

The Master

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George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker

by Robert Gottlieb

Atlas Books/HarperCollins, 216 pp., \$19.95

All in the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine

by Terry Teachout

Harcourt, 185 pp., \$22.00

1.

George Balanchine, the greatest dance innovator of the twentieth century, and possibly the most important in all 350 years of classical dance history since the language was codified in the court of Louis XIV, has just been subjected to a global celebration lasting an entire year in honor of the centennial of his birth, in tsarist Russia, in 1904. Now it is perhaps a good time, as he enters his second century of influence, to assess the many acts of heroism performed in his honor—and the attendant damage.

It is safe to say that had he been alive, this past year of celebrations would have been done in considerably better taste, especially at the company he created, the New York City Ballet, where bad taste now surfaces with predictable frequency both in new productions and often even in the dancers themselves, who have clearly been left, unwisely, in the dark concerning their true purpose in dancing Balanchine ballets. Many of them actually seem to believe that performing Balanchine is all about their admittedly lovely selves, and smile and twirl to curiously inappropriate and banal effect. If Balanchine taught his dancers one thing, and only one thing, it was that whether they liked it or not, neither his ballets nor by association this life is about them. It is about service. Or as Lincoln Kirstein, founder with Balanchine of the New York City Ballet, explained: “Ballet is about how to behave.” Balanchine taught his audience and dancers alike how to behave, but oh how quickly (and how well he knew) they would become both physically and morally lazy in his absence.

In his canonization—which might have amused him, but certainly not surprised him given his laser-like ability to detect all manner of self-serving associations—Balanchine’s name has become a kind of vacant edifice of inevitably crude, yet noble, attempts at preservation and continuation. In the twenty years since his death, and most especially during the last year, Balanchine has been filed, incorporated, copyrighted, trademarked, exalted, berated, plagiarized, and blamed for anorexia and bulimia, for liking what he liked (very undemocratic), and for setting almost impossible standards of excellence (ditto).

Why, he is even now joining Elizabeth Taylor and Britney Spears in branding his name for consumer products, most recently for a line of dancewear “inspired” by his ballets. The manufacturing company proudly states that each price tag will inform the aspiring student and her mother of the name of the ballet, the composer, and the première date. They explain their educational intentions with the comment, “Young dancers today aren’t getting enough of that history.” Balanchine redux on a leotard tear tag. Great. (In reality, ballet dancers rarely “study” the history of their profession—they are far too busy sewing ribbons on pointe shoes and tightening a tutu. Their knowledge of the tradition of which they are legatees is by way of steps, not words, and is intrinsic in their dedication.)

“*Après moi, le board!*” Balanchine declared gleefully. Well, now it looks more like, “*Après moi, le marketing de moi.*” But at year’s end, happily, there were two short biographies, to remind us what all the song and dance was once really about.

George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker is by Robert Gottlieb, former editor in chief of Simon & Schuster, Knopf, and *The New Yorker*, currently dance critic for *The New York Observer*, former board member of the New York City Ballet, and audience member of Balanchine’s enterprise since its inception in 1948. Predict-ably Gottlieb’s book is well informed and makes a perfect introduction to the man. The other book, *All in the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine*, is by Terry Teachout, drama critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, music critic for *Commentary*, columnist for *The Washington Post*, and prolific blogger.

Both books recapitulate the outline of an extraordinary life. The little Russian boy intended for the Naval Academy but ending up at a ballet school—the one run as a tributary of the tsar’s personal household. The child who found music and pageantry and devotion—he wanted to be a bishop after witnessing elaborate Russian Orthodox rituals—married on the great stage of the Maryinsky Theater. The teenager who roamed the streets of St. Petersburg during the Bolshevik Revolution, starving and eating dead cats (and he loved cats) to survive, and then finally at age twenty in 1924 departing Russia never to see his parents again. Then, under the magisterial eye of the impresario Serge Diaghilev, the young choreographer received a crash course in European culture and spewed forth, with lucid ease at age twenty-four, his first astonishing masterpiece, *Apollon Musagète*, and met much of his future in the music of his friend Igor Stravinsky.

He subsequently arrived in America thanks to the foresight of the American Lincoln Kirstein, who had the temerity as a young man, barely out of Harvard, to think he could bring the glory of classical ballet to his own youthful culture. And then, after notable and amusing stints on Broadway, in Hollywood, at the Metropolitan Opera, at Barnum & Bailey, as well as with numerous dancing troupes, the founding of the New York City Ballet in 1948 and the ensuing outpouring from this trim and elegant Russian man of one exquisite ballet after another, including so many indisputable masterpieces that his canon numbers more than Shakespeare’s.

Inseparable from this story were his beloved dancer girls, the thousands that danced for his eyes alone, and the few that he chose as his muses and often wives. For Balanchine, love, eroticism, and a vision of the divine were inextricably interwoven, and while he delighted in portraying both the Madonna and the Whore in his ballerinas, it was the woman dressed in white with flowing tresses that brought him deepest into his destiny—and his despair. Thus he gave us a body of work that defines woman in art as no other dance-maker had done before or since.

And then, in 1983, at age seventy-nine, he died, and the Internal Revenue Service was flummoxed. How to estimate death taxes on a man who left an apartment in Manhattan, a condo on Long Island, two gold watches, several cases of good red wine, and a few thousand dollars in the bank? How to tax an artist who made over four hundred three-dimensional dances that do not exist outside the bodies of the dancers dancing them in a live performance? Videotapes were made and scrutinized and filed, and ballets were valued in dollars, and, at the end of an unprecedented investigation, it was estimated that his estate was worth \$1.2 million, of which less than half was the ballets themselves. But taxes on those ballets needed to be paid and thus the marketing of Balanchine, inevitably, began. The gentle genius who loved blue died, unknowingly, in the red.

Terry Teachout begins his assessment of Balanchine in 1987, four years after Balanchine’s death, upon his first seeing *Concerto Barocco*. Assuming that his own belated coming to the light could possibly reflect that of thousands of others gives the reader an immediate clue to Teachout’s position. Perhaps he’d have done better to explore the reasons for his astonishing late arrival to the shores of one of the greatest artists not only of his own time but of the very city in which he lives. To ask, as Teachout does, “*Why hasn’t anybody ever told me about this?*” begs the question, while playing the innocent is disingenuous, especially for a “culture” critic. Teachout then sets himself up as guide and savior, setting Balanchine up as a victim of the public’s short-term memory loss by titling his first chapter “The Unknown Giant” and

then claiming that today “you don’t have to know who Balanchine was, or what he did, in order to be deemed culturally literate.” Says who?

Balanchine had the extraordinary ability during his lifetime, and now in death, to elicit from his appreciators a possessive ardor worthy of a jealous lover. To many it is “my Balanchine” and Teachout is no exception. Though I am personally thrilled that Teachout experienced his Balanchine awakening, and while his brief telling of Balanchine’s life is correct in most particulars (the facts are well documented in numerous sources), his former ignorance of Balanchine’s fifty-year venture surfaces periodically, most especially in his glib assessment of Lincoln Kirstein.

Kirstein was the man who organized the rank and file of reality about Balanchine’s art with the complex strategizing worthy of a Napoleonic campaign. In his efforts to make way for Balanchine’s angelic message to float free, he dug in the trenches, built the bunkers, and made the nonexistent exist. Teachout falls into the trap, as have others when it serves them, of introducing Kirstein to the story as a bipolar (he was), “eccentric,” “crazy” man, an example of “dilettantism run amok,” known, on occasion, to exhibit public rages. (The ones I knew about were all calculated for effect; Kirstein was the Sun Tzu of ballet, employing the Art of War to achieve the stability of the Art of Balanchine.)

Teachout is certainly entitled to his disagreements about some of Kirstein’s tastes in painters—he cites Paul Cadmus and Pavel Tchelitchev as “minor” painters undeserving of Kirstein’s praise—but it is hard to conceive where his condescension comes from. He announces that “Kirstein would exert no substantial influence on the visual arts, either as a critic or as a patron.” This is a peculiar statement about a man who had his finger, so to speak, in virtually every notable artistic pie of the twentieth century from painting, to literature, to poetry, to photography, to theater, to architecture, and, of course, ballet. Perhaps Teachout felt the need for a dramatic contrast to his new-found hero Balanchine, and plugged the gargantuan, complex, and difficult Kirstein into the slot. But to present the Balanchine–Kirstein collaboration—one of the most significant artistic pairings of the last century—as a sane guy–crazy guy story is both ill-informed and superficial—even for a “brief” life.

Of Kirstein’s impassioned idea to bring Balanchine to America in 1933—talk about “thinking outside the box” before “the box” was even invented—Teachout writes:

It’s easy enough in retrospect to make fun of Kirstein’s naive fantasies.... As for Balanchine, one can scarcely imagine what he made of the awkward, bespectacled giant who urged him to pull up stakes, move to a country he knew only from books, and start choreographing ballets about Uncle Tom and General Custer.

Clearly Balanchine thought it was a wonderful idea since he arrived in their country shortly thereafter and the rest, as they say, is history.

There is also the observation that Kirstein “never fully understood or appreciated mainstream modernism,” a baffling comment about the man who organized some of the first exhibits of “modern art” in America in 1929, featuring such artists as Miró, Man Ray, Modigliani, Dufy, Matisse, Picasso, Klee, Brancusi, Derain, Lachaise, and O’Keeffe. Kirstein understood “modernism” just fine. He just enjoyed denouncing it on occasion.

Then there is Teachout’s assessment of Balanchine’s love life with phrases referring to “an endless string of torrid affairs” worthy of “tabloid fodder,”* employing the terms “ruthless” and “tyrant” in a meek attempt to sensationalize a dignified life, a life devoted to art with an ease and humor that defies all rules and expectations of tortured genius. (That job fell to Jerome Robbins.) It is clear from the depth of sadness exposed in his ballets that Balanchine was a man with a deep internal life, one shaped as much by love as the lives of the rest of us, if not more. But daily drama was not the way of Balanchine, who approached his life and work with a disconcerting calm and confidence that defies the drama of the neurotic.

Robert Gottlieb’s *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker* is the superior book, though the telling is somewhat dry and

there is nothing new here. But it is useful to have all the famous Balanchine stories and quotes gathered into one handy little volume—though the stories have been recycled so often now as to sound more like platitudes than fresh wisdom. Gottlieb has his facts correct, and he manages to convey a general sense of the profound importance of and delight about Balanchine’s achievement.

Most moving in Gottlieb’s book is a considered and sensitive portrait of the young Georgi Melitonovich Balanchivadze, a child who clearly experienced grave injury at a very early age, informing from the start his understanding of life as defined by loss, a view that is so heartbreakingly evident in many of his ballets. Abruptly left by his beloved mother at the ballet school at age nine, he was so unhappy that he promptly ran away. But he was just as promptly returned. (So much for little Georgi’s futile attempt to avoid his now obvious destiny.)

How sweetly touching to read that his first role onstage as a child was in *The Sleeping Beauty* as “a tiny Cupid,” as if that destiny as the man who would explore love’s wounds in three dimensions of motion was sending its message, in a theatrical arrow, to mark the little boy. At age nineteen the budding choreographer set Chopin’s *Marche Funèbre* for his group of young dancers, “building a design of uncompromising grief” and revealing a knowledge far beyond his years.

By age twenty-six, having departed his homeland and his family forever, he all but lost his life, spending three months in a sanatorium for tuberculosis that left him with permanently impaired lungs. “I am really a dead man,” he would explain later, “now everything I do is a second chance.” Balanchine had found his freedom and it would govern his whole artistic life, and his ballets that portray the concept that in loss fate manifests itself are numerous—*Serenade*, *La Sonnambula*, *Meditation*, *Elegy*, *Robert Schumann’s “Davidsbündlertänze,”* *Mozartiana*, to mention just a few. When at age sixty-one he portrayed the bumbling, idealistic Don Quixote onstage pursuing passionately, and futilely, Suzanne Farrell as his winsome Dulcinea, he underscored the notion more personally than ever before.

2.

Balanchine was the man whose work was, at its deepest level, about time itself—the measurement of time, the passage of time, the music that is time, the loss inherent in time. How ironic that in the two decades since his passing, his name has been subjected to so many attempts, both elegant and vulgar, to preserve him, to institutionalize a man who called himself, in the words of the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, “not a man but a cloud in trousers.” The efforts have been enormous, and no possibility has been left unexplored to make that now legendary name not only survive but produce.

But what cannot be preserved is time, the very subject of which he was master, and which now in his heavy absence is all the more poignant. Surely ballet is the saddest of all the great arts, demonstrating in its very essence the swift and inevitable passing of time and the bereavement that is a constant of a conscious daily life. A beautiful ballet doesn’t speak of or refer to loss directly as can poetry, painting, or music; it is an act of loss itself, laid bare, and all the more moving for it. For the same reason it is perhaps the bravest of the arts, the one whose practitioners—dancers—risk all for mere transitory moments of beauty that may or may not be observed by others. Unlike those arts that exist in a form outside the artist himself—painting, sculpture, poetry, prose, music—dance only exists, as Balanchine explained, in that dancer, in that moment. And his work, too, only existed in that body, in that ballet, on that stage. Then poof! It is gone, finished. Time for lunch, as Balanchine would say, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

It is a cliché often repeated that “dancers are dumb,” and yes, they are the “silent minority,” as Balanchine explained, but they are also in a way the noblest and most fragile of artists, knowing as they do that their work will not only not outlive them, but will not even outlive that performance, on that evening, in that theater, in that city. At best their work exists as a memory—and we all know how reliable that is. A dancer will never even see himself, or herself, dance. (Videotape, while technically useful, is a distorted, backward, two-dimensional, miniature rendition of a dance that inevitably erases complexity from any performance. It records, at best, steps, but never depth. Even other live

performance—singing and acting—can now be accurately preserved on digital disks.) While dancers’ “narcissism” is also frequently noted with snide superiority, it is really generosity that dancers demonstrate with their practiced grace. The evanescent nature of the form is haunting and Balanchine, in his own generosity, gave us this ephemeral gift.

Now is an odd time for Balanchine (and “now” was the only time he recognized). With only twenty years between his reality and his now growing legend there are numerous dancers, critics, and fans who saw his workshop under his aegis and knew what they were seeing. But there is also now a permanent changing of the guard, for with several notable exceptions at the New York City Ballet—Kyra Nichols, Darci Kistler, Jock Soto (who will retire this year)—no dancer on a stage today dancing his works was chosen or trained by him. Of the dancers not trained by him, only the uncompromising Wendy Whelan and Peter Boal miraculously embody his integrity in their every move—and they were trained at the School of American Ballet while Balanchine was still alive.

The generations move on and with them, like gossip, the story changes, the technique changes, the look of the dancers changes, and most of all the spirit of the enterprise changes and, in some cases, has been lost altogether. A preoccupation with accurate execution without the aim of honor gives birth to pointed toes but soulless feet. Always succinct in his suggestions to dancers, Balanchine once told a dancer, “Reach for it like you’re reaching for a Cadillac.” They just don’t reach for those Cadillacs at New York City Ballet anymore. It’s SUV City Ballet now.

The much-publicized centennial year 2004 began auspiciously the day after Balanchine’s actual birthday of January 22, with the world première of a very expensive “tribute” to Balanchine by Susan Stroman, a talented woman who boasts numerous hit Broadway shows—including *Contact* and *The Producers*—and five Tony Awards to her credit. And so as Balanchine entered his 101st year the Queen of Broadway raked his stage with Broadway bombast in her “first full-length ballet,” *Double Feature*. But at least it sold some tickets. What Stroman was doing uptown at Lincoln Center paying so-called tribute to Balanchine’s distinguished Broadway career with her swanky but pedestrian moves is unclear. Except that she is popular, and award-winning, and there was a hope that she might draw her Broadway-based audience twenty blocks uptown to Lincoln Center. The year of marketing, I mean celebrating, Balanchine had begun with a dissonant clunk.

On Saturday, May 1, almost two hundred alumni of New York City Ballet (in the spirit of full disclosure, I am one of them) dating back as far as 1948 gathered at the New York State Theater at the invitation of the company director, Peter Martins, to take a bow for past services and share some vodka and blini. After only briefly discussing how the company just “isn’t what it was” (how could it be? it’s now Martins’s company, not Balanchine’s), discussion quickly moved on to the usual reunion banter: who’s married, who’s divorced, who’s no longer gay, and who’s reproduced. Many of us skipped the last ballet on the program—we knew we’d seen it done better—but beneath our ironic remarks lay disappointment. Most of us weren’t so interested in “ballet” per se; we were interested in Balanchine. His dances are now performed like ballets; we had approached them as missions. We are not naysayers, just dinosaurs who remember when the pterodactyls still flew at the State Theater.

The season’s highlight—and unquestionable low point—came with the world première of *Musagète*, a ballet by the Russian hackman Boris Eifman in his first effort for NYCB, in which he dramatized Balanchine’s life according to his own. The vulgarities of this melodrama in Tortured-Artist Syndrome were legion. It must be also noted that when the principal dance critic of *The New York Times* saw fit to claim that the image of Balanchine’s beautiful last wife, Tanaquil Le Clercq, being dragged offstage on a length of funereal fabric (she was tragically paralyzed with polio at age twenty-seven) presented an “image [that] does not offend,” dance criticism reached a whole new plateau of equivocal diplomacy.

Elsewhere Balanchine was celebrated by virtually every dance company in the world, including a twelve-hour “wall-to-wall” performance at Symphony Space in New York, as well as in numerous exhibitions, notably at Harvard, Hartford, Lincoln Center, and St. Petersburg, while the Museum of Television and Radio, in both New York and Los Angeles,

provided screenings of Balanchine ballets dating back as far as 1956.

The year also saw the fiftieth anniversary of Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*, the ballet that spawned a thousand others every Christmas, and an embarrassing financial scandal at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC). In February it was announced that for the first time since 1964 the company would not perform at its annual summer home in 2005 as a "cost-cutting measure," according to the president and executive director of SPAC, Herbert Chesbrough, who had worked closely with Balanchine for decades. By November, after public protest and a state audit, the decision was reversed with the curt statement by the investigating government official: "We were shocked that an institution like the New York City Ballet would be the scapegoat for the financial difficulties of SPAC." It was also noted that Chesbrough was found to have been receiving a salary of more than \$300,000 a year plus benefits (including having his wife on the payroll) and is scheduled to receive more than \$400,000 as a severance package upon his retirement next year—just about the same amount as SPAC's annual deficit.

It is telling, though disturbing, that perhaps the most poignant image to emerge from Balanchine at one hundred is an advertisement for Movado watches (a corporate sponsor of NYCB) featuring Darci Kistler, Balanchine's last angelic messenger and adored child-woman, whose rich but uneven career, sadly thwarted by injury upon injury, echoes like a cry in the dark since Balanchine's death. In the full-page ad, her beautiful, mournful gaze, twenty years after losing her maestro, peers like a blond widow out of a black web. She, the last muse of the Man Who Knew Time, is posed with her arm across her neck like a noose. Balanchine taught his audience and his dancers how to bear loss with grace, and the serene sadness evident in Kistler's enigmatic face is the visage of a woman whose loss indeed has been great.

Two decades have now passed and how ironic that it has left this last great hope from the Balanchine era marketing timepieces to preserve her transitory art. Balanchine said of the time after him: "Everything will be different.... It will be something else." It sure is.

* This phrase is from the jacket copy written by Teachout himself. ↪

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