

DANCE

Darci Kistler Exits the Stage

The last of Balanchine's ballerinas retires, marking the end of a storied era

By Toni Bentley

BALANCHINE'S last ballerina," she is called. It is not an easy tiara—or leotard—to wear. But when Darci Kistler retires June 27, having just turned 46 years old, she will indeed be the last of the dancers chosen by George Balanchine—the greatest dance master of the 20th century.

Ms. Kistler's unique position is like being the last actress chosen by Shakespeare to be his Juliet, his Titania, his Ophelia. But most truly she was Balanchine's Miranda: stranded, protected, as a child on the magical island of ballet with her old father—and Balanchine was a sorcerer indeed. I often think of Ms. Kistler as a figure in John William Waterhouse's painting of Prospero's daughter: streaming Pre-Raphaelite hair blowing wildly in the wind as she stands on the rocky shore in her long gown, hand to her heart, watching as the great ship of Balanchine, now without its captain, rolls in peril on the shoals during the brutal storm of grief and mediocrity that inevitably follows the death of genius. But, take note, the ship has not, contrary to frequent cries of disaster, gone down, and Ms. Kistler is still very much on board, cleaning the decks as it were, teaching the students at the School of American Ballet where it all begins, where Balanchine began teaching Americans to dance in 1934. In Ms. Kistler's departure from the stage we can indeed mourn an era passed, celebrate its miracle.

Ms. Kistler's soldiering on as a Balanchine dancer without Balanchine for almost three decades—and she has borne more than a fair share of slings and arrows, personal and professional—offers a moving parallel to the bumpy ride his ballets have also endured since his death. Both have, all in all, survived with more grace, and occasional excellence, than he certainly ever expected. He said he didn't care what happened after he was gone, the butterfly that is ballet would grow more wings, different antennae and "Concerto Barocco" would become not only anachronistic but silly. But it is not silly quite yet.

Ms. Kistler was a child possessed, already an artist at 15. I have never seen—before or since—such a fierce depth of concentration or intensity in anyone of any age as when she stood at the barre making her perfect tendus more perfect. Ballet is about perfecting perfection and thus is a pursuit fit only for those whose obsession with beauty outweighs all else. "There's that devil inside," Rudolf Nureyev said after seeing her dance, and no one knew more than him about those internal devils. In the devotional act that is morning class, Ms. Kistler often sported a bright pink, shiny leotard, lime green legwarmers and glittering red hair barrettes holding up her reams of golden hair—she was the queen of shimmer offstage. In her intense focus she rendered visible for us all Balanchine's dictum "More! More! More! What are you waiting for?" They both knew there was less than no time. "Now is all there is," said Balanchine. And who can say otherwise?

The first time Ms. Kistler saw Balanchine was in the main rehearsal hall on the fourth floor of the New York State Theatre in early 1979, when she was understudying some older SAB students in a production Balanchine was staging of the "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" for the New York City Opera starring Patricia McBride and Nureyev. The entire room came to a sudden, silent halt when an enormous crash echoed from the back of the studio. Nureyev, McBride and Balanchine all turned to the source of the disruption. An embarrassed 14-year-old Darci was down, and it wasn't pretty. She was on her rear, legs flailing about, a colt out of control. Balanchine smiled at her. Now he knew her. He loved it when dancers fell. It meant they weren't playing it safe, they weren't



"waiting." This was the beginning for them. Ms. Kistler never did learn to play it safe and down she went more than once while reaching for the great Balanchinian "More!"

The meeting of Balanchine and Ms. Kistler—he born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1904 during the reign of Czar Nicholas II, and she in Riverside, Calif., home of the navel-orange industry, 60 years later—is a story of cultural dissemination, and assimilation, that brought full circle this deeply mystical Russian man's journey to America, where, he liked to say, he wanted dancers like Ginger Rogers, and in doing so made America the "home of classical ballet."

No choreographer today has the sophistication or cultural heritage—they couldn't by force of history—that George Balanchine embodied and from which his work emanated. As a little boy he was a student at the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg, where, under the patronage of the czar, he was driven around in horse-drawn carriages with two men in uniform sitting above on

the coach box—"Like Cinderella!" he said. He made his debut on the stage of the famed Maryinsky Theatre as Cupid at age 9 in "The Sleeping Beauty," but by 13 the Bolsheviks had closed the ballet school, and he was playing the piano for bread and eating rats to survive. By age 20 he escaped to Europe, never to see his parents again, and was taken to the museums of Florence and Venice by none other than Serge Diaghilev himself. As the Russian impresario's last choreographer for the Ballets Russes, young Balanchine collaborated with artists such as Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Derain, Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Rouault, Tchelitchev and Coco Chanel. Can you imagine the effect of such an onslaught of artistic exposure, all before the age of 25, as it was for Balanchine? He was not only a sponge but a remarkably discerning filter.

After working for Sir Oswald Stoll in British music halls he came, under the invitation of the audacious and visionary 26-year-old Lincoln Kirstein to the shores of America—and the

rest is the history of ballet in the 20th century. This man carried in him the court of Louis XIV where ballet was first codified, the art of Renaissance Europe, the splendor of Czarist Russia, the classicism of Marius Petipa and his cornerstone classic ballets, the music of Tchaikovsky and the avant garde of early 20th-century modernism. And he brought it all here. Never was a man more cultured—or more American.

Darci Anna Kistler was born the fifth child and only girl to a doctor and his wife in Riverside. She grew up wrangling with her four older champion-wrestler brothers, but after being given a Halloween tutu at age 5 she refused to take it off and began attending ballet classes. At age 14 she was invited to study at SAB and came to New York alone to do so—a Beach Boys ballerina who loved water-skiing, horseback riding, cockatoos, biographies, huge dangling earrings, glitter in any form and unicorns. Within months she was on Balanchine's radar, having fallen for him in rehearsal, by age 15 she was ac-

claimed at the school's Workshop performance for her Swan Queen, by 16 she was featured in Time magazine, by 17 Balanchine gave her the mantle of a ballerina in the New York City Ballet and by the time she was 18 he was dead.

On April 30, 1983, the day Mr. B. died, a Saturday, Ms. Kistler found, curiously, a bumblebee flying around her little New York City apartment near Lincoln Center. She had never seen one there before. The next morning, it was dead, lying on the pillow beside her head. She placed the little dead bee in a crystal box.

Having been so chosen, so clearly adored and then abandoned, as it were, while still a teenager, Ms. Kistler occupies—unlike Suzanne Farrell or Allegra Kent, or Patricia McBride, or even Merrill Ashley whose magnificent careers were completed in his lifetime—a position, not so much transitional, as one might expect, but one where simply continuing without his guidance has been an act of enormous courage, a different kind of courage, not least to withstand in graceful silence the critics who, of course, know all.

For Ms. Kistler, as for many of his dancers, Balanchine was not just their teacher, their balletmaster, he was the best father they ever had, frequently the only father. He was not only unthreatened by their youth, femininity, beauty and talent but wished only to increase it, encourage it, reveal it and generously display that beauty for all the world on his stage. But Ms. Kistler has remained, despite her prodigious efforts alone, the unfinished ballerina, even as she arrives at her last performance. It couldn't have been otherwise: He wasn't there to guide, refine, suggest, applaud, adore. She gave it her all, perhaps too well, for her career has been plagued with serious injuries—like physical manifestations of her loss—her exquisite streamlined body often wounded under its keeper's indefatigable will to dance. But throughout she has been an example for 27 years to all those dancers who came after her and had neither her knowledge of Balanchine nor his love. And the love of Balanchine was like a miracle for a ready young dancer. Witness the now-immortal career of Suzanne Farrell, who arrived in his realm in 1961, almost 20 years prior to Ms. Kistler. Her advantage was immeasurable.

My first image of Ms. Kistler up close was of her exiting the elevator in the theater (I was myself a dancer in the NYCB at the time) heading towards the stage for a rehearsal with Balanchine shortly after joining to company. We had all seen this wondrous young dancer in the Workshop performance as Odette in "Swan Lake" with those honed legs like steel arrows, delicate weapons of heart-breaking beauty, and a decisive widow's peak on her fragile open face, eerily echoing a real swan's brow. On stage, in the wings, sitting on the proscenium we all gathered to watch as Mr. B. spoke with Darci—she was 16—as she stood in pink tights, black leotard, and worn satin toe shoes, a sprig of blond hair escaping its clip. She was holding a red lollipop while he, age 76, so debonair in his Fred Astaire shoes, jacket and colorful silk cravat, explained something to her. She licked her lollipop, and gave him the radiant smile of a devoted child. Ms. Kistler was Balanchine's last Ginger.

"She doesn't need to learn how to understand," he said of her, "she already understands." And she did. When she danced for him, we could all feel his joy. She was Balanchine's delight. She wore white to his funeral. What a gift she gave him, a bright last light.

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years and is currently writing a book about Balanchine's ballet "Serenade."

► See photos of Darci Kistler through the years at WSJ.com/Lifestyle.