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Because Mr. B. Told Me So

By TONI BENTLEY

I THINK the world needs to see this." Suzanne Farrell is standing in an enormous sunlit studio in Toronto surveying 60-odd dancers - all looking, watching and waiting for her direction. She is only six days into teaching them George Balanchine's "Don Quixote," which they will have to perform several weeks later, but she is confident. Her only apprehension is the audience's "expecting it to be perfect," she says. "Things will go wrong."

Pulling together any three-act ballet in just five weeks would be an arduous task, and this is no ordinary ballet. Balanchine's "Don Quixote" is perhaps the most controversial piece in his vast canon of works. In contrast to the neo-Classical style - stripped of scenery, costumes, acting, plot and overt sentiment - for which he was revered, it is emotional, religious and flamboyantly theatrical.

When it had its premiere in 1965, both audiences and critics were confused, ambivalent, even suspicious. In 1978, Balanchine retired it from the repertory of New York City Ballet, and it has not been performed since.

Observing a group of young dancers dashing across the stage, Ms. Farrell is calm and articulate. "A profound diagonal," she instructs, "and then an urgent kneel." The dancers repeat the sequence with, indeed, more profound urgency. "That was good," she says to their evident relief. Then she clarifies: "Goodish."

Now eight and a half hours into the long rehearsal day, she suggests they run straight through all three acts - in reverse, using the Balanchine theory that if you know where you're going, you know where to start.

Act III ends stunningly, as a varied procession of monks, priests and penitents passes before Don Quixote's deathbed in a scene of escalating religious fervor. Finally, his humble servant girl appears. She takes two pieces of wood and lays them on his chest in a cross, and as he passes into the next world, she sinks to the side of his bed in grief.

When the ballet was first performed, George Balanchine, who was then 61, danced the role of Don Quixote. And in the role of the servant girl, whom Lincoln Kirstein, founder of the New York City Ballet with Balanchine, described as "Dulcinea as Ideal Woman, Repentant Magdalene, Innocent Shepherdess, Virgin of Seven Dolors," the choreographer cast the 19-year-old Roberta Sue Ficker from Cincinnati, recently re-christened, with a name pulled from the phone book, as Suzanne Farrell.

Balanchine had not only choreographed this role for her, assigning no understudy, he had also conceived the entire ballet as an unmistakable love letter to her. Then at the outset of her remarkable career, she went on to be his last - and longest-lasting - muse. On opening night in 1965, she recalls, in the last scene Balanchine surprised her when, unseen by the audience, he grabbed her hand and pressed it tightly to his chest.

Today Ms. Farrell is the most respected advocate of his work. But her production of "Don Quixote," which is to open on June 22 for six performances at the Opera House at the Kennedy Center in Washington, presented her with many challenges. During the 13 years of its life, Balanchine made numerous changes to the ballet, adding dances, taking out divertissements, cutting sections. There never was a true "finished" version, so she has had to decide what to keep, what to cut, what to preserve. (Full disclosure: This writer was the co-author of Ms. Farrell's book about her life, "Holding On to the Air.")

Does she have any qualms about adjusting Balanchine's choreography? "No," she says simply. And with good reason. Their bond ran deep; his confidence in her was total. She, more than any other living person, most deeply understood, through her own body, his work and thereby his morality.

In 1965 Life magazine featured on its cover Balanchine and Ms. Farrell as the Don and Dulcinea. Inside he stated his credo: "Woman is the goddess, the poetess, the muse. That is why I have a company of beautiful girl dancers. I believe that the same is true of life, that everything a man does he does for his ideal woman. You live only one life, and you believe in something, and I believe in a little thing like that." This "little thing like that" spawned the greatest body of work in classical dance history.

THE better- known "Don Quixote," choreographed in 1869 by Petipa, is a comic ballet that features the Don as a buffoonish secondary character. But Balanchine's version takes the spiritual quest of Cervantes's great novel, celebrating its 400th anniversary this year, very seriously. One of only four full-length works that Balanchine choreographed, it comprises hundreds of elaborate costumes, operatic-scale scenery, a horse and a donkey, a 40-foot windmill, a miniature puppet theater, a 30-foot giant slinging a massive sword, and an original score by Nicolas Nabokov, a cousin of the novelist.

Ms. Farrell's new production is a million-dollar venture between her company, the Suzanne Farrell Ballet, which operates under the aegis of the Kennedy Center, and the National Ballet of Canada, which will perform the work in Toronto in November 2006. The entire production, including new sets by Zack Brown and costumes by Holly Hynes (all being made in Canada), has been designed to fit into three trucks for touring. For the Washington engagement, featuring 37 dancers from Ms. Farrell's company and 17 from Canada, the original cast of dancers from the 1965 premiere has been invited to opening night.

Ms. Farrell has been thinking for years about presenting "Don Quixote," but she had to wait until her company - now only five years old and still not employed on a full-time basis - was able to take on the challenge. "I, too, had to be ready," she says quietly. She first began talking to Michael M. Kaiser, president of the Kennedy Center, about it two years ago.

To recreate this enormous ballet, Ms. Farrell had few tools: one 40-year-old, blurry black-and-white film (shot illegally during a performance by the photographer Bert Stern) and one incomplete silent color video from the 1970's. "That's what I'm working from," she says with a smile, her enormous blue eyes flashing. "Partial vision and no music. But I was around, and I watched everything. I wanted to be with him. What could be more important?"

A recording of the score would have helped, but none was ever made. So more than six months ago, she and Ron Matson, music director and conductor for her company, started sorting out the published version (which Balanchine and Nabokov were constantly editing along with the ballet). The music is "a big challenge" Mr. Matson says. "It's a very difficult score. As soon as the music starts, there is this kind of awkwardness. I think Nabokov was trying to write music that corresponded to the inside of Don Quixote's head. It is sometimes thinly orchestrated but with numerous solos."

Mr. Matson played it on the piano, recorded it on his Macintosh computer and burned a CD for Ms. Farrell to dance to in her living room. They reconvened at the computer to make various cuts and edits to the score. "I don't know how we would have done it without the computer," he says, laughing, underscoring yet again how modern technology is helping even classical art forms.

"I feel like Donna Quixote, in and out of reality," Ms. Farrell says gleefully, of the process of sorting out the ballet and bringing it to the stage. She feels appropriately missionary about the enterprise, hoping to make it as accessible to its new audience as possible.

"I am sticking almost entirely to the first, 1965 version," she explains, "which keeps closer to the story line with less intervention of divertissements." She is also moving a dance, added by Balanchine in the 1970's, from the third act to the first and cutting the music that played at length before the curtain rose on the Prologue. "We decided," Mr. Matson says, "that it was not necessary, and better to get the audience into the ballet more quickly. Suzanne, after all, was the ultimate musician on the stage. She hears the music internally, without counting."

Casting the role of Dulcinea was difficult. Not because it was once Ms. Farrell's - "I've never looked for dancers who look like me," she explains - but because it requires a combination of innocence and vulnerability, along with strong, if not demonic, technical assurance for some of the riskiest off-balance point dancing ever choreographed.

"I need someone who can give themselves over to the ballet," Ms. Farrell continues. "It's a mind-set. It's very hard to be young. Today dancers often masquerade behind technique without revealing anything of themselves, and the whole of 'Don Q.' is revealing. In fact, everything Mr. B. did was always about revealing something of you. It's hard, sometimes, to find a person amongst all the ballerinas."

One of the dancers she chose to learn Dulcinea is the pretty and petite - and, notably, Spanish - Sonia Rodriguez, a leading dancer with the Canadian company. She will dance the role on opening night in Washington. Less than a week of rehearsals, and she has learned virtually all three acts.

"This is very different from our usual way of working," she says in charmingly accented English, "where we are taught little section by little section at a time and then slowly put it together. Suzanne gives you everything, and by just doing it, you find your own way, you create the role. It's a little shocking at first, but it brings in more possibilities because you don't have someone picking at you so much. The experience becomes bigger and freer. You take more risks. She is wonderful at giving you ideas, but then letting you find your own way. She doesn't hold anything back."

That includes her memories of Balanchine. As she puts her dancers through their paces, her thoughts are very connected to the man who created the ballet and who left it to her in his will. "I don't want

people to feel that I can't let go of Mr. B.," she says. " If I saw a great choreographer out there, I'd be in his corner. But I don't see anybody. Everyone can do steps. I can do steps."

Having retired from the stage in 1989, she says: "The further away I get from my performing career, the more I feel that each ballet we did together - even though they harvested wonderful work - was to bring George and I to another level of understanding. 'Don Q.' brought us together in such a way that we almost didn't have to speak, a level of collaboration, a kind of equalization. It meant, 'look where we can go.' "

Back in the studio, the reverse rehearsal proceeds through Act II, set in a royal court where Don Quixote and Sancho Panza endure numerous humiliations, and then Act I begins with the servant girl entering the stage, barefoot, carrying a bowl of water. Don Quixote has just realized his mission: to fight the impossible fight, to dream the impossible dream and to defend his beloved woman in all her guises. Preparing him for his travels, she kneels and washes his feet and dries them with her hair. The imagery is unmistakable. Having anointed her master, the girl rises, her bowl in hand, and slowly climbs a steep staircase on stage right, as Dulcinea's theme music plays for the first time, sweet and mournful.

She climbs, inexorably beckoned by a halo of warm, bright, soft light, the kind that emanates from a Tiepolo ceiling fresco when the heavens have cracked open. Balanchine called this "Dulcinea's light," and when Ms. Farrell was 19, it showed her where to go. Watching Ms. Farrell, who will turn 60 in August, passing on this piece of her own life, one still sees Dulcinea's light shining brightly into the future of the fragile art form to which she has dedicated her life. And on June 22, in the nation's capital, like a torch being passed, it will guide a new Dulcinea.

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