of ballet, which was introduced at the court of Louis XIV. The king was a keen dancer and established the world’s first ballet school, where Pierre Beauchamps, his dance teacher, invented turnout and the five positions of the feet that are followed to this day.

The core of Ms. Bentley’s book is an unabashed, heartfelt love letter to Balanchine, “this compact, graceful, exotic Russian man.” She writes that despite his power (absolute), he emanated stillness and calm. “There was, I think, not one of us who did not have a full-blown romance—conscious or not—with this man, the kind only young girls can have: unconsummated, consuming, life-changing, and one-sided. . . . It is the kind of hungry desire that conjures a young girl’s energy to levels unexplained by science and that, among other things, literally took us up upon our toe tips.”

Now, nearly 40 years after his death, Ms. Bentley is still haunted by the ballet. “ ‘Serenade’ is a slant shadow on my heart. She bifurcates my being, my life.” This moving, heartfelt book will not only appeal to lovers of ballet, it will make wistful reading for those dancers who will never have the good fortune to work with such a genius as George Balanchine.

—Ms. Hodgson is the author of “*It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food.*”

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