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"There has neve

Classical Dance in Print

Published: November 30, 1986

To the Editor:

Gelsey Kirkland's "Dancing on My Grave" (review, Oct. 19) epitomizes and carries to an extreme the rash of books and articles that in the past few years have launched a violent backlash against one of the few flourishing tributes to human nobility in our century: classical ballet. "Off Balance" by Suzanne Gordon, "The Unmaking of a Dancer" by Joan Brady, articles by Ron Reagan, our President's son and a dancer who got out just in time, and now Ms. Kirkland's autobiography (written with her husband, Greg Lawrence) - all make desperate pleas on behalf of the poor, pathetic, uneducated dancers.

These books are the output of passionate frustration. Yes, dancing is very, very hard; not everyone is able to sustain its demands, not only of body but of spirit. Classical ballet does not allow for mediocrity. Classical dancing, at its best, is about achieving a form of dignity, grace and beauty that is a very far cry from the "self-expression" that so relentlessly preoccupies Ms. Kirkland.

There is a crusade by these writers to save dancers, especially those "victimized" by George Balanchine, the major culprit. It is a strange notion to those of us who were asked to join the New York City Ballet and thought it the high point of our lives. We have not changed our minds, but apparently we have been brainwashed. It is interesting to contemplate what the story of Balanchine's "domination" would be from one who voluntarily subjected her artistic life for over 25 years to Balanchine. Suzanne Farrell's "story" is not available on the printed page but in a much more lucid and eloquent form: in her dancing. Those who have been privileged to witness this statement of dedication, faith and spiritual fullness might see these narratives in another perspective.

Ms. Kirkland's analysis of herself cannot hide the lack of the essential requirement of her art: belief in it. Her book is not a revelatory account of the perils of a dancer's career. It is the self-indulgent exploration of a mind bent on self-destruction. That she chose a classical art form as the place to "experience herself" is not rare, only boring.

The deepest offense is her dedication to Joe Duell, "that the cry for help might yet be heard." Duell, a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, committed suicide several months before the publication of this book. That Ms. Kirkland should presume to understand Joe's pain, to identify herself with his reasons and his ethics and to use them for her own purpose, sensationalism, is a devastating affront to him and those who loved

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Page 1 of 2

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Photo of Gelsey Kirkland

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