

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Choreographer in His Element*

The rehearsal studio of a ballet company is something of a cross between a convent and a prizefight gym. Before the dancers go into action, they paw a resin box in a corner, like fighters, and when they make their way about the room between classes or rehearsal sessions, they are apt—even the most petite of ballerinas—to walk with a pugilist’s flat-footed but springy gait, shoulders swaying with a bit of swagger, arms hanging loosely. There is the acrid sweat smell of the gym, and the same formidable presence of lithe, steel-muscled, incredibly trim and capable bodies ruthlessly forcing themselves to become even trimmer and more capable. But there is also an aura of asceticism, of spirituality—a spirituality achieved, paradoxically, by means of single-minded concentration on the body. The mirror covering one whole wall from ceiling to floor would seem to speak of gross vanity, but the dancers, though they may have embarked on their careers for vain motives, have learned to rid themselves of conceit when they work. They use the mirror dispassionately, measuring their reflected selves with almost inhuman objectivity against the conception of an ideal to which they have dedicated their lives. The ideal is that of a particular kind of beauty, a centuries-old, thoroughly artificial way of moving, which, when shaped into ballets by a choreographer, becomes art of a special sort—an elusive, evanescent art, as fleeting as fireworks or soap bubbles, that nevertheless has the power not only to entrance beholders but even, in some mysterious manner, to convey an experience of lasting significance.

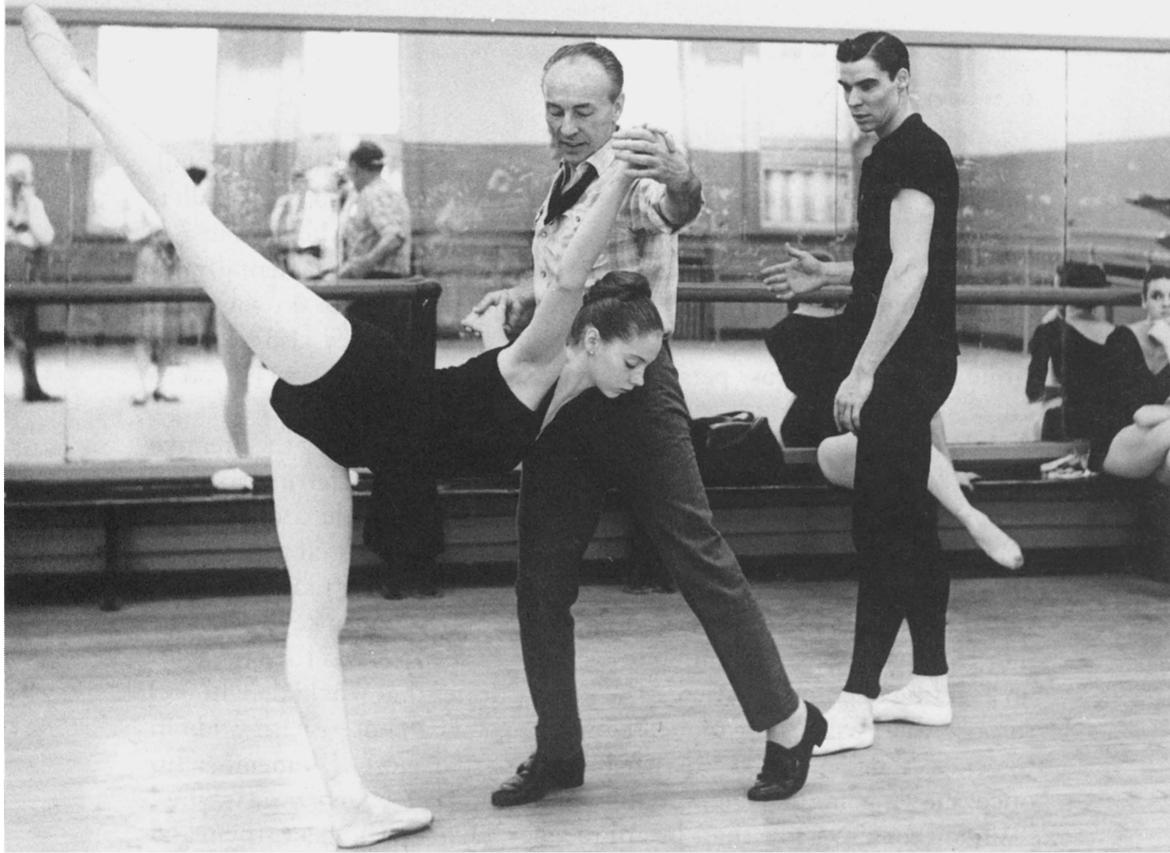
To see George Balanchine in such an environment, rehearsing his

~ *Choreographing Gounod Symphony, with Maria Tallchief.*

New York City Ballet Company or, better yet, creating one of the new ballets he brought forth bountifully, season after season, was to have a rare pleasure—the pleasure of seeing someone who appeared completely attuned to his world. In his person, Balanchine suggested the quintessence of the ballet studio's paradoxical combination of qualities. A noble-looking man, with a proud, elegant bearing—"a *grand seigneur*," Cecil Beaton called him—Balanchine did not hesitate to throw himself on the studio floor in the course of demonstrating to his dancers some movement in one of his ballets, and he would often work himself into a dray-horse lather of perspiration during a rehearsal or choreographic session. In him, an intense, dedicated vision of a perfection of grace merged with an unquestioning willingness to submit to the arduous discipline, the specific physical efforts, required to attain—or at any rate, approach—this vision. "First comes the sweat," Balanchine used to say, speaking in a low, agreeable voice, tinged with the accents of his native Russia. "Then comes the beauty—if you're *vairy* lucky and have said your prayers." Someone once observed of ballet that it is "a science on top of which an art is precariously balanced." Balanchine would have agreed, although he would have preferred to substitute the word "craft" for the more resounding "science."

In the years that followed his introduction to this craft, at the age of nine, in the Imperial Theatre School in St. Petersburg, Balanchine knocked about in many parts of the world, but wherever, in the course of his wanderings, he was able to find a ballet studio, with a complement of dancers in need of something new to dance, there he was at home and in his element. The ballet studio—whether in Russia, France, Denmark, Monaco, England, or the United States—was his true native heath. It was much more to him than just the setting in which he worked; it provided the vital stimulus to his creativity—the rare and indefinable kind of creativity that made him the most esteemed and prolific inventor of ballets in our time. "I'm not one of those people who can create in the abstract, in some nice quiet room at home," he once said to me. "If I didn't have a studio to go to, with dancers waiting for me to give them something to do, I would forget I was a choreographer. I need to have real, living bodies to look at. I see how this one can stretch and that one can jump and another one can turn, and then I begin to get a few ideas."

As a man, aside from ballet, the impression Balanchine made was of someone who was pleasant, mercurial, authoritative, and fundamentally enigmatic. W. H. Auden characterized him, during a conversation we



~ Movements for Piano and Orchestra. Jacques d'Amboise watches as Balanchine, working with Suzanne Farrell, shows him how his part should go.

had one day, as the most intuitive person he had ever known. "Ideas come to him as images, not abstractions." Auden also said, "He's not an intellectual, he's something deeper, a man who understands everything." In tastes and interests, Balanchine fell into no category; he was high-brow, lowbrow, and middlebrow all mixed up together in a blend of his own. He liked Braque, Pushkin, Rockefeller, Stravinsky, Sousa, Jack Benny, Piero della Francesca, fast cars, science fiction, TV westerns, French sauces, and American ice cream. An adherent of the Russian Orthodox Church, he was deeply religious. He patronized only the best and costliest tailors, but the clothes he fancied were a sort of Russianized version of a wild West dude's garb—bright, pearl-buttoned shirts, black string tie, gambler's plaid vest, frontier pants. On him, these surprising outfits appeared natural and elegant. He lived for almost fifty years in America and remained enthusiastic about it the whole time. He said he loved the way it looked, sounded, and smelled; on occasion he would even remark what a pleasure it was to pay taxes to support a country it

was such a pleasure to live in. Most of the time, he would rather talk about cooking or politics, or almost anything other than ballet—ballet, he felt, was something you do, not discuss. He relished luxury but not money. Witty and often playful, he was, however, fundamentally reserved about himself. Most people who had anything to do with him spoke of him with great devotion and affection, but they also said that while he was a very easy person to be with, he was not an easy person to know.

Admirers of Balanchine's work rank him very high among the creative artists of the age, using the word "genius" freely in referring to him. Balanchine himself would never speak in such terms. He could seldom even be trapped into speaking of ballet as an art and himself as an artist. He preferred to describe himself as an entertainer, an artisan, a professional maker of dances for a paying public. When he spoke of what he did, he often compared himself to a chef, whose job it was to prepare for an exacting clientele a variety of attractive dishes that would delight and surprise their palates, or to a carpenter, a good carpenter, with pride in his craft. Craftsmanship was what he respected most. I remember his once showing me a pair of Italian shoes he had bought and saying, "When I see shoes like that, I want to meet the man who made them and shake his hand."

Balanchine did not keep scrapbooks, programs, or reviews of his work; he claimed that he never bothered to read what critics and admirers wrote about him or his work. If someone happened to tell him about an article propounding a theory in regard to his ballets, he would listen politely. Then he would make his standard comment: "Too fancy!" He did not particularly blame writers for going on at length about ballet, if that was how they wanted to occupy themselves or make a living, but he thought that what they (including his most ardent admirers) wrote bore very little relation to what happened onstage while the music was playing. Though capable of expressing original and poetic insights himself in unguarded moments, he chose—out of deep-seated principle, it would seem, or perhaps out of a canny intuition that so elusive an art could not bear the burden of much theorizing or solemnity—to talk about his work as seldom as possible and then only casually, playfully, or in matter-of-fact technical terms. The numerous people who saw grave significance and profound portents in his ballets got no encouragement from him. "When you have a garden full of pretty flowers, you don't demand of them, 'What do you mean? What is your significance?'" he used to say.



~ Preparing a sequence for *The Goldwyn Follies* in 1937, with Gisella Caccialanza and Daphne Vane.

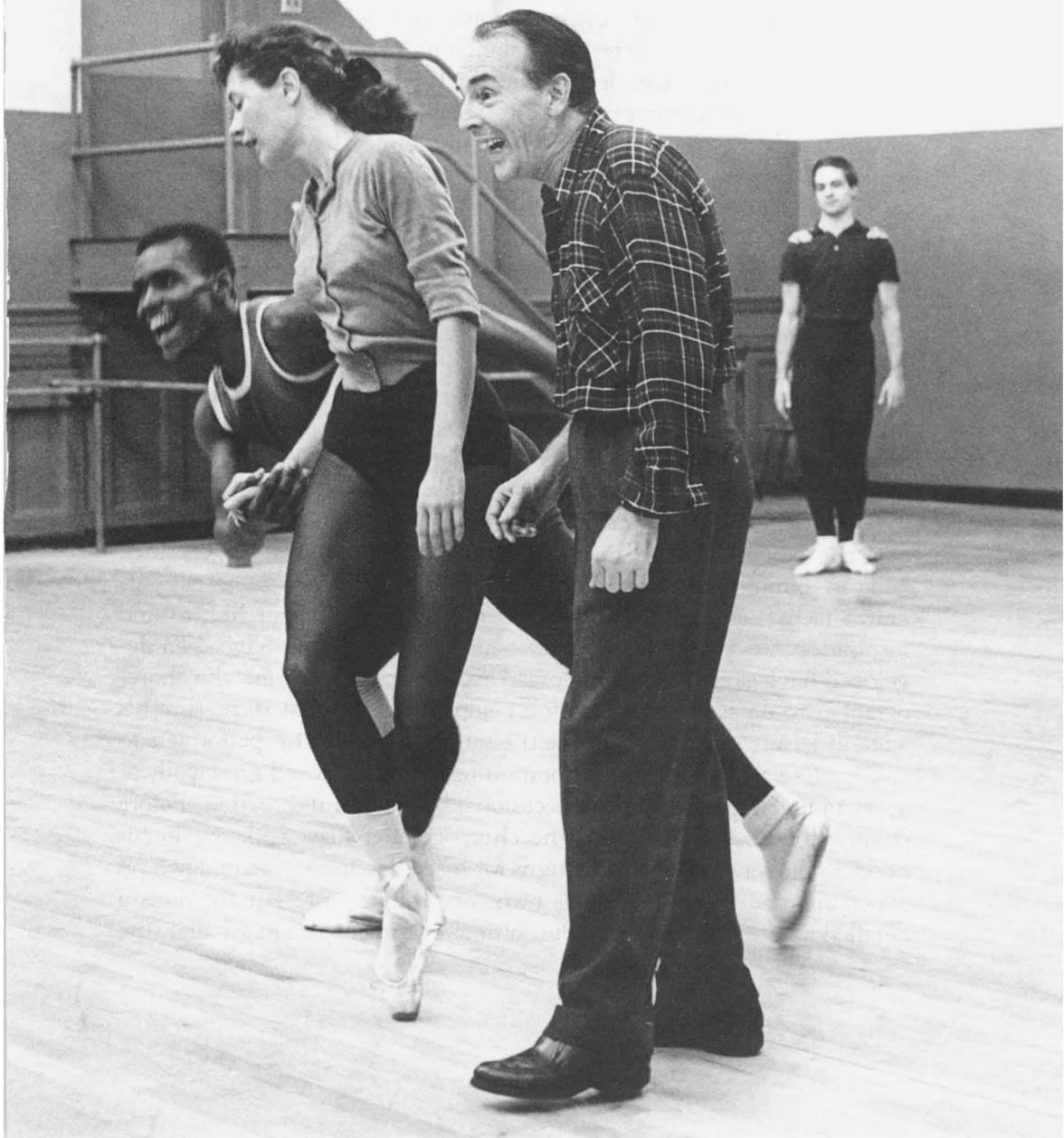
“You just enjoy them. So why not just enjoy ballet in the same way?” Of people who insist on seeing explicit meaning in ballet, he once said, “People never seem to understand unless they can put their finger into things. Like touching dough—when people see bread rising, they smell something and they say, ‘Oh, is it going up?’ And they poke their finger in it. ‘Ah,’ they say, ‘now I see.’ But of course the dough then goes down. They spoil everything by insisting on touching.”

Despite his lack of solemnity, there was no mistaking his own or his company’s dedication to ballet. “He doesn’t do it by talking,” a member of the company said, “but he implies at every moment that there is a great art of classical dancing that all of us, including him, are serving.” Early in my acquaintance with Balanchine I had occasion to witness an instance of this concentrated dedication. It was an evening in 1958, when I attended a performance of the New York City Ballet at City Center. On the program that evening was *Apollo*, which had been revived for Jacques d’Amboise after being out of the repertory for some years. In the cast was Diana Adams as Terpsichore, Patricia Wilde as

Polyhymnia, and Jillana as Calliope. They gave a triumphant performance, received by the audience with enthusiastic applause and repeated bravos. I was there with another friend of Balanchine's, and we were both so moved by the ballet and the performance that we decided to go backstage and congratulate Balanchine and the dancers—to offer homage, as it were. When we got there, the scene that met our eyes surprised us. We had assumed that, on the heels of such success, we would find dancers and choreographer standing amid admirers, graciously acknowledging their praise. Instead we discovered them hard at work. They were, it seemed, going over aspects of *Apollo* that Balanchine wished to improve. They were grouped near the lowered curtain and must have begun this impromptu rehearsal the instant the last curtain call was over. Standing in the wings, we watched as Balanchine worked first with Patricia Wilde and then with d'Amboise. We heard no harsh words spoken, no reproofs; when Balanchine finished making his point to Miss Wilde, she smiled before departing to her dressing room and thanked Balanchine warmly for his help, as if she were a beginner rather than a distinguished ballerina who had just received an ovation. From her, Balanchine turned to d'Amboise, and we could see them going over various sequences together—facing each other, like one man looking in a mirror, while both danced. Occasionally they would stop for a few words of comment. “Your leaps are still too spectacular, you know,” we heard Balanchine say. “Yes, I know,” d'Amboise replied. “I'm working on that.” Then they went into action again, face to face, about three feet apart. Time passed as they continued thus, and we watched them wonderingly. Dancers began to gather onstage for the next ballet. Bells could be heard ringing, announcing the imminent curtain. Stagehands hurried to their places. Totally preoccupied, Balanchine and d'Amboise ignored it all. When we finally left, without having had a chance to congratulate or pay homage, they were still at it. They were gone, though, when the curtain went up on the next ballet. At the very last instant, perhaps, the stage manager had taken each of them by an arm and led them off. Back in our seats, we could not help wondering if they might not be still working away in the wings.

Over the course of the years the hours I spent in the New York City Ballet studios watching Balanchine choreograph were a constant revelation. To watch him at work with his dancers, bringing into being little by little this new intangible entity called a ballet, was for me a continuing demonstration of the miraculous proposition that chaos could be mas-

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tered, the world made capable of order, and that order and beauty could be one. I was not the only visitor who felt that way. There was an acquaintance of Balanchine's—a businessman—whom I saw in the studio from time to time. He told me that whenever he felt oppressed by the tangle of his own affairs or the confusion of the day's news, he liked to close up his office early and spend an hour or two watching Balanchine at work on a new ballet. He told me it was the best therapy he knew. In the world of ballet, the peaceful, assured, workmanlike way that Balanchine made his dances became legendary. Anecdotes concerning other famous figures of that world often revolve around some pyrotechnical display of temperament. The characteristic Balanchine story, on the other hand, has to do with some crisis or other in which Balanchine was to be found calmly and productively carrying on with his choreography, apparently unaffected by the chaos and hysteria around him. There are people who worked closely with Balanchine for ten years or more and never saw him lose his temper or heard him raise his voice in anger.

When Balanchine choreographed a new ballet, quite a number of spectators were usually present—seated on a bench that ran along the mirrored wall, leaning against the practice bars on the other walls, or standing around the piano off to one side. They observed Balanchine, they talked among themselves, they came and went. He paid no attention. His tolerance of visitors was exceptional among choreographers; many of them detest being watched and exclude from the room not only outsiders but also any members of the company who are not required at the moment. Even so, by the nature of his art, a choreographer can never fully enjoy the pleasure of creating in solitude; eventually he cannot escape the dancers who are the medium in which he works. If he gets stuck and runs out of ideas, there they are before him, waiting—"with patient, drawn faces," as Agnes de Mille has ruefully written—for him to find inspiration. As yet, none of the systems of notation that have been developed have gained such widespread acceptance as to permit the choreographer to do as a playwright or a composer does—that is, prepare his work at leisure on paper and give the script or score to his performers to study before rehearsal. Dance notation has been employed principally as a way of making a record of an occasional ballet after its creation. Before coming to the first rehearsal, the choreographer may work out in his mind a number of steps and patterns for his ballet and jot them down on paper in some shorthand of his own, or he may write out in words a detailed libretto of the action. But, ultimately, to create a new ballet, the

choreographer must do what all the generations of ballet masters before him have done—get his dancers together in a large room and show them what he wants them to dance. The creation of a ballet has to be a public act. It is as if a composer had to assemble an orchestra and compose a symphony by standing in front of the musicians and making it up as he went along, first humming a snatch of music for the cellos to try, perhaps, and then turning to, say, the woodwinds and humming a theme they might play at the same time. For all its sophistication, ballet is really a prehistoric kind of art. Lacking a widely accepted written language, it has been able to preserve its masterpieces only by devoted, laborious effort, passing them on from one generation to the next by direct communication, like folk legends. And, like legends, few ballets survive this process unchanged.

These conditions of the craft, which some choreographers find extremely trying, did not disturb Balanchine; he took them for granted. In advance of the first rehearsal he would make no notes whatever. His way of creating a ballet was by extended improvisation under pressure. One of the most facile of all choreographers, he would usually take only about thirty rehearsal hours over a period of about three weeks to choreograph a major ballet, but under pressure he could work even faster. He choreographed the innovative *Symphony in Three Movements*, with its complex, formidable score, in one amazing week for the 1972 Stravinsky Festival. "He just tossed off steps without hesitation," Gordon Boelzner, the company pianist and associate conductor, told me. "He threw whole chunks of choreography at the dancers. I couldn't make head or tail of what was going on. Then Balanchine took one afternoon and cleaned it up, and all of a sudden it came absolutely clear. And I saw that it was a masterpiece."

The system under which he worked allowed no latitude for self-indulgence, dawdling, temperament, searching for inspiration, or getting in the mood. By the time he commenced choreographing a ballet, the ballet would have been announced in the press, the season's performances would have been scheduled, and the costumes and sets ordered. Balanchine's advance preparations for his choreographing would have consisted chiefly in studying the music he was to use until he had soaked it up completely. Sometimes, as part of this process, he made his own piano reduction of the orchestral score. The son of a composer and the product of several years of advanced conservatory training as a young man, Balanchine was unquestionably the most musical of all choreog-