



Changing the Landscape *Balanchine in Canada*

BY
JOYSANNE SIDIMUS

IMAGE CREDIT

George Balanchine teaching at the School of American Ballet, 1960s / Photo: Martha Swope, Dance in Canada Photo Collection, Dance Collection Danse

In 1948, New York City Center offered George Balanchine and his fledgling troupe, Ballet Society, the opportunity to become the resident ballet company of the Center for a rental fee of \$1 per year under a new name, The New York City Ballet. It was another 13 years before a Balanchine work was performed live in Canada.

My own artistic journey, first as a dancer and later as a répétiteur for the George Balanchine Trust, began when, after 10 years training at the School of American Ballet, I was invited to become part of the New York City Ballet (NYCB) for the 1958 five-month tour to Japan and Australia. The very first ballet I danced was as part of the corps in Balanchine's *Serenade* in the enormous Koma Stadium in Tokyo. The mystery and spirituality of the opening moment was magical when, with arms raised shielding our eyes from the light, we began to slowly evolve into movement that transported us across the stage and into another realm of existence. This was the moment that inspired all the Balanchine ballets I was to dance. It seemed he had an endless source of contrast and invention that called upon all the different facets of our individual talents. There was and is no corps de ballet in the traditional sense in his work. No

one stands around. Everyone has a role, a purpose, and is an integral part of the work and, after a short while, most of us had a small demi-soloist or soloist role as he knew many of us from childhood and the potential we might bring to the work.

Erik Bruhn was indirectly responsible for my career staging Balanchine ballets when he requested that I set *Serenade* for the Royal Swedish Ballet where he was artistic director (1967-1971). Mr. B granted permission but I was still dancing and declined. In 1970, the Pennsylvania Ballet, where I was a principal dancer, decided to stage *Serenade* and I had my opportunity. When I stopped dancing and approached Mr. B to ask if I might stage more of his ballets, he responded to my request by saying "maybe you watch".

For the next six months, I watched every class, rehearsal, and performance at NYCB, after which he sent me to Geneva as ballet mistress. To observe him develop a technique to serve his work, create new work, and bring out individual artistic depths in dancers was a rare privilege and formed the foundation of all my later work setting his ballets. This led to a 40+-year career of staging his masterpieces and, after I returned to Canada in 1984, to staging not only internationally but consistently as a Balanchine répétiteur for the National Ballet of Canada (NBoC), a company I knew well having been a principal dancer from 1963-1968. There was no formal organization that gave permission or licensed the ballets or répétiteurs until The George Balanchine Trust was founded in 1987.

The idea for this article came from my realization of how long and plentifully the Balanchine canon appears in Canada. The challenge was finding consistency and verifiable facts in the earlier archival records of The George Balanchine Trust and the companies and schools where his works were mounted. Because Canada did not start performing Balanchine until the early 1960s when most of the companies were struggling to survive, archives and legacy were not a priority. Today, thanks to The GB Trust and The GB Foundation as well as companies and

schools that have wonderfully helpful archivists, one can start to have an idea of the beginning of Balanchine work in Canada. This article is, therefore, not an exhaustive record of all the early or subsequent work. Also, many of the ballets listed have been repeated in the repertoires many times.

The very first performance of Balanchine work in Canada, outside of touring Ballets Russes performances, was on television. In 1954, Radio-Canada invited him to be part of the prestigious Montreal-based television arts series *L'Heure du Concert*. Balanchine staged the 2nd Act pas de deux from his *Swan Lake* for Maria Tallchief and André Eglevsky and choreographed a special *Coppélia* pas de deux for Tanaquil LeClerq and Eglevsky. This was the first of a 25-year series of broadcasts that brought almost the entire company to Montreal to film some of Balanchine's most famous works. Many, such as *Concerto Barocco*, had to be re-envisioned with fewer corps members for the small studio stage. While Balanchine also adapted choreography in other works, his commitment to the tempi and approach to the physicality of the movements remained the same as if the company were on a much larger stage. The Radio-Canada orchestra, conducted by NYCB conductors, was relayed



IMAGE CREDITS

(above) Joysanne Sidimus rehearsing with Luc Amyot and Su Keen at Canada's National Ballet School, 1975 / Photo: Joysanne Sidimus Collection, Dance Collection Danse

(below) Donna Day Washington, Hiller Huhn, Pat McKibbin, Raymond Goulet, Sonia Taverner, Frederic Strobel, Beverly Barkley, Karl Kaufman, Helen McKergow, and Bill Martin-Viscount of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in Balanchine's *Pas de Dix*, 1962 / Photo: J. C. Hadden, courtesy of Royal Winnipeg Ballet Archives

live from another studio, continuing the enduring tradition that his ballets are always presented with live music when the New York City Ballet performs. Some wonderfully preserved interviews on recently released DVDs (vaimusic.com) of some of the telecasts include Mr. Balanchine being interviewed by René Lévesque. The importance of these telecasts and accompanying interviews was mentioned by *New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff in 1984: "The most intelligent handling of Balanchine's work on television in the 1950's and 60's was the CBC's 'L'Heure du Concert'

series in Montreal with its sympathetic, cultured hosts interviewing Balanchine in French."

BALANCHINE IN CANADIAN BALLET COMPANIES

Balanchine works were first staged by Canada's three major ballet companies in the 1960s starting with *Concerto Barocco* by NBoC, directed by Celia Franca, in 1961. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB), directed by Arnold Spohr, acquired *Pas de Dix* in 1962. Les Grands Ballets Canadiens (LGBC), directed by Ludmilla Chiriaeff, first performed *Allegro Brillante* and Tchaikovsky *Pas de Deux* in 1963. NBoC also acquired *Serenade* in 1963. These ballets were staged by Una Kai,



with the exception of *Allegro Brillante*, staged by Franca Russell. Both these women danced (Russell as a soloist) with NYCB and both served as company ballet mistresses.

Correspondence from that time reveals an informal approach, with Balanchine and his administration co-operating fully with the desire for Canadian representation of his work. He was very generous with those early stagings, often waiving a fee as long as the stager's fees and expenses were paid. The early artistic directors of NBoC, RWB, and LGBC shared the desire to bring the latest classical contemporary work to Canada. Their choice of Balanchine's repertoire was totally determined by the size of each company and the technical level of its dancers.

The technical aspect of the ballets demanded a more athletic and unconventional approach to movement than dancers had previously experienced. Since most Balanchine ballets are taught to counts to ensure dancers hear the phrasing and dynamics the choreographer wanted, the works emphasized movement as a visualization of the score. Music was not an accompaniment, nor were dancers dancing to the music; they were to *be* the music! In teaching this choreography, knowing that the body responds differently to fast movement, répétiteurs had to insist that Balanchine's choreography be learned at the required fast tempo. Initially dancers found this and other aspects of the work quite challenging, but eventually found their way through technical and artistic demands and danced, according to reviews of the time and feedback from Kai, with a new realization of what classical ballet could be. Over ensuing decades, dancers began to enjoy dancing this repertoire, realizing it made them better dancers.

Over the years, NBoC has had two major distinctions in its approach to the Balanchine work. First, it is the only company in Canada large enough to present *Symphony in C* and the full-length *Jewels*. Second, a consistent group of répétiteurs gave the dancers an opportunity to have a much deeper understanding of the work. Starting in 1984 under Erik Bruhn's direction, I was appointed designated Balanchine répétiteur. This role was greatly enhanced when former NYCB principal dancer Lindsay Fischer and former NYCB company member



IMAGE CREDITS

Calley Skalnik, Christopher Gerty, Harrison James, Koto Ishihara, Peng-Fei Jiang, Jeannine Haller, and artists of The National Ballet of Canada in Balanchine's *Symphony in C* / Photo: Karolina Kuras, courtesy of The National Ballet of Canada

Mandy-Jayne Richardson joined NBoC as part of the artistic staff. The legendary Suzanne Farrell was brought in by James Kudelka to oversee the Balanchine repertoire during his tenure. She provided a unique approach and perspective that inspired the dancers. As well, several other répétiteurs were brought in at different times. From Franca's initial foray into the repertoire and then during the artistic directorships of Bruhn, Valerie Wilder and Lynn Wallis, Reid Anderson, Kudelka, Karen Kain, and now Hope Muir, there has rarely been a year in which Balanchine work has not been programmed.

The RWB, with its reputation as a very talented company and home to acclaimed ballerina Evelyn Hart, was uniquely positioned as the second in the country

to perform Balanchine. Artistic Director Arnold Spohr, and subsequently John Meehan, William Whitener and André Lewis, brought works such as *Tarantella*, *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*, *Square Dance*, and *Allegro Brillante* to showcase this company's virtuosity and exuberance. *Ballo Della Regina* was staged by the ballerina for whom it was created, Merrill Ashley. She joined an impressive list of Balanchine répétiteurs including Victoria Simon and Susan Hendl.

The history of Balanchine work at LGBC is very interesting both in the many artistic directors' choices of ballets and the Trust's répétiteurs who came to stage them. Over the years, they performed ballets uniquely suited to Québécois awareness of culture and the elegance, taste, sophistication, and interpretive talents of the dancers. The early years brought a more traditional repertoire but, starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s under Linda Stearns, Daniel Jackson, and Colin McIntyre and through the '90s with Lawrence Rhodes, works as diverse as *Agon*, *Rubies*, *Square Dance*, *Prodigal Son*, *La Sonnambula*, and *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* brought répétiteurs John Clifford, John Taras, Karin Von Aroldingen, Richard Tanner, Simon, and Patricia Neary to Montreal. In 2001 Artistic Director Gradimir Pankov (1999-2017) added *Episodes* to this impressive list.

Starting in the 1980s the Alberta Ballet, under the artistic direction of Brydon Paige (1976-1988), presented *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux* and *Allegro*

Brillante (staged by Russell) and, interestingly, the little known *Glinka Pas de Trois* staged by Marina Eglevsky, daughter of André Eglevsky, for whom it was created. Artistic Director Ali Pourfarrokh (1988-1998) added *Donizetti Variations* and Mikko Nissinen (1998-2001) continued the expansion, adding, among others, *Prodigal Son*. Jean Grand-Maître (2002-2022) continued to add ballets such as *Divertimento #15* and *Four Temperaments*. Most were staged by Simon, Elyse Borne, and Hendl.

Ballet BC, a small company at the time, acquired *Apollo* in 1988, staged by Neary.

Currently, NBoC and LGBC each have 18 Balanchine ballets in their repertoires, while the RWB has 10 and Alberta Ballet nine.

The George Balanchine Trust répétiteurs of this now large Canadian representation of his work have all been dancers who either worked directly with Balanchine and danced with NYCB or, if younger, danced with his company after his death. This direct line has ensured authenticity from the earliest stagings to the present day.

FULL EVENING STAGINGS

The pioneering vision of Franca at NBoC was further evidenced in March 1969 by being the first in Canada to present a full evening of Balanchine. She added *Four Temperaments* staged by Kai to the existing repertoire of *Serenade* and *Concerto Barocco*. And in the same performance, guest artists Farrell and Peter Martins danced *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*. In 1984, *Serenade*, *Four Temperaments*, and *Symphony in C* were staged during Bruhn's tenure by me along with Rosemary Dunleavy, ballet mistress of NYCB. It was a fortuitous time to do this as Bruhn's directorship lured brilliant young dancers from Canada's National Ballet School (NBS) and internationally. These ballets needed not only strong, courageous technique but artistic individuality and in that era of truly exceptional performers well versed in a classical background, I found the work suited the company very well. Since they had already danced Balanchine, they were able to more easily transfer their basic knowledge of his work to a full evening though the unusual movement, musical sophistication, and interpretive qualities of *Four Temperaments* took a bit longer to master.

In 1998, with Kudelka as artistic director, NBoC presented another all-Balanchine program: *Mozartiana* staged by Farrell, *Episodes* set by me, and *Theme and Variations* by Neary. He also added the full-length *Jewels* with Farrell, Borne, Sara Leland, and Fischer as répétiteurs. In 2009, the company co-presented Balanchine's *Don Quixote* with The Suzanne Farrell Ballet. To date, these are the only performances, except for Farrell's own company in 2005, since that work's 1965 creation for NYCB.

In 2008, RWB, directed by André Lewis, also presented a full evening of Balanchine – *Concerto Barocco*, *Four Temperaments*, and *Serenade*. As répétiteur for these works, I found a company well-experienced in Balanchine since

they already had nine works in the repertoire. They brought an energy and unique interpretive approach that was enhanced by the presence of Fischer, who had been invited to teach company class during some of the rehearsal period – an invaluable help.

UNUSUAL STAGINGS

In 1988, in tandem with the Calgary Olympics, dancers of NBoC, LGBC, and RWB shared the stage in a performance of *Symphony in C*.

In 1991, LGBC presented a reconstruction of *La Chatte*, one of three surviving ballets – along with *Apollo* and *Prodigal Son* – from Balanchine's era with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1924-1929. It was staged by reconstructionists



Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer. Along with two performances at the Rome Opera in 2005 and 2006, the first with Canadian guest ballerina Anik Bissonnette, these have been the only performances of *La Chatte* in the post-Diaghilev era.

BALANCHINE IN BALLET SCHOOLS

When writer and impresario Lincoln Kirstein first asked Balanchine to create a company in America, he is said to have responded: "But first, a school." Betty Oliphant, co-founder with Franca of NBS in 1959 and long-standing Principal and Director of the school, was aware of the unique demands of Balanchine ballets. To expose her students to this very different technique and unmistakable genius of the choreography, she included *Serenade* in 1975 and, in 1983, *Concerto Barocco* in workshop performances. Mavis Staines, NBS Artistic Director since 1989, danced many Balanchine ballets with the Dutch National Ballet and understood firsthand the demands and benefits of including works as diverse as the Bach section of *Episodes* and *Scotch Symphony* in spring showcases. The dancers were always strong technically and brought an elegance and incredible discipline to the work. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet School – Professional Division, under Artistic Director Arlene Minkhorst, also admirably presented *Scotch Symphony* in 2011 featuring guest RWB company members Jo-Ann Sundemieir and Harrison James.

In 2012 Anik Bissonnette took over as Artistic Director of L'École supérieure de ballet du Québec and contacted me to stage some Balanchine for her workshop performances. When I first visited to see what might be possible, it became apparent that the students she had inherited were not yet at a level to do the work. We both agreed that the best solution was to teach some Balanchine classes and variations to give them both a technical and philosophic foundation. After a few years, the school changed dramatically and we were able to do (among others) the "Waltz" from *Diamonds* and the first movement of *Concerto Barocco*. The students were consistently enthusiastic and hard-working, and they produced quite unique performances.



IMAGE CREDIT

(previous page) Anik Bissonnette and Min Hua Zhao in Balanchine's *Apollo*, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, 1997 / Photo: Peter Morneau, courtesy of Le Bibliothèque de la danse Vincent-Warren

(above) Jill Johnson and students of Canada's National Ballet School in Balanchine's *Serenade*, 1987 / Photo: Andrew Oxenham, Dance in Canada Photo Collection, Dance Collection Danse

The Banff Centre's summer dance program also has a long and profound history of Balanchine, which is beautifully recorded in a chapter entitled "Balanchine at Banff" in Brian Macdonald's book *Dancing in Thin Air*. Under his direction, and with Annette Av Paul, they presented 13 of Balanchine's works from 1987-2007. Some of the ballets were presented in their entirety and some were movements of longer works or pas de deux. All were staged by Simon, one of the most experienced and respected Balanchine répétiteurs. From 2008-2015, the Banff program was directed by Fischer who was at that time Artistic Director of the Apprentice Program at NBoC. Under his direction and with Mandy-Jayne Richardson, he staged

seven Balanchine works and also invited famed NYCB ballerina Merrill Ashley to coach and teach.

It is an honour and privilege to pass on this rare legacy and my experiences in Canada have reinforced my belief that Balanchine changed the landscape of classical ballet by his profound understanding and respect for musical values and a technique that enhances a dancer's ability to move quickly, articulately, and beautifully in as organic and free a way as possible.

At NYCB, we all danced because of our love of movement through time and space. Balanchine gave us the technical and artistic tools to do that framed by the genius of his choreography.

Today, Balanchine's works are a staple of Canadian ballet companies and schools – allowing audiences and dancers alike to continue joyfully benefiting from the genius of this icon of the classical repertoire. 🎭

Joysanne Sidimus has been a Balanchine répétiteur for The George Balanchine Trust for over 40 years and recently retired from the National Ballet of Canada in that capacity for 38 years. She was trained at the School of American Ballet, danced with the New York City Ballet, and was a Principal Dancer of the National Ballet of Canada and the Pennsylvania Ballet.

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Please visit URL below for full acknowledgements.

THE ARTISTIC DIRECTORS' VIEWS ON BALANCHINE

Read more from Canada's ballet artistic directors as they speak to the impact of George Balanchine's work in Canada's ballet companies and schools.

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