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PARIS, MILAN, NEW YORK:
RUNWAY REPORT





*Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine's great ballerina
and muse, brings his legacy back home.*

By Toni Bentley Photographs by Elliott Erwitt

The first time Suzanne Farrell went to Russia, in 1962, she was a chubby-cheeked seventeen year old in the corps of George Balanchine's New York City Ballet. She injured her knee and did not dance in Leningrad, spending her days at a clinic receiving hot-wax treatments and eating tuna fish in her room for dinner.

This past December Farrell went back to Leningrad. She stayed alone at the old Europskaya Hotel on Nevsky Prospekt and again she ate tuna fish for dinner, from tins she'd brought with her. The bath water was as yellow and sulferous as before, the rubles were as useless. But everything else had changed.

The shy girl from Cincinnati had become Balanchine's most important muse—the object of his most ardent attentions, on-stage and off. She had been the center of his artistic investigations for the last twenty years of his life, and more than any other single dancer, perhaps, she showed the world what Balanchine was about—his Russian soul and American energy. Now Balanchine was gone, Farrell's career had been ended decisively by a total hip replacement operation—then resurrected miraculously by a year of therapy and sheer willpower. She had not come back to dance on the stage of the Maryinsky Theater (now the Kirov) where Balanchine was educated, but in her suitcase she carried several pairs of toe shoes and a pink tulle tutu she had worn in the Balanchine ballet *Scotch Symphony*.

She had come to work. It was unusual work for her, and for her collaborators, the dancers and management of the Kirov Theater, it was unprecedented. She was going to teach the conservators of Balanchine's Imperial ballet heritage how to dance his streamlined reinventions of their Romantic style. Glasnost, of course, made this curious endeavor possible, but it was Oleg Vinogradov who made it real.

Vinogradov, director of the Kirov Ballet, first saw Balan-

RAISING THE IRON CURTAIN



SUZANNE FARRELL
WENT TO THE KIROV NOT
TO PERFORM BUT TO
TEACH BALANCHINE'S
DANCES ON THE STAGE
WHERE HE TOOK HIS FIRST
STEPS. "I COULD GIVE IT
AWAY AND FEEL JUST AS
REWARDED AS IF I HAD
DANCED IT—ALMOST."
NEXT MONTH THE KIROV
COMES TO NEW YORK CITY
TO RETURN THE FAVOR.
LEFT, A MOMENT FROM
SCOTCH SYMPHONY.



chine's work during the New York City Ballet's tour of the Soviet Union in 1972. He'd even spoken with Balanchine at the time and received some encouragement about the possibility of staging his ballets at the Kirov. But only after Gorbachev's 1985 summit with Reagan did Vinogradov feel confident that the time had come to realize his dream. After several years of Byzantine negotiations with Barbara Horgan, executrix of Balanchine's estate, arrangements were finalized. Tchaikovsky's *Theme and Variations* would be staged by Francia Russell, a director of the Pacific Northwest Ballet and former ballet mistress with the New York City Ballet. Mendelssohn's *Scotch Symphony* would be staged by Farrell.

From the beginning Vinogradov saw this only as a first step,

an opening of the door, but for Horgan, who feels an almost anguished responsibility for the quality of the stagings of the Balanchine works she licenses, everything would depend on the success of the first two works. The future of Balanchine in Russia—not as a visiting curiosity but as a style incorporated into the minds, muscles, and repertory of Russian dancers—depended in a very real sense on two women trained by Balanchine, carrying his counsels only in their memories.

Armed with a marked musical score, a videotape, pages of hieroglyphic notes, and the flowered Russian shawl that is her trademark, Farrell entered a studio at the Kirov Theater on December 20. She had ten days to teach the ballet. In the end she didn't use the videotape or the notes—just her feet and her face.



SUZANNE FARRELL,
LEFT, REHEARSING
ALEXANDER KURÓV,
AND GALINA
MEZENTSEVA FOR
SCOTCH SYMPHONY.

Farrell confronted dancers who knew less about her or Balanchine than any other ballet dancers in the world: they knew that "his real name was Balanchivadze," and that "he was not Russian, he was Georgian." Of his style, ethic, musicality, purpose, and importance they knew nothing. Balanchine would probably have been delighted: they were ready for him.

For Farrell the questions were simple: would these dancers be willing to follow the music and not have the music follow them? Would they "roll through their feet," making the dance a smooth flow rather than a series of poses on pointe? Would they give full importance to every moment, not just the difficult ones? Would they extend their limbs past what is comfortable to what is beautiful—in Balanchine's terms? The dancers of the Kirov are

among the best trained in the world. But since they didn't know the first thing about Balanchine, would they trust his dancing?

"It was a disaster," Farrell says of her first day. "I was supposed to have a choice of whom I wanted to work with, and I didn't. I was in a room with all these people who didn't look like dancers to me, and I had no interpreter. Since I couldn't see how they danced, I took whoever looked the best visually, who had some line, who seemed interested. I just threw steps and directions at them and eventually the atmosphere began to buzz."

The "buzz" in the studio denoted many conflicting energies—resistance, excitement, confusion, and disbelief. The dancers were confronted with sixty years of ballet history and development that simply had not happened in their world. Balanchine

worked all his life to train American dancers to move the way he wanted. These dancers would have only days.

For her leads, the principal couple and a female soloist, Farrell also had little choice. "I didn't want girls who would wear their hair in that classic *Giselle* bun-over-the-ears, which Mr. B. hated. I wanted dancers who were willing to make themselves over." She ended up choosing three young fair-haired dancers, none of them leading members of the company.

Elena Pankova, twenty-five years old, had been with the Kirov for eight years and had just recently been promoted out of the corps which, as she explained it, meant an extra thirty rubles a month. Her innocent face was sad as she confessed that the Leningrad public doesn't like her very much, and while other ballerinas have cheering fans and friends at performances "who give them success, I have only two women in my public, and they don't cheer, they cry."

Yuri Zhukov was a rebel and a clown. Four years ago at the age of twenty-one, he had hurt his knee and deciding he didn't want to dance, had investigated a career in acting. He ultimately returned to the company and while rehearsing in the corps of *Theme and Variations* a few months earlier, he was dismissed for talking back to the ballet mistress.

Larisa Lezhnina, nineteen, had been in the company for only a year and a half and was already preparing Princess Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*. "But," she said, "I am short and have short arms so I have many things to work on." She was a natural dancer of crisp line, and heartbreaking exuberance.

Within six days the whole ballet was taught, and within ten it began to take shape. Pankova and Zhukov asked to change a step—not a difficult technical step, but a running step that made them feel awkward because they thought it wasn't a step at all. Farrell wrinkled her nose and said, "But it's so pretty! Try it." They did and it worked and they never asked to change another thing.

"These dancers have great pride and don't like to look bad in front of you or their peers," says Farrell. "I explained to them that it just didn't matter. If you rehearse only what you know you can do, that will limit your possibilities in performance."

"They know only intellectually that dance has gone a long way from where they are. But how large can your mind be if you haven't seen anything? I told Elena, 'You can do any arms you want here,' and her eyes opened wide and she asked the interpreter, 'What'd she say?' I said, 'Yes, you can do anything.' I told her to listen to the music, that she would find things in it to help her."

"In a way these dancers are much more disciplined than we are because they have no freedom. That's what makes them different from everybody else. In that sense they're much better equipped to deal with freedom than people who have all the freedom in the world and no discipline."

Trust was building between the dancers and Farrell, and slowly various Balanchine requirements were being absorbed and tentatively applied. Arabesques grew larger, tempos grew faster, necks grew longer, and hands grew fingers—out of the softly cupped palm that is standard in the Romantic repertory.

Farrell would now go back to the States for six weeks and return to ready the ballet for performance on February 21.

"I don't care if we're booed off the stage, but I want this to change their lives," Farrell says shortly after. "I think it already

has. I said to Vinogradov, 'This may not be successful, but when you're a pioneer you can't bank on being successful, that's what pioneer means. Pioneer is pain.'"

Friday, February 10—Farrell's first rehearsal of *Scotch Symphony* since December. It appears to be the dancers' first one since then also. Another "disaster" and this one only eleven days before the premiere, which is already sold out.

Sunday, February 12—Pankova and Zhukov are slowly becoming a Balanchine couple. She dances with a half mournful, half otherworldly smile that goes right to the heart, and her fourth positions are growing bolder as her consecutive pirouettes grow smoother and faster. Zhukov is learning that his steps provoke and echo the ballerina's. It is a dialogue, not a competition.

Wednesday, February 15—Sets and costumes arrive for both *Theme* and *Scotch* and are immediately installed on stage and dancers. The backdrop for *Theme* is a beautifully painted view of the interior of the Maryinsky Theater as it was when Balanchine was a boy; thus the stage and the auditorium become a huge circle of past and present joined by the dancing at the center. It is a grand and moving design.

Friday, February 17—Orchestra rehearsal. Dzhemal Dalgat, a short, gnomish man in his midfifties, is the conductor for the "Evening of Dances by Balanchine." He looks not unlike Stravinsky and he conducts Tchaikovsky in Russian, with overwhelming force and passion. A little of this grandeur has even invaded the Mendelssohn and it is surprisingly glorious. But Dalgat is confused. The dancers want the music slower and Farrell wants it faster. "It is not their decision," Farrell finally tells him. "You're the boss!" He looks bewildered.

"But I am not allowed to play the way I feel."

"But I'm telling you to."

"Now, yes, but when you leave I'll be on my own."

Farrell smiles. "Maybe I'll come back."

Pankova is gliding through *Scotch* as though she were born to it, but suddenly stops and only walks through the remainder of the ballet. She is visibly upset, close to tears. "The music was too slow!" she says later. Her muscles are absorbing the logic of the movement. She has learned, as Farrell keeps telling the dancers, that with Balanchine it's easier if you go faster.

After rehearsal Vinogradov holds a dinner in Horgan's honor, in an intimate room behind one of the Imperial boxes. After the requisite vodka is poured, Vinogradov proposes a toast to the man who brought everyone in the room together, George Balanchine. "It is the first toast to him in this theater, but it will not be the last!" Vinogradov cannot help relishing the fulfillment of his longtime dream, one he will present to Balanchine's own public when the Kirov dances in New York City this July.

"Why didn't the Bolshoi do it before? As soon as I did it, everyone wants to! Of course it didn't happen here right away either, things take more time in Russia..." he pauses, clearly moved, "but history will not forget us."

Saturday, February 18—Today is the first of two full rehearsals before the actual premiere. Afterwards Farrell goes back to Pankova's dressing room and tells her that it's getting better and better—that it's becoming wonderful. "Now it is your ballet." Farrell's eyes fill with tears. Pankova stands, chin down, in a small first position, unable to respond but looking at Farrell with unspeakable humility.

Farrell runs out of the room but is stopped by Zhukov; he wishes to speak to her alone. She emerges a few minutes later with a single red carnation. Farrell worries most about >

FARRELL: "I WANTED DANCERS WHO WERE WILLING TO MAKE THEMSELVES OVER."

Zhukov, that he might panic on his difficult turns, falter, then play it safe. The Kirov's male dancers are so obsessed with their bravura turns and jumps that they practice them to the detriment of the dancing that connects them.

Sunday, February 19—Farrell takes three of her dancers to dinner. With communication consisting mainly of wild gesticulations and a little French, they are asked what Russian dancers say for "good luck" before a performance—an equivalent to the Western "merde!" "HE ПУХА HE ПЕРА (Ni pou kha ni pera)" they reply, but it can't be translated, and even its pronunciation by Americans causes howls of laughter. Only the ritual rejoinder is clear: "K' YÉPT (K Chor tou!)"—"to the devil with you." Later one learns that the phrase means something like "neither a feather nor a plume," probably a paradox designed to confuse the devil. To Farrell, who as an artist is nothing if not elusive, it seems a fitting motto for her mission.

Tuesday, February 21—The night of the premiere. The sheets are removed from the Czar's Box and from the tiers, and the hundreds of tiny chandeliers are lit. The Kirov Theater is largely unchanged from the days when Balanchine knew it, and it is lovingly preserved. The inevitable hammer-and-sickle insignias have replaced the Imperial crests above the boxes so discreetly that they seem like hidden jokes—what's wrong with this picture? The house seats eighteen hundred, but is so intimate, so like the inside of a finely polished music box, that it feels private and privileged. It is a fantasy of white and gold painted stucco, blue velvet seats, and draped silk curtains with gold tassels.

Directly above the proscenium is an ornate gold clock that keeps perfect time. At 7:42 P.M. the curtain rises on *Scotch Symphony*. As Farrell prepares to watch from the Czar's Box, she holds concealed in her palm a large wooden cross of Balanchine's. Backstage Pankova is being fitted into another sentimental souvenir—Farrell's own *Scotch Symphony* costume.

Farrell's nervousness vanishes as the curtain rises. The ballet comes alive immediately. It looks not only like a Balanchine ballet but one that could have been danced by his own company—fast, energetic, vivacious. Perhaps best of all, no one, not even Zhukov, retreats into old habits, but dives physically and bravely into the new world.

"I told them everything I knew," says Farrell later, "and I knew they could handle it. It was wonderful seeing this ballet on this stage, in this theater, knowing that as a little boy Mr. B. was here, probably already planning things. Even though I remembered how wonderful it was to dance *Scotch Symphony*, I could watch it and not want to dance it. That's my acid test. I could give it away and feel just as rewarded as if I had danced it—almost." Her huge blue eyes fill with tears.



The audience attempts applause at several climaxes, but soon realizes that there are many climaxes and that the ballet does not stop for bows, for applause, or for a rest. Already Balanchine is educating a new public through the dancing alone. When the curtain finally lowers, the audience seems dazzled, satisfied, and perhaps a little relieved. Farrell receives a note from Zhukov's grandmother, that probably speaks for many: "I never saw Balanchine's ballets and I thought: it will be many acrobatics, and also the nonesthetic attitude of contemporary dances. But I saw a pure classic, which I loved from my childhood till now."

Theme and Variations opens to loud applause for its two lead dancers, Altinai Asylmuratova and Konstantin Zaklinsky, which continues throughout the ballet at each turn, jump, entrance, and exit. And though the performance goes astonishingly well, the undertow of star temperament, so foreign to Balanchine's method, is never far from the surface.

Scotch Symphony offers other pleasures and intimations of a different sort. Here one sees young, hungry dancers somehow seduced by Farrell into abandoning the certainties of a lifetime, moving arms and legs in a different sort of space than they had ever inhabited before, and finding themselves exhilarated by the exercise. One also sees, in a curious way, Farrell the dancer as one has never seen her before, performing none of the parts, and all of them. She has managed to pass on a little of the sheer, startling courage of her own dancing. One rarely witnesses in such a focused way this transfer of inspiration by which ballet survives—and grows. There is one person in the theater who knows precisely what it all means.

Farrell takes a short bow with her dancers at the end of *Scotch Symphony*. Suddenly as she begins to walk off the stage, Elena Pankova rushes to her, stops her, thrusts all her own flowers into Farrell's arms, lunges to the ground, and bows her head practically to Farrell's feet. It is both a noble and abject bow, not without its own grandeur and style, but utterly spontaneous, shattering, desperate, and beautiful. This young Russian dancer, who has never seen Farrell dance and probably never will, in one short moment seems to lay down not only her flowers but her life. When the other leading dancers, shocked and excited by this breach of custom, if not decorum, rush to add their own flowers to Pankova's, the exchange is complete. ■

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet.