

# Book Review

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Начало балетного театра в России  
Кристаллизация танцевальных форм

CRISTIANA COUCEIRO

## Taking Flight

By Toni Bentley

**APOLLO'S ANGELS** A History of Ballet. By Jennifer Homans. Illustrated. 643 pp. Random House. \$35.

It has never been done, what Jennifer Homans has done in "Apollo's Angels." She has written the only truly definitive history of the most impossibly fantastic art form, ballet, this most refined, most exquisite art of "aristocratic etiquette," this "science of behavior toward others," as a 17th-century ballet master put it, in which lovely young women

perch upon their 10 little toe tips (actually, it is really just the two big toes that alternately support the entire body's weight: think about it) and waft about where the air is thinner — but heaven is closer. She has taken this world where wilis, virgins, sylphs, sleeping princesses, the "women in white" embody the eternal — the eternally unattainable

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— and set it into the fabric of world history, and we see, miraculously, their pale tulle and satin pointes peeking out from the crevices of war, of revolutions, of political machinations, and on the stages of the monarchies and empires of the kings and czars who gave birth to this improbable art.

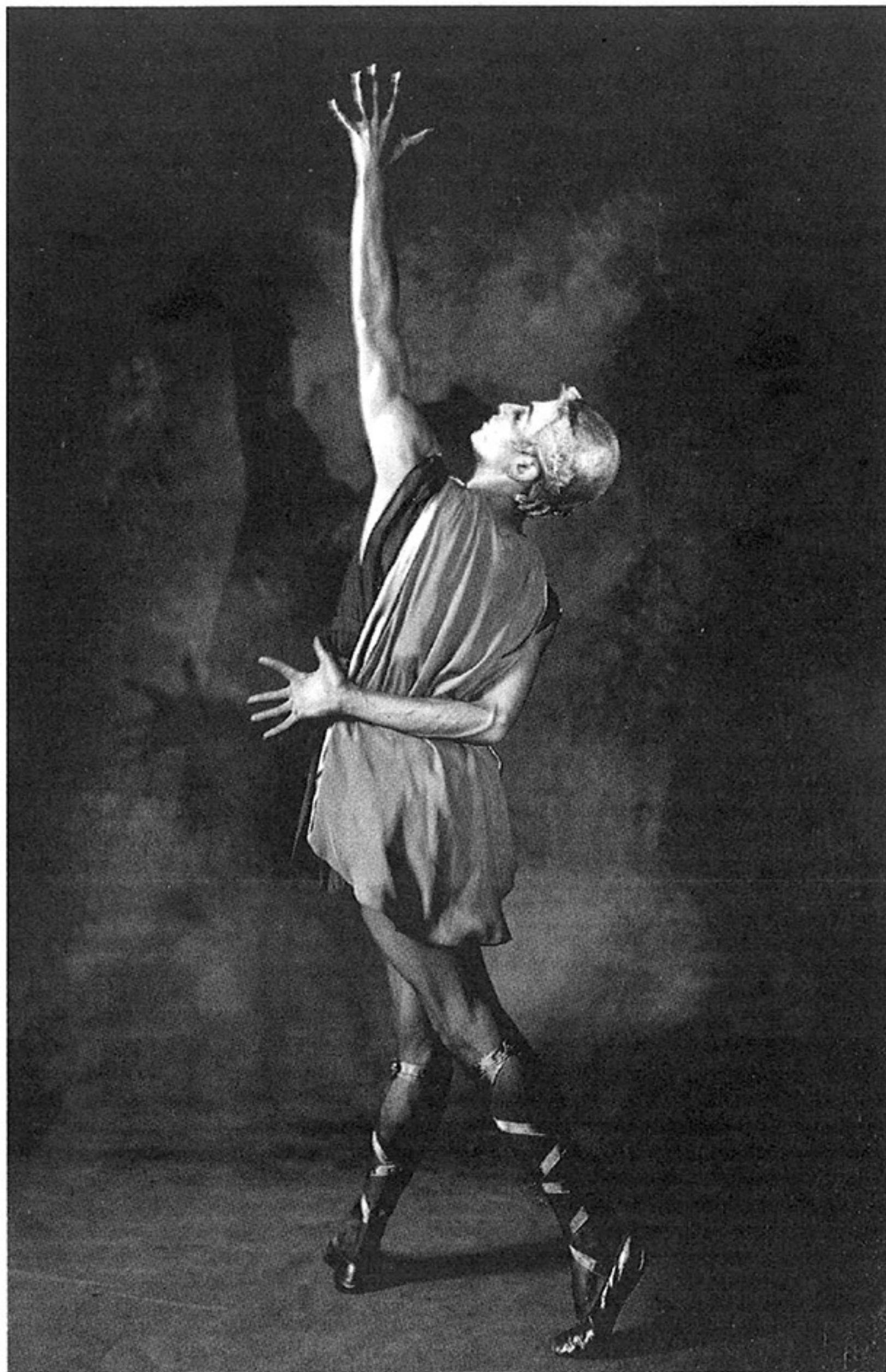
Homans's accomplishment is akin to setting the most delicate and beautiful of all the imperial Fabergé eggs into a fissure high on Mount Rushmore and tracking its unlikely survival. And the question of ballet's survival lies at the core of Homans's moving story. "Ballets," Théophile Gautier wrote, "are the dreams of poets taken seriously."

The tale of the tutu is indeed the story of a bunch of crazy dreamers, dancers, warriors of anatomy who have worked ludicrously hard to formulate, shape and perfect the highest form of the human physique, and the result is a glorious paradox: the manifestation of morality in muscle, truly Whitman's body electric. What a noble and superb cause! What folly in the face of guaranteed evanescence!

Ballet is the body divined, and it is not by chance that all the work started at the royal court in France in the mid-16th century. Homans begins with what has long been considered the first ballet, "Ballet Comique de la Reine," which had its premiere in 1581. It was an extravagant six-hour affair, performed among the guests — elevated stages did not yet exist — in a large gallery at the Petit-Bourbon, and told an allegory of "the enchantress Circe vanquished by the powerful gods Minerva and Jupiter," ending with Circe presenting her magic wand to the king himself before a ballet of naiads, dryads, princesses and a queen. The purpose of the ballet was nothing short of elevating man, "to raise him up a rung on the Great Chain of Being and bring him closer to the angels and God." So the bar was set for this new art — and it couldn't have been higher; ballet is *about* Highness — and the angels of Homans's title take their first flight. Ballet became so revered in France that by 1636 the Abbé Mersenne, a contemporary of Descartes and Pascal, referred to "the author of the Universe" as "the great Ballet-master."

Thus ballet was born as the dance of kings. Louis XIII designed costumes, wrote librettos and danced leading roles, being particularly fond of portraying the Sun and Apollo, god of music and poetry. His son, Louis XIV, made his debut in 1651 at 13 and studied with his ballet teacher, Pierre Beauchamps, daily, for more than 20 years. The dancing master in Molière's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme" declares that "all the misfortunes of mankind, all the disasters of which history is full, the

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Serge Lifar of the Ballets Russes in Balanchine's "Apollo," which had its premiere in 1928.

bungling of politicians and the mistakes of great generals, all come through not learning to dance." Where, I ask you, is Obama's Beauchamps?

It was Beauchamps who first codified the five positions of the body, providing "the crucial leap from etiquette to art," and they remain to this day the beautiful base of outwardly rotated feet and legs from which classical ballet rises and expands centrifugally. Homans documents this passionate path with impressive grace — she was herself a professional ballet dancer and is now the dance critic for The New Republic — across Europe from its birth in France, with stopovers

in Italy, Denmark, Germany and Austria, landing in Russia in the mid-19th century and then returning to Western Europe in the early years of the 20th century, and finally, here, to America, where it reached its apogee in the last half of the century.

The stops along the way often provide great charm. It was the enchanting French ballerina Marie Sallé in the mid-18th century who introduced the novel idea, with her revealing drapery and sensual movement (she was much admired by Voltaire and Montesquieu), that women, including ones of humble origins, might dance, not just men and kings. The history of ballet is also a story of class; ballet is a language

of vertical ascent, physicalized nobility. "Ballerinas," Homans writes, "acted like aristocrats even when in real life they most emphatically were not." But mix they did, and more than one young dancer rose — or descended — to positions other than an arabesque in the famous corridors of the Paris Opera, "the nation's harem," as one police official termed it, where wealthy men trolled for pretty girls with limber limbs.

It was the magnificent French dancer Auguste Vestris, a favorite of Marie Antoinette's, who "pried the feet open" to 180 degrees (Louis XIV had maintained a dignified 90), and they have remained there ever since. He also insisted on fully pointed feet, and thus soft, flat ballet shoes with ribbons wrapped around the ankles were born. A teacher of mammoth energy and passion, he gave lessons lasting three

*'Ballerinas,' Homans writes, 'acted like aristocrats even when in real life they most emphatically were not.'*

hours that would include "48 *pliés* followed by 128 *grand battements*, 96 *petits battements glissé*, 128 *ronds de jambes sur terre* and 128 *en l'air*." Any dancers reading this are now rolling their eyes in empathic agony, but ballet, like prayer, is ritual repetition: the more you do, the closer you get to perfection, to God. (Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hours-to-genius rule is a mere drop in the rosin box for a ballet dancer.) Vestris also forbade any "provincial insecure shuffling of the feet."

The French ballet master Charles-Louis Didelot, in "Psyché et l'Amour" (1809), kept "provincial" shuffling to a minimum, and his most famous ballet literally took flight not with angels but with 50 live white doves "outfitted in minicorsets and attached to wires," carrying the chariot of Venus to the heavens. What delightful imaginings are those of dancers, ever searching to soar — though one does worry about those corseted doves.

Marie Taglioni, the first ballerina still generally recognized, was born in Stockholm in 1804 into a dynasty of Italian dancers, and her rise to immortal fame is fascinating not least because she was one ugly duckling. According to Homans, she was "poorly proportioned, with a bent posture and skinny legs," though she came to symbolize not only exquisite feminine beauty but the best kind, the kind you can't have. How this determined young woman overcame these apparently extreme deficiencies and danced her way into history is a mesmerizing tale of body and soul outwitting gravity and that somewhat more horizontal pull: the male gaze.

She made her debut as ballet's iconic  
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sylph in "La Sylphide" in 1832, a supernatural creature who was "strong but frail, sexually alluring but chaste, in love but fiercely independent." Inspired by Taglioni, Chateaubriand called the sylphide a "masterpiece" of a woman and was driven, Homans says, into "frenzied states of uncontrolled imagination and desire." Not bad for a "famously ugly" woman.

Taglioni's success reached far beyond the stage, and she became "a force of anarchy and dissolution," Homans writes, "a woman's dancer" (in Gautier's words). "Decent" women "had to settle for a subdued and controlled life, but underneath they were desperate to 'abandon their soft and calm existence' for 'storms of passion' and 'dangerous emotions.' Taglioni lived what they could only dream: a . . . fully expressed life." And you wonder why little girls want to dance? They intuit that inside a corseted tutu lies untold freedom.

August Bournonville, an almost exact contemporary of Taglioni and a friend of Kierkegaard, was born in Denmark, but he traveled throughout Europe, studied with Vestris in Paris and even fought a duel to defend his teacher's honor. He came home from his sojourn to direct the Royal Danish Ballet for 47 years, creating some 50 ballets, though only a handful remain. In his emphasis on precise, unsentimental footwork, free of passion and angst, he added to the lexicon of ballet as few others have.

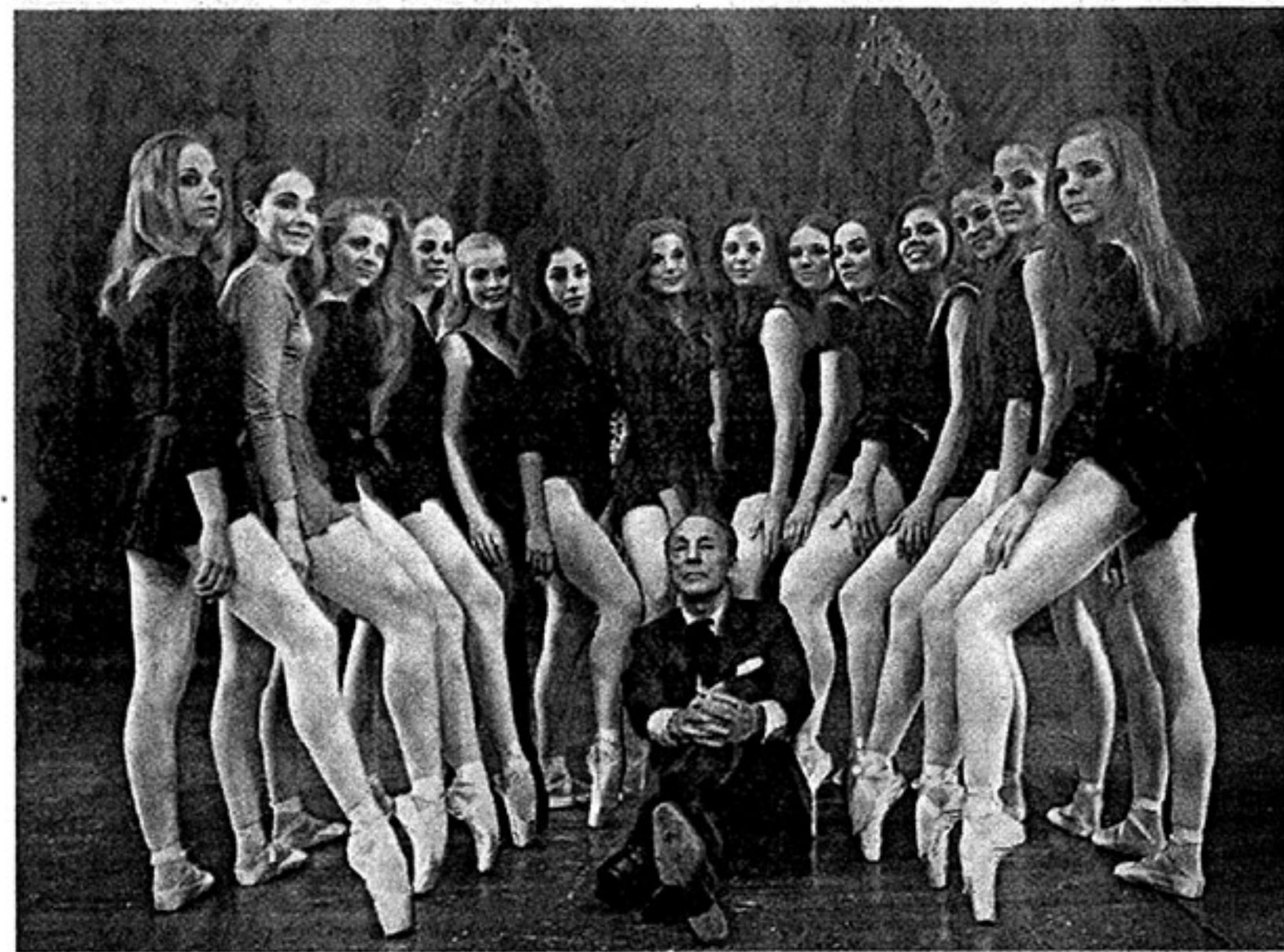
"Excelsior," the most successful Italian ballet in history (that you have probably never heard of), claims its place in Homans's narrative for less than artistic reasons: it has yet to be surpassed in sheer spectacular display and bad taste. Choreographed by Luigi Manzotti in 1881, it offered a cast of "more than 500, including 12 horses, 2 cows and an elephant." The lead roles were Light, Darkness and Civilization (the ballerina), and they were joined by Invention, Harmony, Fame, Strength, Glory, Industry and Science. This extravaganza ended with Light banishing Darkness and communing in a "warm embrace" with Civilization.

"Excelsior" had 100 performances in Milan at La Scala, and then in virtually every other city across Italy before it zoomed around the world: South America, the United States, Berlin, Madrid, Paris, Vienna and St. Petersburg. By 1931, the ballet had incorporated the "progress" of Fascism.

But as Homans points out so lucidly, while "Excelsior" was, well, ridiculous, it had an amazing side effect: it produced hundreds of performers who traveled abroad staging, dancing and teaching, spreading the seeds of ballet like dandelion florets. Among them were the illustrious Italian teacher Enrico Cecchetti, who staged Manzotti's ballet in St. Petersburg, and Carlotta Brianza and Pierina Legnani, who became the first Princess Aurora and

Odette/Odile, respectively, for the great Russian ballets of Marius Petipa, "The Sleeping Beauty" and "Swan Lake."

While Manzotti spawned an international dynastic dancing family, all ballet dancers since the mid-19th century are the progeny of Petipa. Like Sallé, Vestris and Taglioni, Petipa was from a long line of dancers. Born in Marseille, he studied with Vestris in Paris, traveled widely and, like Bournonville, fought a duel, in Madrid with a French marquis, though Petipa's was not over the honor of his art but over the apparent dishonor of a young lady. Petipa shot off the marquis's jaw and jeté away unscathed. It is comforting to know that two of the three great choreographers in ballet history — we will get to George Balanchine soon — were winning



George Balanchine in 1969.

duelers, willing to risk their bodies for honor, as all dancers do.

Yes, only three men of such genius to add to and permanently change the language itself in all 400 years, so rare is the great dance maker. It would be as if all classical music had only Mozart, Bach and Beethoven, no Wagner, Verdi, Brahms, Schubert or Chopin, or all literature had only Shakespeare, Dickens and Tolstoy, no Dante, Cervantes, Dostoyevsky, Austen, Thomas Mann or Elmore Leonard.

**P**ETIPA arrived in St. Petersburg in 1847 and lived there for more than 50 years, dying in 1910 at the age of 92. He had two Russian ballerina wives, nine children, and never learned to speak Russian, though he became an eager and respected member of the czar's court. Interestingly, he produced his masterworks, the cornerstones of the art, the Latin of all

classical ballet — "The Sleeping Beauty," "The Nutcracker" and "Swan Lake" (he also re-choreographed "Giselle" in the form we know it today) — in an astonishing late flowering after the age of 70!

This outpouring — some done with the significant help of the ballet master Lev Ivanov — was attributable, in part, to Tchaikovsky, "the first composer of real stature to see ballet as a substantial art," Homans writes. "Petipa became a great choreographer because of Tchaikovsky, and he knew it." She evokes the sweetness of their close collaboration: Tchaikovsky would visit Petipa's house and play his new composition on the piano "while Petipa shifted his papier-mâché figurines around a large round table."

By 1903 Petipa was forced to retire, and

the Imperial Theaters were floundering. But within only six years Serge Diaghilev brought Russian ballet back to Paris, the place of its birth — his company, the Ballets Russes, never danced in Russia — and unleashed a frenzy of modernist creativity the results of which were widespread and groundbreaking. Never before had so many artists of note been pulled together by one man, whose edict was "Astonish me!" His grand experiment lasted only 20 years, but its legacy is vast — perhaps most notable for two artists whom he helped usher out of Russia: Stravinsky and Balanchine. Working together and separately, they would become two of the great artists of Time, their shared subject.

Homans provides good overviews of the major players of the 20th century. British ballet, led by the formidable Ninette de Valois, Frederick Ashton and Margot Fonteyn, had its culmination in

the Fonteyn-Nureyev partnership in the 1960s, though it produced its best — and certainly most enduring — gift to ballet in Michael Powell's 1948 cinematic masterpiece, "The Red Shoes." "During the war we were all told to go out and die for freedom and democracy," Powell said. "After the war 'The Red Shoes' told them to die for art." And why not?

Homans does justice — and then some — to the propaganda *dram-balets* under Soviet Communism and their extraordinary dancers: Galina Ulanova, Maya Plisetskaya — "a fierce and undying swan" — Vladimir Vasiliev, Natalia Makarova, Nureyev and Baryshnikov. While calling ballet "Britain's finest cultural hour," Homans states that "the Bolshoi's rise signaled a sharp decline for the art of dance." About its signature ballet, "Spartacus," she writes, "Even at its most thrilling (Vasiliev), it was quite clearly a degraded form of art." But ballet was an important national symbol, even if Nikita Khrushchev complained that he had seen so many "Swan Lakes" that his dreams were laden with "white tutus and tanks all mixed up together."

The British Antony Tudor (William Cook) and the American Jerome Robbins (Jerome Rabinowitz) each get an in-depth assessment; together they form the angst-driven sadists — onstage and off — of 20th-century ballet, and each created a few classic ballets. Tudor, choreographer of "Pillar of Fire," "Lilac Garden" and "Dark Elegies," liked his performances to be "executed in cold blood." "Breaking down a person isn't hard," he explained, but then "you're terribly tempted to lay them flat and walk on them."

Robbins is the undeniable King of Broadway, with works like "West Side Story," "On the Town" and "Fiddler on the Roof," but his ballets, his second language, never quite reached the same apotheosis. He was top second-rate ("Dances at a Gathering," "The Cage," "Afternoon of a Faun"), and Homans is unafraid to say so. His torture of his dancers and others — he named names before the House Committee on Un-American Activities — was matched only by his well-earned self-hatred. His parents owned a kosher deli on East 97th Street in New York, and he admitted to a strong desire "to become an American and by American I mean WASP American." He wrote in his diary that he thought his fascination with ballet "has something to do with 'civilization' of my Jewishness. . . . The language of court and Christianity."

And it is with "court and Christianity" that Homans arrives in the end. When she finally reaches the story of Georgi Balanchivadze, her book takes flight. She lets go of the professorial traces and dutiful descriptions that have occasionally punctuated previous pages — an editor should have fixed the multiple repetitions of "as

we have seen" — and comes into her own with absolute authority. Her writing becomes inspired. Balanchine had that effect on people, and Homans was a student at his School of American Ballet (the "West Point of dance," as his co-founder, Lincoln Kirstein, called it). Moreover, it actually feels as if she wrote the book in order to get to Balanchine, the one she loves, to put him in his deepest context, and to present him as the pinnacle of the towering pyramid of dance that she has built for him, for us. There he is, the undisputed "Yahweh" of all dance history, the Apollo of her title, accompanied by his beloved muses, his dancers, his angels, leading his chariot, no corseted doves in sight.

"His ballets are the jewel in the crown of 20th-century dance," Homans writes. "Their depth and scope far surpass those of the dances made by Robbins, Tudor, Ashton or any of the Soviets. . . . Few doubted that Balanchine towered over them all."

While it took a Frenchman, Petipa, to make ballet Russian, it took a Russian, Balanchine, to make it American — the most unlikely transposition the art form has ever experienced. "Classical ballet was everything America was against," Homans explains. "It was a lavish, aristocratic court art, a high — and hierarchical — elite art with no pretense to egalitarianism," designed "to promote and glorify kings and czars." Whose divine right would it promote in the land of the equal, the free, the duly (and unduly) elected? But as Balanchine was fond of saying in the face of the impossible, or highly inadvisable, "Nevertheless. . ." And he proceeded to give American dancers an aristocracy all their own.

The story of Balanchine has been told before and at greater length, but never better. Homans's account is the best that exists — for both the novice and those in the know. The opening of the School of American Ballet in 1933, the short-lived companies, the work on Broadway, in Hollywood, and then in 1948 the birth of the New York City Ballet, the incubator for him and his dancers, where he produced his greatest work. She gives us terrific appraisals of "Apollo," "Serenade," "La Valse," "Liebeslieder Walzer," "Agon" and "Stravinsky Violin Concerto."

Homans even risks some close truths when she points out the reasons for the "unusual physical luminosity" of his dancers, who had "more dimension, more depth, more range" than other dancers. "Foremost among them was love," she writes. "Not love for dancing, although that was part of it, but Balanchine's love." The fuel his dancers ran on was not the cottage cheese, muffins and Tab they consumed but the sheer adrenaline of love, that immeasurable, magical component that takes a body beyond itself.

Unlike Tudor and Robbins, Balanchine "was not interested in ordinary people or real social situations," Homans says. "Rather, for him ballet was an art of angels, of idealized and elevated human figures, beautiful, chivalric and above all strictly formal." Balanchine brought the art full circle back to Louis XIV.

"Ballet is woman," Balanchine proclaimed, and he elaborated in a letter to Jackie Kennedy in 1961: "Man takes care of the material things and woman takes care of the soul. Woman is the world and man lives in it." Among his multiple images and portraits of women, one dominated: "a man and a woman who come together but cannot stay together," Homans writes, "dances that show the man alone, or abandoned by a woman who is too independent, too powerful, too goddess-like to give him the solace he needs." Balanchine said his biography was in the ballets — and Tagliolini's anarchist sylph reigns on.

"Balanchine's legacy was immense," Homans concludes. "He had given the world the greatest oeuvre in the history of dance and made classical ballet a pre-eminently modernist and 20th-century art." But "over the past two decades," she writes, it "has come to resemble a dying language," and thus she announces the awful truth. Ballet is such an ethereal, such a deeply moral exercise that it would appear to have less and less of a place in our current technology-driven world: there are no bytes for ballet.

But ballet always seems to be ending; it has been finished, in fact, many times. The ballet master Jean-Georges Noverre saw it sliding into "empty and meaningless virtuosity" by the late 18th century, and Bournonville despaired for his art when he saw

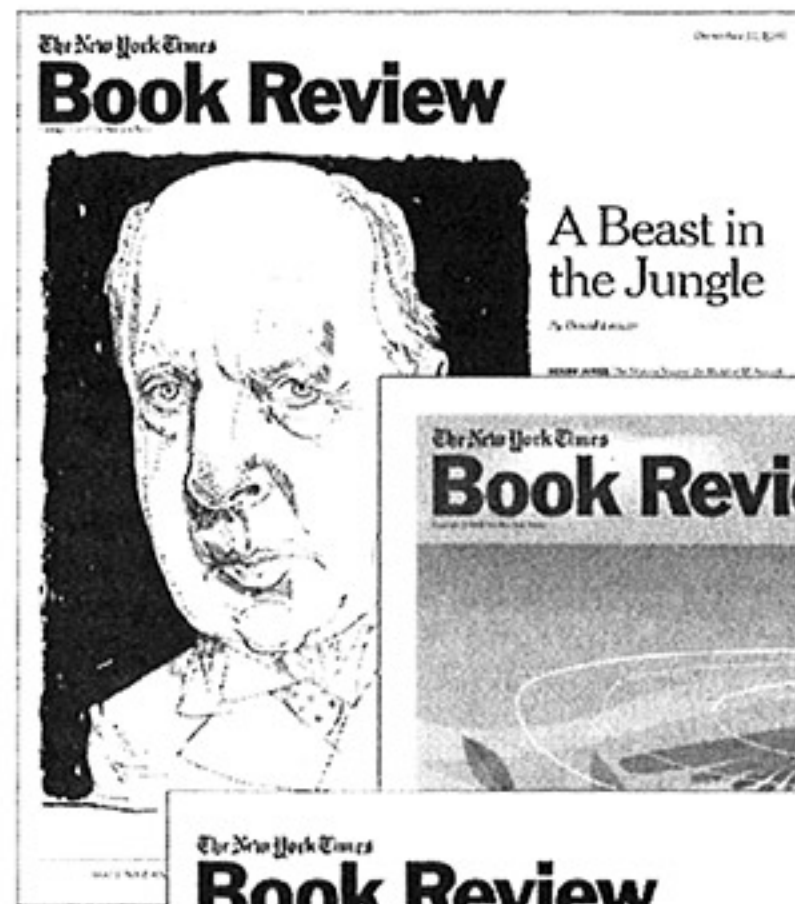
the "disgusting cancan" showing its garters in Paris theaters. And in 1936, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of "the catastrophe of the death of Diaghilev. The sorrow of it that Zelda felt, as did many others, who seemed to feel also that the ballet was ended."

**N**OW, it would appear ballet is ending yet again. But this time, Homans thinks, it really is the end. "In the years following Balanchine's death," she writes, "his angels fell, one by one, from their heights." Her explanation is, sadly, convincing: "Contemporary choreography veers aimlessly from unimaginative imitation to strident innovation," while "today's artists . . . have been curiously unable to rise to the challenge of their legacy. They seem crushed and confused by its iconoclasm and grandeur." Terpsichore, like Victoria Page, has put on the red shoes and danced her last, no longer willing to "die for art," so her art dies.

"At N.Y.C.B.," Homans writes of Balanchine and Robbins's old home, "the understandable desire to preserve its masters' legacy has led instead to a stifling orthodoxy," and she reports with restrained outrage of "a small but telling departure" from its former grace. "The New York State Theater, named for the people it served, was recently rechristened: it is now the David H. Koch Theater, for the millionaire whose ego and resources substitute for the public good." In a wickedly ironic footnote, bedbugs have also recently taken up residence with Koch in Balanchine's theater.

The Fabergé egg has fallen. Today's ballerinas use Twitter, securing the fall of the fourth wall, and even Darren Aronofsky's new ballet film, "Black Swan," presents, uncannily, a haunting final image of a white tutu oozing blood. So what is one to do now, having seen, having known, a thing of such beauty that is facing imminent extinction? Jennifer Homans has put her mourning into action and has written its history, an eloquent and lasting elegy to an unlasting art. It is, alas, a eulogy. □

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