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TANAQUIL LE CLERCQ

THE EXQUISITE DANCER, RENOWNED BEAUTY, AND LAST WIFE OF GEORGE BALANCHINE CAPTIVATED THE DANCE WORLD—UNTIL ILLNESS ROBBED HER OF HER GIFT. SHE REMAINS A FASCINATING FIGURE SHADED IN LIGHT AND DARK

Words TONI BENTLEY

"I'm not a swan, I'm a crane," protested Tanaquil Le Clercq when cast by George Balanchine in *Swan Lake*. She had a point. Jacques d'Amboise likened her to "an elegant praying mantis." She was, in fact, so resistant to her role, one usually so coveted, that her boss had to stand in the wings and literally give her a push; a careful observer could see the jolt as she flew onstage.

Le Clercq was the first American ballerina entirely trained from childhood by Balanchine. She presented not only the prototype of the sleek physique that would become world famous as a "Balanchine dancer" but in her elegance, sophistication, and spunky, speedy, tongue-in-cheek wit, she was the ballet world's Barbara Stanwyck, a far cry from the prevailing 19th-century image of a neurasthenic sylph. She was "Balanchine at his clearest, fastest, most musical, and insouciant," says writer John Gruen, who watched her dance in the 1950s. "There wasn't a mawkish or self-conscious bone in her body, and the logic of her long legs could produce lightning states as well as cool lyricism. Was she Balanchine's greatest ballerina? Most probably."

The splendor of Le Clercq's face, body, and style can still be witnessed in grainy snippets on YouTube. In *Afternoon of a Faun*, she looks like a postmodern Garbo in tights, while in *Western Symphony* she prances like a young colt, jutting her saucy hips in a manner so innocent yet alluring as to conjoin the sacred and profane in a single vision. But, alas, these clips are all that is left, blurry hints of this dancer's magic. And because her career was cut short so abruptly, they convey a particularly poignant beauty.

But further elucidation is on hand in a moving new documentary titled *Tanaquil Le Clercq: Afternoon of a Faun* by Nancy Buirski that will air on *American Masters* (PBS). The film provides the most comprehensive view to date of Le Clercq's life, including previously unseen images, interviews, and dancing footage.

Le Clercq's rise to universal acclaim was as smooth and unhampered as the line of her stiletto legs, those erotic exclamation points. She once commented to a friend that she had sometimes thought it had all been too easy: the scholarship at age 11, a leading role at age 17, principal dancer at age 19, and then, finally, marriage to her great love, George Balanchine—who was the great love of many—at age 23. But then, suddenly, as if Kafka had co-opted her fairy-tale script from Mother Goose, dues were collected—on October 29, 1956, a Monday—in a manner more vicious, more pointed, than to any other dancer in the annals of dancing.

In a sign of respect for Le Clercq's absolute detestation of sentimentality, those who write about the woman, known to intimates as "Tanny," typically accentuate her dancing and beauty, quickly passing over the polio. But the attempt to render her disease a mere footnote to her illustrious career is impossible, and it sidesteps the essential story of Tanaquil Le Clercq whose life as a ballerina is framed by her crippling, and whose legacy—and it is rare to have one at all in this most evanescent of arts—is seared into history as the most merciless dance that Terpsichore ever devised.

At first, she had wanted to kill herself, but she didn't, in large part due to Balanchine's absolute devotion to her. He bathed her, dressed her, fed her, talked to her, amused her, played games with her, prayed for her.

She decided to live, though she said that until the end she still dreamed of herself "walking, never wheeling."

It must be remembered that this tragedy was visited not only upon the young ballerina but also upon Balanchine, tossing this man, who knew better than any before him how to move a woman into her beauty, into a place of unprecedented powerlessness. In a cruelly perverse pas de deux, he would gather Le Clercq up from the bed, and facing her outward, leaning her against his chest, he would partner her, placing her flopping feet atop his own and moving about their apartment, trying to incite in those famous limbs a flicker of muscle memory where so much had lived. Of course he failed. But the image elicits an almost unbearable tenderness.

It is not by chance that the seminal Stravinsky ballet *Agon*—one of Balanchine's most revered masterpieces, which he choreographed only one year later, contains a stark pas de deux in which the male dancer places, guides, and directs his partner's legs and feet in every possible way—from the overtly erotic to the tortuous extreme. But here, on Olympus, unlike at home, the ballerina follows every suggestion with glory and ease.

Le Clercq was born in Paris—as Diana Vreeland once asserted any girl with gumption would arrange for herself—on October 2, 1929. She was named by her French father, an intellectual, poet, and translator, after the first Etruscan Queen of Rome, Queen Tanaquil, a personage known for her powers of divination. Le Clercq's mother was an American, a St. Louis debutante, who became a devoted stage mother to her only child, overseeing her every step and later chaperoning her dates with Balanchine. Le Clercq's godfather was former French prime minister Georges Clemenceau and family friends included the likes of Edmund Wilson, Gore Vidal, Tennessee Williams, and Frank O'Hara.

When Le Clercq was three, her family moved to New York, and at age 11 the scrawny little girl was given one of the first of five scholarships offered by the School of American Ballet. She was on Balanchine's radar from the start. "She looked like a real ballerina already," he said later, "only very small, as if you were looking at her through the wrong end of the telescope."

The telescope quickly rotated, and, by age 17, she was featured in the premiere of *The Four Temperaments* for Ballet Society. Two years later, on October 11, 1948, at City Center, she danced the ecstatic second movement adagio of Bizet's *Symphony in C* in the debut performance of the newly inaugurated New York City Ballet.

A young Jerome Robbins was in the audience that night. "Tanny Le Clercq made me cry," he said, "when she fell backward at the end and I thought, Oh boy! I want to work with that company!" He wrote to Balanchine, "I'd like to work with you and I'll come as anything you need, anything you want." Balanchine replied with typical brevity, "Come on," and thus began Robbins's historic involvement with Balanchine's company, as well as his lifelong love affair—perhaps consummated, perhaps not—with Le Clercq.

Though Robbins was 11 years older than Le Clercq (Balanchine was 25 years her senior), the two of them were like kids together, writing frequent letters to each other, riding the Cyclone at Coney Island, and identifying with the *Peanuts* comic strip: he was Charlie Brown, she was Lucy. They gossiped, teased, and laughed, and Robbins called her

Left: Tanaquil Le Clercq performing *La Valse*, circa 1951. Photography Gjon Mili

“baby.” “I love you so for just that quality,” he wrote, “which really is very honest and always makes me blink at its directness and acuteness.”

In 1953, Robbins choreographed one of his most lucid works on Le Clercq and Francisco Moncion. *Afternoon of a Faun* is a pas de deux that takes place in a studio. Both in practice clothes, the dancers connect, tenuously, through perfecting their mirrored images, but their love—if it is that—is severed when he kneels, leans in, and breaks the mirror’s distancing triangulation by kissing her cheek. Reality has entered the sacred studio, and with her hand held to her cheek, she rises and exits. He rolls over, stretching one last time before sleeping. Such was love for the tortured, bisexual Robbins.

The previous year Le Clercq had married Balanchine. “I am in love with George,” she wrote to Robbins. “I suppose it’s a case of he got here first.” Much later Robbins said, “All the ballets I ever did for the company, it was always for Tanny.” When he died, in 1998, at the age of 79, only a single photograph was found in his bedroom, a snapshot of Le Clercq, in her wheelchair, smiling at the cameraman, probably her Charlie Brown.

In 1951 Balanchine cast Le Clercq in his new ballet, *La Valse*, set to the evocative and ominous music of Ravel’s 1911 *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*. Ravel imagined the setting as “an Imperial court, about 1855... dancing on the edge of a volcano.” Forty years later Balanchine devised a work that answered the composer’s vision, with Le Clercq as its doomed heroine, the Girl in White.

Set in a dark, cavernous ballroom filled with billowing fabric hallways and clusters of black lights, Lincoln Kirstein, co-founder with Balanchine of New York City Ballet, described the work as “the never-ending and always futile struggle between the actual and the ideal.” The climax of the ballet features a figure in black, Death, and his servant entering the ballroom. He offers the Girl in White a glittering black necklace, long black gloves, and a sheer black tulle cape. Mesmerized, Le Clercq dons Death’s accessories. She cannot resist, and what girl could: the costume, gloves, and jewelry were among the crowning triumphs in the long career of Barbara Karinska, the great Ukrainian costumer and one of Balanchine’s most trusted collaborators. Brimming with evocation, the costume’s lush layers eerily mimicked the gorgeous, sinister proceedings.

“I remember Tanny’s marvelous gesture,” wrote poet Edwin Denby, “when she put her hand into the glove, she threw her head at the same time, so that it was a kind of immolation, you felt, like diving to destruction.” Her innocence now veiled in black, she waltzes with Death, faster and faster, swirling under his gaze, to her demise. As the curtain closes, Le Clercq’s body is held high and horizontal, spinning above a crowd of dancers running in a frenzied circle, the edge of a volcano crossed.

On Christmas Day 1952, Balanchine asked Le Clercq to marry him, making her his fifth wife. She didn’t hesitate—“I was crazy about him”—and they married a week later, on New Year’s Eve. “If it lasts a year,” Le Clercq said to Kirstein at the reception, “it’ll be worth it.” Upon hearing of the nuptials, a fellow dancer said, “She married him for all of us.”

“I hate shots!” declared Le Clercq as the company was lining up for polio vaccines before an 11-week European tour, in 1956. “They make me sick,” she said, stepping out of the queue. “I’ll get mine when I come back.” Balanchine didn’t get one either.

After visiting Cologne, the company traveled to Copenhagen, where Le Clercq danced both the matinee and evening on Sunday, October 28, but complained of feeling achy. She woke up Monday morning, and “it just happened,” she said. “The legs went.” Within days she was diagnosed and ensconced in an iron lung.

She was in the hospital in Denmark for over four months. Balanchine, leaving his company to finish the tour without him, got a cheap hotel room nearby and spent his days cooking at a friend’s apartment—he was a famously good cook—and bringing the food to Le Clercq at the hospital during visiting hours. At night he played solitaire in his hotel room. In March 1957, the family returned to New York and Balanchine took his wife to Warm Springs, Georgia, to the facility for rehabilitation founded by Roosevelt. All the while Balanchine hoped, believed, she

would recover. He was, by all reports, the last—long after Le Clercq herself—to accept that she would never walk, much less dance, again.

Le Clercq spent the following decades devising crossword puzzles (some published in *The New York Times*), teaching ballet classes at the Dance Theater of Harlem, occasionally going to the ballet, and writing two very original books.

The Ballet Cook Book collected backstage portraits of dancers, many her close friends at NYCB, and their favorite recipes. *Mourka: The Autobiography of a Cat* is now a hard-to-find treasure. Published in 1964, it features enchanting photos of the Balanchines’ rescue kitty, Mourka, whom Balanchine had taught to dance. Le Clercq’s text is filled with charm and wry humor as she details Mourka’s rise to world renown from rather questionable beginnings. Mourka’s father (an intellectual in mortarboard) “founded Connecticut College,” but his wife, a floozy, “ran away with the gardener” the day after Mourka’s birth. The kitten is discovered to have a fantastic jump that distinguishes him “from every other cat in catdom.” He studies the “Petipaw method,” and finds fame on the cover of “Mewsweek” and “Mouse & Garden.”

After a thwarted love affair with “a ravishing little thing,” Mourka agrees to become “the first astrocat” and commences serious “training” with “Mr. Balanchine.” Appearing on “Meet the Puss,” Mourka declares that he has “not one but nine lives to lose for my country.” After securing a “Cat Star” on his first voyage into outer space, he explains triumphantly, “I always knew I could do more for the nation through my elevation.” *Mourka* is a triumph indeed, one of humility and sweetness, for the ballerina in a wheelchair, who chose to write not her own biography but that of her beloved, high-flying feline.

Le Clercq and Balanchine divorced in 1969 so that he could pursue, unsuccessfully, his new muse, Suzanne Farrell. At his funeral 14 years later, Le Clercq was beside his coffin, alongside his four other wives. Balanchine took care of Le Clercq to the end, dividing his estate among three women, with Le Clercq receiving the American royalties on almost 100 ballets. She died, age 71, on New Year’s Eve, 2000, on what would have been her 48th wedding anniversary.

The first role Balanchine ever devised for the young Le Clercq was for a one-time-only charity luncheon at the Waldorf Astoria. She was 16 years old and still a student in the school. The event was a fundraiser for the March of Dimes, and *Resurgence*, set to Mozart’s soaring String Quintet No. 4 in G Minor, told the story of a young girl with her friends in their ballet class, dancing, rejoicing, practicing with their limber young bodies.

A monstrous figure robed in black enters—the Threat of Polio—and touches the young girl. She falls, paralyzed. She is gathered up, placed in a wheelchair, and performs cheerless little arm movements from her chair. At the ballet’s climax, a flurry of silver coins showers down upon her. Healed, she rises from her wheelchair, dons her ballet slippers once again, and dances happily across the stage into her promising future. It was Balanchine’s 42nd birthday that day at the Waldorf, and he played the Threat of Polio himself for the performance.

Years later, Balanchine, a mystical man, called this dance “an omen,” and felt that somehow he had brought Le Clercq’s illness upon her. “It was, alas, a balletic finale,” he said. “Nothing like that ending will happen in Tanny’s real life.” Omen, perhaps, but, alas, with its coda of rejuvenation, not prophecy.

“What precocious sense of the transience of beauty and gaiety,” wrote critic Lillian Moore of Le Clercq in *La Valse*, “enabled her to dance this role with such infinite delicacy and penetration?” What “precocious sense” indeed, but that of fate? Le Clercq chose to never tell her story—she took it with her. And so now she perches, quietly, an inexorable beauty shrouded in mythic horror, a lone figure in pale black tulle, forever haunting the ghostly halls of dance history.

Toni Bentley danced for 10 years with New York City Ballet and is the author of five books. A one-woman play adaptation of her book *The Surrender: an Erotic Memoir* premiered in Madrid in January 2013 in a production by the Spanish National Theater

Photography courtesy Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and the estate of George Platt Lynes



Right: Le Clercq in George Balanchine’s *La Valse*, circa 1951. Costume by Barbara Karinska. Photography George Platt Lynes