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Ib Andersen and the Seasons of a Dancer

By TONI BENTLEY; Toni Bentley, a former dancer with the New York City Ballet, is the author of "Winter Season: A Dancer's Journal" (Random House).
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DESPITE GEORGE BALANCHINE'S "NO-STAR" policy at the New York City Ballet, the company produced many stars during his 35 years as benevolent dictator. The last male artist on whom Balanchine created major roles is Ib Andersen, who, almost five years after Balanchine's death, has come into his prime - with little fanfare.

Since Peter Martins retired from the stage four years ago, Mr. Andersen has replaced him as the company's leading male dancer. But now the 32-year-old artist is at a crucial juncture in his career: He has reached the subtle, precarious balance between physical ability and emotional maturity. For a dancer it is, ironically, the most transitory and can be the most terrifying of achievements.

When the New York City Ballet opens its winter season on Tuesday at the New York State Theater, Mr. Andersen will be dancing in as many as 18 of the 38 ballets the company will present, including Balanchine's 1972 reworking of Stravinsky's homage to Tchaikovsky, "Divertimento From 'Le Baiser de la Fee.' " Though Balanchine's 1937 interpretation of the ballet was based on "The Ice Maiden," a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, this version has no plot. Yet, Mr. Andersen's clarity, ardor and disarming honesty, partnering Patricia McBride, powerfully conveys the bittersweet essence of the tale: the curse, and the blessing, of the artist who must renounce earthly love for his muse.

Unlike Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov, Mr. Andersen has not had the drama of defection to glamorize his arrival or the exposure of celluloid to make him a household name. In a world of publicity-hype that simplifies accomplishment by rating and creating champions, Mr. Andersen's status as a world-class dancer remains relatively unsung. But, like Michael Spinks in boxing, he has won the title in the ring.

Balanchine's legacy as a teacher could not be more clearly stated than in the dancing of Mr. Andersen. Onstage his strong, chiseled face, piercing blue eyes and linear body become illuminated with raw energy translated as pure elegance. He moves with an immediacy and urgency that is not curbed by the hesitation of one who questions. And all of this is crystalized in a smile that seems to be not so much a calculated finishing touch as a natural expression of freedom.

"I enjoy dancing more now than when I was 28 - because I can see the end," Mr. Andersen

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says. "I'm at that age where I have danced much longer than I'm going to dance - five, six, seven years - that's a very short time. I'm probably as good as I'm going to be. For me, that is very positive. You can learn and improve this and that - experience, knowledge, just being old does a lot to you - but I'm never going to be technically better than I am now. "

Mr. Andersen, who recently choreographed - for the Royal Danish Ballet - his first original piece, is continuing the long line of outstanding interpreters of three of Balanchine's most demanding male roles: in "Apollo," "Prodigal Son" and "Orpheus." Talking about the role of Apollo, he often seems tempted to use superlatives, even emotion, but is suspicious of words diminishing the evidently profound experience of being Apollo, the mythic god who leads the Muses.

"It's the ballet I rehearsed the most with Balanchine," he says. "He always got very much into it and wanted it a specific way. It's one of the clearest ballets - you have so many pictures from it, shapes and startling images, very angular. It's actually very unballetic, very unclassical. You don't feel in the whole ballet there's anything that shouldn't be there - it's crystalline. It just feels right, and you can't say even with Balanchine ballets that that is always true. Dancing 'Apollo' is the closest in my experience to a clarification. It's very much a process of becoming more clear with yourself in a way that you rarely do in real life."



Mr. Andersen is the last of the so-called Great Danes - Mr. Martins and Adam Luders being his immediate predecessors - imported by Balanchine from the Royal Danish Ballet. "Balanchine told me all the time how much he liked Danish dancers," says Mr. Martins. "He liked their attitude. He would say, 'Well-bred people, well-behaved, dignified, not prima donnas. They serve.' " Balanchine's dictum of selfless service eliminated the need for a fabricated "personality." It enabled certain dancers to become so truly themselves that they would indelibly imprint those selves on dances, music and memories.


Epitomizing the Balanchine ethic, Mr. Andersen has almost no visible vanity, onstage or off. His self-effacement is so acute that it provides little fodder for celebrity status: He does not make movies or videos, he provokes no scandals, he makes few guest appearances outside his own company, he does not earn a six-figure salary and he hates interviews. Mr. Andersen mistrusts real life. His medium of existence is found in music, steps and stage.


"Performing - it's very hard for normal life to compete," he says. "Except for a few things - sex and food - there are very, very few other things where you can have that kind of high or satisfaction. We dancers are experiencing something that most people probably don't."


Timing is critical in any dancer's career; in Mr. Andersen's, it was crucial, for it was what made the connection with Balanchine possible. At the age of 24, he "auditioned" for Balanchine at Covent Garden, where the New York City Ballet was performing in September of 1979. "I took one class," Mr. Andersen recalls, "John Taras was teaching on stage, and Balanchine watched for six seconds. I talked to him for two minutes. He was very shy, I always felt like I had to pull it out of him, but he said, 'Well, do you want to come?' and I said, 'Yeah, yeah.' He said that if I was coming I would have to stay at least three years because he's had others that just came and went. I said, 'Of course.' So, that was it." Thus, Balanchine acquired the dancer upon whom, paired with Suzanne Farrell, he would create in 1981 his final spiritual statement of the quietest, most profound, most ecstatic joy: Tchaikovsky's "Mozartiana."


"Mozartiana" is that rare Balanchine celebration which is eerily bound to its original dancers, though others have danced it. It was the culmination of Balanchine's portrait of Ms. Farrell, begun 20 years earlier: of woman as spirit and spirit as woman. And it was the


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role that defined Ib Andersen, not as a man dancing, but as a dancer dancing.

Mr. Andersen began his training at the age of 4 in Copenhagen with ballroom dancing. "Apparently, I liked it a lot," he says, "and my mother saw an ad in the paper for auditions for the Royal Theater School. So, she took me when I was 7 and I got in. I liked it until I was 10, then I got a bit awkward. I got stuck there and was kind of bored with it for a few years. But then at around 13 or 14, I decided, 'I might as well go for it because I'm here anyway.'

"I was an apprentice at 16 [to the Royal Danish Ballet] - I never really did corps work - I had my first lead when I was 17, 'Monument for a Dead Boy,' choreographed by Rudi van Dantzig. I danced everything" - "Swan Lake," "Giselle," "Romeo and Juliet," the Bournonville repertory - "but I think I'd known since I was 16 that I would eventually leave. It was easy to see that Copenhagen was isolated, really isolated."

When Mr. Andersen was 19, Erik Bruhn arranged for him to join American Ballet Theater, but it never came to pass. Had Mr. Andersen gone, he would have joined the company shortly after Mikhail Baryshnikov. The Russian dancer and Mr. Andersen were to almost cross paths again a few years later; Mr. Baryshnikov left the New York City Ballet only one month after Mr. Andersen was hired. Sadly, Mr. Baryshnikov's 15-month tenure with the company spanned a time when Balanchine was ill and his presence in the theater was sporadic, but when Mr. Andersen arrived for work in March of 1980 it was the beginning of Balanchine's last creative surge.

Mr. Andersen is brutally realistic about the timing of his career. "Who knows, if Balanchine were still alive he might have lost interest," he says. "In a way, I was lucky he didn't last any longer, because his history shows that he got tired of people after a while. So, I can say at least that he liked me as long as he lived."

Unlike Mr. Martins and Mr. Baryshnikov, Mr. Andersen fit into the style, the pace and the schedule of the company immediately, without a period of artistic upheaval. He learned almost 20 ballets in his first months, and his repertory now numbers more than 50 ballets.

At 25, his muscles were young enough to adjust, a highly significant fact; dancing Balanchine Balanchine's way is virtually a different language than that used in any other company. But perhaps even more importantly, Mr. Andersen's moral muscles were prepared. He was immediately called upon to replace the injured Sean Lavery opposite Merrill Ashley in "Ballade," Balanchine's first new ballet in two years, and shortly afterwards in "Robert Schumann's 'Davidsbundlertanze.'" "

In the former, Mr. Andersen had his first lesson in Balanchine partnering. "It's all on the floor - balances, promenades - as opposed to doing lifts or pirouettes," the dancer says. "It's much harder because in the air it's more a matter of strength, but on the floor it's a matter of technique, sensitivity - it's about weight, yours and your partner's. It easily becomes clumsy. You can feel like you have 10 pairs of hands."

Clearly, Mr. Andersen learned more than just partnering from Balanchine; he was watching, training a choreographer's sensibility, one that extends beyond his own body. "Balanchine's biggest gift," Mr. Andersen says, "was probably pointe work. There's no one, no one in the world that gets close to what the women in City Ballet can do and the way it looks on pointe - because it's not a matter of pointe work. It's a way of expressing dance. In most other companies you are aware that they are on those shoes, of that going up and down and here and there.

"When you look at it, Balanchine didn't have an extremely big vocabulary, technically. It's

very few steps actually - it might be at a funny angle or with an arm that is not normal. It was the way he put steps to music. Peter [Martins] has a very big vocabulary - enormous. But it's a bit of an obsession to do something that hasn't been seen before. I don't think it was an obsession with Balanchine. He just made it look as though you hadn't seen it before. It is an incredible gift to be able to do that."

Arriving at a plateau is often less of an arrival than a departure point, and Mr. Andersen is now testing his expertise in another area: He has just returned from Copenhagen where four days ago the Royal Danish Ballet gave the premiere of "1 2 3 - 1 2," his first ballet as choreographer.

Mr. Andersen says that he thinks of the day when he won't dance: "I hope that when I get to 37 or 38 that I don't just go on and on and on and make a fool of myself." Though he admits he enjoys teaching, Mr. Andersen does not see it as a second career. "No matter how much you grow as a teacher, you're still a teacher," he says. "It takes much more than it gives - look around, good teachers are much rarer than good dancers. Good teachers are the rarest of all." Mr. Andersen also senses the limitations of directing a company. "It's extremely, extremely hard and it has to be very unsatisfying," he says. "There are all those meetings - more than half of the job is not about what it should be. The only way to direct would be if I get to the point where I feel I have something to say and a real passion to communicate it. Balanchine had that, but the time was different. Today it's very hard to do."

Painting, however, is a passion of Mr. Andersen's and provides satisfactions that performing cannot. He has studied extensively in the last few years, has a studio and when he gets the chance will be there nine hours a day. "It's not 'Sunday painting' - to paint little apples - it's more a matter of exploration," he says.

When the City Ballet presents its revival of the Balanchine/Rieti "La Sonnambula" this season, Mr. Andersen will re-create his role as the Poet in the dramatic tale of decadence and death. Mr. Andersen has received acclaim for his acting in this role, as in others, something he feels strongly about. "I get annoyed when people say, 'Oh, you act so well,' because I don't feel like I'm acting," he says. "I'm not so much trying to do it - it's more like I am doing it. It's not just your hands or your facial expression, it's through your whole body that you are communicating something. There's a difference between trying and being and doing and being."

Balanchine often described his dancers as different creatures from the animal kingdom - horses, snakes, cheetahs, fish. But he called Ib Andersen an angel. Of this, Mr. Andersen says: "It's an incredible compliment. What it means, I don't know. I've never met an angel." Perhaps Balanchine had.

FOR LINDA BREWER BOX WITH JUMP BENTLEY Season's Fare The New York City Ballet's 87th season opens this Tuesday evening and will continue through Feb. 21, at the New York State Theater. The company's presentation of 23 ballets by George Balanchine will include the return of the three-part "Jewels"; the "Divertimento From 'Le Baiser de la Fee,'" and Glazunov's "Raymonda Variations."

Jerome Robbins's 1981 Tchaikovsky Festival celebration, "Piano Pieces," will return after a three-year absence, and Peter Martins's recent and controversial "Ecstatic Orange" to music by the contemporary composer Michael Torke will also be on view.

From Dec. 3 through Jan. 3, the company will present its annual Christmas celebration, "The Nutcracker." Finally, a new, as-yet-untitled ballet by Mr. Robbins is scheduled to have its premiere on Feb. 4. T. B.

Photos of Ib Andersen during rehearsals with the Royal Danish Ballet of his new work "1 2 3 - 1 2" (John R. Johnsen) (pg. 1); Ib Andersen watching George Balachine rehearse Suzanne for "Mozartina" in 1981 (Stephen Caras) (pg. 26)

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