

DANCE

The Ballet that Changed Everything

Balanchine's 'Serenade' took women out of a fairy tale setting—and created a new model for American dance

BY TONI BENTLEY

‘SERENADE” was the first ballet George Balanchine choreographed in America, whereby he planted the seeds for the next 50 fertile years during which he re-shaped classical ballet, with its French, Italian, Danish and Russian roots, as an American art form. It was 1934, he was 30 years old, and just off the boat, literally, having barely avoided detention at Ellis Island, from St. Petersburg via Europe where he was Diaghilev’s last choreographer for the Ballets Russes. “Serenade” was his third masterpiece (after “Apollon musagète” in 1928 and “Le Fils Prodigue” in 1929)—and the first of many to his beloved Tchaikovsky. The ballet is set to the composer’s soaring score “Serenade for Strings in C.” Tchaikovsky called the piece—composed at the same time as the 1812 Overture—“his ‘favorite child,’” written, he said from “inner compulsion . . . from the heart . . . I am terribly in love with this Serenade.”

In this single early work, remarkably, Balanchine made a dance that would become the Rosetta Stone for a new kind of dancer, the American classical dancer. He brought a kind of democracy into the hierarchical land of ballet classicism, lifting it from its dusty 19th-century splendor, and created, simultaneously, an aristocracy for American dancers who had none. But he had plenty, having been a subject, as a child in St. Petersburg, of the last Czar in Russian history. And he was willing to impart his Imperial heritage. In “Serenade” all the female dancers are dressed identically. They are all women—one woman, finding her place among others and her place alone. As a young dancer for Balanchine, I was among them.

As the heavy gold curtain rises at the start of “Serenade,” 17 girl dancers in long pale blue gowns are arranged in two adjoining diamonds, tethered estrogen. We do not move, grip gravity, feet parallel, pointe shoes suctioned together side by side, head tilted to the right. The right arm is lifted to the side in a soft diagonal, palm facing outward, fingers extending separately, upwardly, shielding as if from some lunar light. This is the first diagonal in “Serenade,” a ballet brimming with that merging line: This is female terrain.

From this opening choir of sloping arms flows an infinite number of such lines, some small, some huge. There is the “peel,” where 16 dancers form a full-stage diagonal, each body in profile, slightly in front of the last, and then, one by one, each ripples off into the wings, creating a thrilling wave of whirling space. In later sections, there are off-center arabesque lunges, drags and upside-down leaps, a double diagonal crisscrossing of kneeling, pushing and turning, and then finally the closing procession heading to high upstage. Ballet is live geometry, a Euclidean art, and “Serenade” illustrates a dancer’s trajectory, a woman’s inclined ascent.

When Balanchine was asked what “Serenade” is about, he said that it is just “a dance in the moonlight.” “A boy and girl on the stage,” Balanchine famously said when berated for his disinterest in stories. “How much story do you want?”

So “Serenade” is a romance? Well, yes, it may well be the most Romantic ballet ever devised: a flock of young girls, diaphanous dresses, loose tresses, a fall (a death?), a few nebulous men coming and going, and the yearning burn of loss, loss, loss, all set to Tchaikovsky is indeed a recipe for tragic rhapsody. But “Serenade” does not stop there, flooded as it is in beauty, tulle and evanescent moonlight. No, there is an edge, a razor-sharp subversion where the boy-girl affair goes right off the rails and something more profound beckons.

A little history is in order to understand the revolution that is “Sere-



The American Ballet's production of 'Serenade,' 1935, above; and a New York City Ballet 'Serenade,' 2003.

nade.” In this ballet Balanchine revisited, saluted and then condensed all of classical dance history before him into 32 minutes (or less depending on the conductor that evening.) This was a ballet for the century where speed was the byword, the century that saw the Bomb, the Moon, the Concorde, the Internet and Picasso. He took the actual physical technique of the art, first codified in the court of Louis XIV, and edited out all but the essentials, trusting its core—the human body at its highest beauty—to still be, as it were, divine. Gone were the masks: the wigs, the mime, the decorations and yes, the stories, the fairy tales (Balanchine liked to say there are “no mothers-in-law in ballet.”) Perhaps strangest of all, he dared to disregard the natural lethargy of the human body. (During class, while we were sweating bullets, he would hold his forefinger up in the air, and say with a gleeful little smile, “The body is lazy! That’s why I am here!”) While distilling the form he lost none of its beauty or tradition and he found it to be faster, bigger, longer, jazzier than anything the Sun

King could have imagined, a deeper language now expanded to its essence.

But it was not only the technique of classical ballet that Balanchine streamlined, as if a missile, in “Serenade.” He also paid tribute (the references in the ballet are numerous and witty, both subtle and obvious) to the glorious works that were, and remain, its legendary triune: “Giselle” (1841), “Swan Lake” (1877) and “The Sleeping Beauty” (1890). In “Serenade” he not only catapulted the whole art form forward intact, tightened and heightened, but, most radical of all, in removing the story, he rewrote it. You know, the girl-boy one.

It was very touch-and-go for these 19th-century gals: Aurora, the Sleeping Beauty, is already 116 years old at her wedding, while both Giselle and Odette, the Swan Queen, only achieve any kind of consummation—of the most platonic kind—with their beloveds in the afterlife, if at all. Trapped in love, by love, it is only love that will save them, the familiar Catch-22 of doomed romance. In “Serenade” Balanchine sets these

women free—but not to be with their lovers happily ever after. He had something else entirely in mind, this man who loved women.

Yanking these beauties from their poetic, otherworldly suffering, a stance so suited to ballet’s tender language, Balanchine thrusts them squarely—disregarding their objections, dragging petticoats, and protesting parents—into the 20th and, it would now appear, the 21st, century. Balanchine stripped his heroine—she will always be that—of her specificity, her wings and feathers and weighty crown, and of her impetuous dependence. And he sends this creature he finds, this real woman, to her destiny, to Eternity, alone, unadorned but for the echo in her loosened hair of Giselle gone mad. Underneath the elaborate camouflage he has uncovered an artist.

“Serenade” is one of the greatest works of art ever made about a woman artist—her sacrifices, her vulnerability, her work and her love affairs. (Balanchine told one of his favorite dancers that the ballet could have been called simply “Ballerina.”)

The Next Serenade

“Serenade” will be performed by New York City Ballet during its inaugural fall season from Sept. 14-Oct. 10 at the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center on Sept. 14, 18 (matinee) and 30, and Oct. 2. The NYCB’s fall season will also include two rare evenings of all-Balanchine ballets on Sept. 15 and 18, the latter an all-Stravinsky evening as well, where one can witness two of the greatest artists of the 20th-century working in explosive unison. There will also be three performances of the Balanchine/Bach 1941 ballet “Concerto Barocco” on Oct. 1, 2 and 9, an 18-minute masterpiece so pure and trim that it will cleanse your soul—or at least remind you why art is entirely essential.

Balanchine’s woman is no longer a creature yearning for her man, but an artist for whom men are transitory not primary. (It is worth remembering that “Serenade” was made nearly three decades before Betty Friedan published “The Feminine Mystique.”) While she may well stand on the shoulders of men—as she does, literally, in the final magnificent closing of “Serenade”—she does not attain anything as pedestrian as equality. She attains transcendence, perhaps in life, perhaps in death, and her companions—her acolytes, her handmaidens, her mythic sisters, her fellow witches—are those of her own sex.

Where are they going as the curtain lowers and they rise? Into that light. To where it comes from. The journey of the dancer. I believe, having danced the ballet over 50 times, they have gone to a kind of Heaven—the one we can’t see, can barely conceive, and yet so desire. In class one day, Balanchine said, “You can see Paradise, but you can’t get in”—but then he never danced “Serenade.”

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years and is the author of five books. She is writing a book about Balanchine’s “Serenade.” Her essay “The Bad Lion” will be published in “The Best American Essays 2010” this month.

The Short List | A selected guide to this week’s arts and entertainment

Prime Suspect

DVD, Sept. 7
Starring Helen Mirren as a police detective, this complete collection of the British television series “Prime Suspect” (nine discs, \$124.99) comes with the usual DVD-package add-ons, but mainly consists of seven seasons, which vary in length and format but a typically run a bit more than three hours, in several parts. Lavishly praised when it started airing in the early 1990s, on INTV and soon after on PBS in the U.S., this is Ms. Mirren before she was a “Dame,” collecting all manner of awards for roles as both Queen Elizabeths and others. She is a wonder.

Detroit, Steppenwolf Theatre

Chicago, Sept. 9
A friendship among neighbors starts with mundane chitchat about plantar warts, but chaos erupts soon after the new inhabitants of the long-empty house next door reveal they met at rehab, don’t have

jobs and lack furniture. “Detroit,” a new comedy starring Laurie Metcalf, starts previews Thursday at Steppenwolf Theatre Company. The new season is dedi-

cated to new and classic plays that explore the private lives of others, on the theory that in a modern world driven by online updates, the relationship between peoples’ inner lives and outer personas has never been more interesting.

My Trip to A-Qaeda

HBO, Sept. 7
After the Sept. 11 attacks, Lawrence Wright set out to answer the question everyone was asking—what could have produced these terrorists? The resulting book “The Looming Tower” won a Pulitzer, but Mr. Wright couldn’t shake his obsession, and produced a one-man show off-Broadway about his experiences researching the book, with a more personal approach, now a film directed by Alex Gibney. There are no easy answers here, but Mr. Wright is down-to-earth and non-ideological (if sometimes a stiff performer). His first-hand insights resonate given the current “mosque” debate, as people wrestle with issues of Islam and terror.

“Bob Dylan in America”

The annals of Dylanology are already well-stuffed, but Princeton history professor Sean Wilentz provides a worthy amalgam of biography, critical appraisal and anecdote.

dotal dish. Although an unabashed fan, Mr. Wilentz has the skills to bring Dylan’s legacy alive even for non-geeks.

600

Number of interviews conducted by Lawrence Wright on Al Qaeda