GEORGE BALANCHINE IN AMERICA: INSTITUTIONS, ECONOMICS, AND AESTHETICS OF THE NONPROFIT PERFORMING ARTS, 1933–1954

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation chronicles the early years of the ballet enterprise begun by choreographer George Balanchine and impresario Lincoln Kirstein in the United States in 1933. Chapter 1 offers a revised history of the origins of the enterprise, resituationg their collaboration within the crowded marketplace of dance performance and pedagogy of the 1930s. Chapter 2 recounts the history of the first year of the American Ballet to show how the institution focused on not just pedagogy but also performance from its earliest days and discusses the company’s first performances in 1934 in White Plains, New York and Hartford, Connecticut. Chapter 3 discusses the American Ballet’s debut as a company at the Adelphi Theater in New York City in order to more critically evaluate the aesthetics of the company’s initial repertoire and Balanchine’s early American style. Chapter 4 reexamines the process by which the American Ballet was engaged as the resident ballet company of the Metropolitan Opera and Balanchine as ballet master, as well as the company’s summer engagements and short-lived nationwide tour in 1935. Chapter 5 offers a new perspective on the American Ballet’s 1936 dance-intensive production of Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*, showing how the opera’s modernist and experimental dramaturgy was ill-suited to the institutional context in which it would premiere, the Metropolitan Opera’s new “popular price” spring season. Chapter 6 examines Balanchine’s dances for the musical comedy *On Your Toes*—the *Princess Zenobia* ballet, the “On Your Toes” number, and the concluding *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*—as an allegory for the process of the Americanization of ballet envisioned by Kirstein for the American Ballet, a connection made stronger by the case of an unrealized “Bach Ballet” starring tap dancer Paul Draper. Chapter 7 revisits the genesis and first
season of Ballet Caravan to show how the troupe was contiguous with rather than distinct from the American Ballet, in contrast to the independent and determinative terms in which it has been understood. An Afterword reconsiders the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise in the context of the emergence of the nonprofit organization as a normative institutional structure for the performing arts in twentieth-century America.
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Introduction

The history of the collaboration of choreographer George Balanchine and impresario Lincoln Kirstein has been told with a set of compelling narrative tropes. The story typically goes something like the following. This synoptic account includes no citations, since any attempt to annotate it thoroughly would constitute an exercise in bibliographic futility. Its narrative contours have been reproduced in innumerable instances, whether program notes, documentary films, newspaper articles, or memoirs:

In the summer of 1933 while traveling in Europe, Lincoln Kirstein came upon the idea of founding a ballet company in America and invited choreographer George Balanchine to be its artistic leader. Balanchine insisted that first they must found a school, so that American dancers could acquire the skills and training that ballet dancing requires. Initial plans called for this school to be located in Hartford, Connecticut under the auspices of a museum. Due to Balanchine’s dislike of the provincial environs of Hartford and the protests of local dance instructors, the organization was soon after relocated to New York City, where it opened just after New Year’s Day in 1934. Six months later, students from the School of American Ballet presented their first public performance at an outdoor event at the family estate of Edward Warburg, Kirstein’s partner in the enterprise. This performance marked the world premiere of Serenade—Balanchine’s first ballet in America—a reinvention of the classical tradition specially crafted to teach his inexperienced dancers how to be on the stage.

The early years of the school and its producing company, the American Ballet, were not without challenges. Although their 1935 company debut in New York was a popular success, New York Times dance critic John Martin—a staunch advocate of modern dance and native-born artists—relentlessly criticized the company for the European character of its repertory and artistic leadership. Additionally, a cross-country tour planned by the company came to an inauspicious end in Scranton, Pennsylvania after only a few weeks of performances as a result of mismanagement.

Despite such setbacks, the company was unexpectedly invited to become the resident ballet company of the Metropolitan Opera, with Balanchine installed as ballet master. During their time at the opera the company
mounted several notable performances, including a controversial dance-intensive staging of Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* in 1936 and in 1937 a triple bill of works by Igor Stravinsky—conducted by the composer himself—that included the American premiere of *Apollon Musagète*. In the end, however, Balanchine’s innovative choreography for the operas was not to the liking of the conservative Metropolitan audience, and as a result the troupe was let go after its third season.

After the American Ballet’s first season at the Metropolitan, Kirstein formed a separate company called Ballet Caravan in order to provide summer employment for some members of the company. This small, chamber-sized troupe featured original choreography by the dancers themselves and specialized in ballets that treated explicitly American themes, from gas station attendants to the outlaw Billy the Kid. Though somewhat makeshift in character, the Caravan would continue for several seasons achieving moderate success.

The “Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise” (as I will term it) whose early years are recounted above would ultimately result in the founding of the New York City Ballet (NYCB) in 1948 and the establishment of the School of American Ballet (SAB) as a leading training institution in America. Between 1933 and 1948, however, the organization envisioned by Balanchine and Kirstein would log a variety of triumphs, setbacks, false starts, and new beginnings, in particular from 1933 to 1936, the years of the enterprise chronicled in the seven chapters that follow. In the mid 1930s, moreover, Balanchine was by no means the unquestionably canonical exponent of modernist expression that he would eventually become (and remains today over thirty years after his death). During this time and for many years after, Balanchine was active in not just ballet pedagogy and performance, but in the staging of operas and musical comedies and the creation of stage revues and film musicals, at a time when the boundary between commercial and nonprofit art was more porous than it is today. At times he would literally spend the morning with Stravinsky at the Metropolitan Opera and the afternoon working on Broadway for Rodgers and Hart. Far from something that should be
suppressed, this crossing of classical and vernacular, along with commercial and noncommercial boundaries is responsible for much of the energy and verve of his art—evident in works ranging from his iconic ballet *Serenade* (1934) to his dances for the Rodgers and Hart musical comedy *On Your Toes* (1936).

Despite this breadth of experience, Balanchine has been studied and celebrated mostly as an exponent of high modernist expression, with his work in so-called “popular” venues understood as marginal or at least somewhat peripheral to his official institutional undertakings with Kirstein. Thus in addition to correcting numerous errors of fact that have come to figure in the received history of their ballet enterprise, this account seeks to understand Balanchine’s early life and career in all of its ungainly complexity, including the ways in which it was shaped by the aesthetic priorities and professional ambitions of Kirstein. As will be shown, the early years of this collaboration did not portend a tidy teleological culmination in the establishment of NYCB and SAB. Rather, this period was the beginning of a haphazard institutional journey, whose failures and contradictions are as instructive as its accomplishments and triumphs.

1. Music, Dance, Modernism

Recent scholarly approaches to the practices and theoretical underpinnings of modernism provide a way not only to reconsider the full breadth of Balanchine’s creative output but also to situate his collaborative efforts with Kirstein in a wider and more complex cultural-historical context. Although the underlying goals and motivations of modernism are as numerous as its various contributors, most simply put, the movement has been understood as premised on a desire to break with past traditions and create bold
new artistic visions, whether in the spirit of Ezra Pound’s dictum to “make it new” or Serge Diaghilev’s imperative “Astonish me!” Chronologically, modernism can be defined for music and dance history as beginning around the turn of the century with the early tone poems of Claude Debussy and Richard Strauss and the choreographic innovations of Isadora Duncan and concluding with the chance-based collaborations of John Cage and Merce Cunningham of the early 1950s.¹ New approaches to the study of modernism have in large part been motivated by a desire to revisit these and other canonical figures, while at the same time expanding the terms by which its multi-faceted phenomena are understood. Modernism was previously studied as a succession of “isms”—e.g., cubism, Dadaism, futurism—cultivated by discrete camps of avant-garde elites in a select number of (mostly European) capital cities. Now it is construed to encompass a much wider range of practices, including not just so-called high art but also forms of mass-market entertainment, all of which were reproduced and circulated in shared networks of transnational exchange.²

It is now the consensus among numerous scholars—pace the longstanding critiques of mass culture by Theodor Adorno and other Frankfurt School thinkers—that for much of the modernist period and beyond, so-called “elite” and “popular” art forms

¹ This chronological definition of modernism is adapted from the parameters of Daniel Albright’s *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
existed in a symbiotic rather than an antagonistic relationship. Andreas Huyssen in his seminal study *After the Great Divide* argued that the aesthetic independence and autonomy prized and celebrated by modernist artists was, somewhat ironically, an after-effect of the rise of mass cultural objects against which they could define themselves and their work.³ Film scholar Miriam Hansen subsequently called for a broader conception of modernism to include “vernacular” objects such as classic Hollywood cinema, on the grounds that such phenomena are as articulate about the larger experience of modernity as their high-art counterparts.⁴ In similar terms, the much-maligned category of the “middlebrow,” the contested field in which the elite and popular often uncomfortably mix or collide, has received increased attention from scholars of modernist art and artists as well.⁵ This more expansive conception of modernism has made it possible to tell a history that encompasses individuals and practices previously considered peripheral to the “official” movements, whether the products of the new global entertainment industries or lesser known artistic contributions by women, racial minorities, or other marginalized groups.

Amid these realignments, scholars of music and dance have offered new perspectives on the life and work of many celebrated composers and choreographers from the period, while also granting much-needed attention to lesser-known but no less

significant contributors to modernist expression. Among others, Richard Taruskin’s landmark study of Stravinsky and the Russian roots of his neoclassicism, Sabine Feisst’s reconsideration of Arnold Schoenberg’s career in America, and Simon Morrison’s revisionist account of Prokofiev’s return to the Soviet Union have each offered new ways of understanding these composers distinct from the narratives that had previously come to define them. Among dance scholars, Mark Franko’s study of the life and career of Martha Graham, Roger Copeland’s work on Merce Cunningham, and Lynn Garafola’s research on the circle surrounding Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes have offered fresh perspectives on these seminal figures. At the same time, scholars have drawn attention to overlooked or otherwise underappreciated contributors to the development of modernism. In musicology these include Brigid Cohen’s monograph on German émigré composer Stefan Wolpe, Olga Haldey’s study of Savva Mamontov’s Private Opera, and Carol Oja’s comprehensive account of the composers and patrons who contributed to the flourishing of modernist music in 1920s New York.

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account of the close relationship between modern dance and the “Negro Dance” movement, and Janet Soares’s monograph on the circles around music director, composer, and pedagogue Louis Horst.  

In the spirit of these and many other scholars who have expanded our understanding of modernism, this dissertation seeks to achieve tandem goals: to interrogate the received narratives that have come to define Balanchine’s early career in America while at the same time attending to the role of Kirstein and other lesser-known individuals in the development of the enterprise. These include Edward Warburg (Kirstein’s business partner), Vladimir Dimitriev (Balanchine’s partner and sometime manager), and Pierre Vladimirov (a former Maryinsky soloist recruited to join SAB as an instructor). Two other more famous individuals will make appearances as well: dancer Erick Hawkins and choreographer Agnes de Mille, whose involvement in these early years of the Balanchine-Kirstein collaboration has been largely ignored.

In the early 1930s when the story of this dissertation begins, moreover, Balanchine’s fame had in fact been somewhat eclipsed by a fellow member of the Diaghilev diaspora, Léonide Massine, who scarcely figures in most histories of the enterprise. As the star and lead choreographer of Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes, Massine and not Balanchine was regarded as the most famous ballet artist of the day and the logical heir to the legacy of Diaghilev. If Balanchine’s career had ended in the 1930s (as it came close to doing due to a variety of factors, as will be shown) or had he spent his

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remaining decades working for Broadway and Hollywood (as some thought he might given his early success in popular venues), he could himself have ended up as another overlooked entertainer in need of scholarly recuperation and reincorporation into the more inclusive history of modernism being written today.

2. The Received History of the Balanchine-Kirstein Enterprise

While the study of modernism has thus undergone a radical redefinition and expansion, the early history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise continues to be related with a set of familiar tropes, summarized in the brief history recounted at the outset of this introduction. Though their exact origins are difficult to identify with precision, the contours of this history diverge in substantial and consequential ways from the evidence available in a wide range of contemporary sources, whether diaries and correspondence, newspapers and periodicals, or photographs and oral histories (outlined in section 3 below). As a result, I suggest that these existing accounts should be collectively regarded as a received history, which should for the most part now be read, analyzed, and cited as a primary source in and of itself. This received history has been many decades in the making, the product of many instances of telling and retelling by individuals too numerous to list, not the least of whom are Balanchine, and even more important, Kirstein himself.

10 Though more diffuse in its authorship, this received history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise is akin to the “vast autobiographical and memoiristic legacy” generated by Igor Stravinsky, which as Richard Taruskin has argued can no longer be reliably or responsibly used for scholarly purposes except as primary source material. Taruskin, Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions, 12.
Broadly speaking, this received history can be understood to serve several agendas. On the one hand, it elides numerous inauspicious incidents in NYCB’s pre-history and Balanchine’s early career in America, telling a story that is commensurate with the present-day stature of the choreographer and his eventual institutional homes, rather than reflecting messier or less glamorous historical realities. There is more at stake than public relations, however, in revisiting the history of Balanchine’s early American career. As I will show, the received narratives of this period impede our understanding of the complex institutional dynamics of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, which was significantly imperiled at several points in time by both internal and external pressures. What is more, they have obscured our appreciation of the character of Balanchine’s choreographic style and aesthetic priorities during his first decade in America. At this time Balanchine was still invested in the bold experimentation that characterized much of his first choreographic work in the Soviet Union and many of his projects for Diaghilev. Inspired by his new home, he was also intensely interested in the new opportunities to explore more vernacular modernisms on Broadway and in Hollywood. Both such dimensions of his sensibility have been marginalized if not suppressed in the received history of his career, in favor of the neoclassical profile that has come to define not just his early American career but his repertoire and reputation as a whole. The public profile that Balanchine built in the course of his five-decade career in the United States (from his arrival in 1933 to his death in 1983) was markedly different from the reputation he enjoyed when he first arrived. More simply put, the artist Balanchine became was not always the artist that he was, and the same can be said of his eventual institutional homes, the New York City Ballet and School of American Ballet.
The history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise has been cultivated and consolidated most consequentially in two distinct yet closely related sets of published writings to which this dissertation stands as a historiographic corrective: histories of NYCB as an organization and biographies of Balanchine. These writings have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship that has compounded the power of their respective—and often shared—narrative tropes, many of which were shaped by Balanchine and Kirstein themselves.\textsuperscript{11} It is not the goal of this overview (nor of this dissertation) to impute malicious intent to any of the authors of these works. Rather, the aim is to explain how the history of the enterprise came to be told and demonstrate the need for a new perspective.

During the lifetimes of Balanchine (1904–83) and Kirstein (1907–96), most published accounts of the history of their ballet enterprise were what we might regard as “authorized” books, if not explicitly prepared under the auspices of the enterprise then originating from circles very close to it, most notably from the hand of Kirstein himself. One exception is perhaps the earliest published account, journalist Ruth Eleanor Howard’s \textit{The Story of the American Ballet}, a brochure-length item generously illustrated with photographs and geared toward an audience of dance enthusiasts.\textsuperscript{12} Several years

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Elements of this received history have also been reproduced in the many dozens of memoirs by dancers and other individuals associated with the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, including Alexandra Danilova, Tamara Geva, Jacques d’Amboise, Moira Shearer, Suki Schorer, Edward Villella, and Allegra Kent, some of which will be cited in the ensuing chapters.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
later in 1938 Lincoln Kirstein offered his first history of the organization in his polemical monograph *Blast at Ballet*, in the context of a larger critique of the state of ballet performance and pedagogy in the United States.\(^\text{13}\) Beginning in the 1940s and just before the founding of NYCB in 1948 the journal *Dance Index* (founded and edited by Kirstein) began the work of consolidating Balanchine’s work and the predecessor organizations of their ballet enterprise in several issues of the journal. Most notably, a 1944 double issue offered a modest *précis* of Balanchine’s work and career, with photos of his most notable ballets accompanying “Notes on Choreography” written under the byline of the choreographer.\(^\text{14}\) The issue included an abbreviated catalogue of Balanchine’s ballets, including his Broadway and film projects, and appreciations written by Agnes de Mille and critic Edwin Denby. Other issues of the *Index* published around the same time focused on the work of Pavel Tchelitchev and Igor Stravinsky, providing an occasion to recall both artists’ work with the American Ballet, notably the 1936 production of Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* designed by Tchelitchev and the 1937 Stravinsky Festival.\(^\text{15}\)

Less than a decade after the 1948 founding of NYCB the first book-length history of the company was published, authored by émigré dance writer Anatole Chujoy, called


\(^{14}\) *Dance Index* 4, Nos. 2–3 (February–March 1945).

Although the organization in the book’s title was then barely five years old, Chujoy’s monograph spanned nearly twenty years of history, devoting most of its chapters not to the newly founded company, but to the School of American Ballet and its shorter-lived performing adjuncts, most notably the American Ballet and Ballet Caravan. Chujoy thereby instituted a historiographical precedent by which all of these organizations are considered part and parcel of a larger trajectory and teleology leading to NYCB itself. A close friend of the enterprise and the émigré circles surrounding Balanchine, Chujoy relied extensively upon interviews and sources provided by Kirstein for his account, thus rendering it a somewhat insider perspective. Similarly, Lincoln Kirstein’s own diary-style history of NYCB *Thirty Years*, first published twenty years after Chujoy’s monograph, comprises material related not just the company itself, but devotes extensive coverage to the work of its predecessor organizations: the American Ballet, Ballet Caravan, and Ballet Society. Though a practical solution to the tangled historiography of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, these narrative trajectories have lent the events they relate a retrospective coherence and teleology that was not always in evidence in the individual histories of the School of American Ballet, American Ballet, and Ballet Caravan.

With respect to Balanchine’s life and career more specifically, the first and still most widely read biography of the choreographer was published by journalist Bernard

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17 Lincoln Kirstein’s *The New York City Ballet* (New York: Knopf, 1973) was originally published as an illustrated large-format book. In honor of the thirtieth anniversary of NYCB Kirstein published a text-only version revised and expanded to encompass the years 1973–78, titled *Thirty Years: Lincoln Kirstein’s The New York City Ballet* (New York: Knopf, 1978). Except where noted, this dissertation will cite the more widely available 1978 edition, abbreviated as *Thirty Years*. 
Taper in 1963, based on interviews conducted over a period of six years, some of which were initially published in *The New Yorker*. Taper would subsequently publish three revised and expanded versions of *Balanchine: A Biography*, the first in 1973, the second in 1984 (following the choreographer’s death in 1983), and a final edition in 1996 (which included an epilogue recounting the establishment of the Balanchine Trust).\(^1\) A subsequently published biography co-authored by Richard Buckle and John Taras (published in 1988) hewed more closely to original sources (including the diaries of Lincoln Kirstein, a longtime friend of Buckle’s), and if less readerly than Taper’s narrative is a more reliable chronicle of the events of Balanchine’s life and events in the pre-history of NYCB.\(^2\) Like Taper’s account, however, Buckle and Taras’s account is still significantly indebted to many of the narrative tropes of the received history. More recently, two shorter biographies of Balanchine were published in conjunction with the one hundredth anniversary of Balanchine’s birth in 2004—by Robert Gottlieb and Terry Teachout—which offer in essence condensed versions of the more exhaustive accounts of Taper, Buckle, and Taras.\(^3\)

Martin Duberman’s biography *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, published in 2008, drew more directly on archival documents and other primary sources to build its narrative. Since Kirstein was a central player in Balanchine’s early career in America, the biography covers all of the important milestones in their collaboration, including their

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\(^1\) Bernard Taper, *Balanchine, a Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). This fourth and final edition of Taper’s biography will be referenced in this dissertation.


first meeting in London and Paris, the false start in Hartford, the opening of the School of American Ballet and founding of the American Ballet, and the formation of Ballet Caravan. Perhaps because its focus is Kirstein’s life in all its many phases—which encompassed not only music and dance but also literature, the visual arts, and theater—Duberman’s biography often fails to capture the larger spirit of many of the events he recounts and does not always tease out their specific significance for dance and music history more narrowly construed.

3. Toward a New History of the Balanchine-Kirstein Enterprise

Toward a new history of origins of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, two resources provide a firm foundation on which to build, despite their status as somewhat “authorized” publications. First is Choreography by George Balanchine: A Catalogue of Works (hereafter Balanchine Catalogue) published towards the end of the choreographer’s life and subsequently updated and expanded via a free online searchable database. A project of the Balanchine Trust and Balanchine Foundation, the Balanchine Catalogue offers a year-by-year chronicle of all of Balanchine’s work—whether for ballet companies, opera houses, the popular theater, or Hollywood—including revivals of works that resulted in significant revisions. The Catalogue finds an institutional-based complement in Nancy Reynolds’s Repertory in Review, a chronological compendium of ballets presented by the New York City Ballet and its predecessor organizations, the

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American Ballet, Ballet Caravan, and Ballet Society.\textsuperscript{22} Unlike the \textit{Catalogue, Repertory in Review} includes work by not only Balanchine but the other choreographers associated with NYCB, including William Dollar, Lew Christensen, Eugene Loring, and later, Jerome Robbins, through the year 1977 when it was published (around the same time as Kirstein’s revised and expanded edition of \textit{Thirty Years}).

In recent decades, aspects of the received history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise have undergone revision and critique at the hands of many scholars who have revisited source materials and repositioned Balanchine’s career and the history of NYCB within a larger historical and cultural context. Elizabeth Kendall’s monograph on Balanchine’s youth in Russia and the Soviet Union has now become a definitive reference on this period of his career. Kendall drew on newly examined archival sources and also endeavored to understand the way that sociopolitical forces and circumstances shaped his education and emergent choreographic sensibility.\textsuperscript{23} Balanchine’s subsequent work in the 1920s for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes has also been extensively researched and analyzed by dance scholars including Lynn Garafola, Susan Jones, and Tim Scholl.\textsuperscript{24} The contentious ballet wars that took place between the death of Diaghilev in 1929 and Balanchine’s emigration to America in 1933 have received study by Kathrine Sorley Walker, Vicente García-Márquez, and Judith Chazin-Bennahum.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} Nancy Reynolds, \textit{Repertory in Review: 40 Years of the New York City Ballet} (New York: Dial Press, 1977).
\textsuperscript{25} Kathrine Sorley Walker, \textit{De Basil’s Ballets Russes} (New York: Athenaeum, 1983); Vicente García-Márquez, \textit{The Ballets Russes: Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes de Monte
Balanchine’s career after his emigration to America has similarly benefited from renewed attention by many dance scholars. Lynn Garafola’s edited collection *Dance for a City* (based on an exhibition of the same name) offered fresh perspectives on Balanchine and Kirstein’s collaborative efforts by authors including dance scholar Sally Banes and musicologist Charles Joseph. In numerous additional articles Garafola has provided important accounts of the involvement of composers George Antheil and Aaron Copland in the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, the genesis of Ballet Caravan and Kirstein’s relations with modern dance circles, and the involvement of the Rockefeller Foundation in the later history of the organization. Debra Hickenlooper Sowell’s monograph on the dancers of the Christensen family, drawing on archival sources and oral histories, offers important insights into the American Ballet’s time at the Metropolitan Opera and the history of Ballet Caravan from the perspective of many of the companies’ performers. Mark Franko and Gay Morris have each offered additional critical perspectives on the way both ballet and modern dance in America defined themselves in opposition to existing popular dance cultures and to one another, with particular attention to the

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underlying ideologies and discourses that characterized Balanchine and Kirstein’s collaborative efforts.  

Musicologists have made several notable contributions to this more critical understanding of Balanchine’s life and career, in particular in relation to two major composers affiliated with the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, Igor Stravinsky and Aaron Copland. Charles Joseph’s *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention* provides a comprehensive account of this important decades-long collaborative relationship, most of which transpired after Balanchine’s emigration.  

Joseph’s subsequent monograph *Stravinsky’s Ballets* offers additional insights into the works the composer and choreographer created together. Stephanie Jordan’s *Moving Music* and *Stravinsky Dances* offer authoritative accounts of Balanchine’s views on “choreomusical” relationships, including analyses of his ballets that take into account the complex interplay of music and choreography for which he is celebrated. Two special issues of *The Opera Quarterly* with dance as their focus—one co-edited by Jordan and Simon Morrison—each included a contribution focusing on Balanchine and his Stravinsky ballets.  

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Tick, first published the substantial article on Copland’s ballets by Lynn Garafola noted above, and one of the case studies of Elizabeth Bergman’s monograph *Music for the Common Man* focused on the Ballet Caravan commission *Billy the Kid*, showing how the work was imbued with leftist political sensibilities that have largely been erased by the subsequent reception history of Copland’s score.34

Balanchine’s popular career, for a long time consigned to marginal status, has also begun to receive its due. The “Popular Balanchine” initiative of the George Balanchine Foundation has seen the creation of special research dossiers of primary source material and oral history accounts for most of his work for film, musical comedy, and other popular venues. The scholarship of Adrienne McLean and Beth Genné has drawn more critical attention to Balanchine’s work in the movies. Even more consequentially, the writings of Constance Valis-Hill, Sally Banes, and Brenda Dixon-Gottschild have offered new perspectives on Balanchine’s work in popular genres, exploring the ways in which his contact with African-American artists and black popular music shaped and influenced his larger style and choreographic sensibility.35

In the face of these and other contributions, however, the received history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise still holds remarkable sway, and despite the localized interventions by the scholars noted above, the early years of Balanchine’s American career as a whole have yet to be reconsidered or significantly revised. Instead it has been left to Balanchine’s biographies and the other authorized histories of NYCB to fill the void, and their narrative tropes continue to be reproduced in not just mainstream and

35 The work of these scholars is discussed in Chapter 6 on Paul Draper’s “Bach Ballet” and Balanchine’s choreography for *On Your Toes*.
journalistic sources but also in scholarly writings. It is thus the goal of this dissertation (and the larger monograph of which it is the beginning) to bring these scholarly interventions full circle: to offer a new history of the origins of the Balanchine-Kirstein ballet enterprise, attuned not merely to its triumphant teleology and culmination in NYCB and SAB, but considering its missteps, overlooked achievements, and unsung heroes, and most crucially, its larger place in the contentious and constantly evolving history of modernism.

4. Sources and Methods

The methodology of this dissertation is premised first and foremost upon drawing from primary sources to construct a new account of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise distinct from the received history described above. Primary sources are by no means wholly absent from existing histories of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, nor are they entirely neglected in the biographies of Balanchine and Kirstein. In the scholarly work surveyed in the previous section, moreover, primary sources have proven crucial toward offering new and more nuanced perspectives on individual aspects of Balanchine’s early American career. These sources have yet to be exhaustively examined, analyzed, and synthesized, however, since when taken as a whole they yield information and insights that directly contradict many of the underlying contours of the received history. Three sets of sources have provided crucial insights for this new history: contemporary accounts from the diaries and correspondence of Lincoln Kirstein; oral history accounts, scrapbooks, and other archival documents from early dancers of the American Ballet and Ballet Caravan; and a broad range of periodical sources, including newspapers and
magazines as well as more specialized music and dance publications. (A complete list of unpublished archival materials and periodical sources can be consulted in the bibliography.)

A wide-ranging collector and a historian in his own right, Lincoln Kirstein was a voluminous diarist and correspondent throughout his life. His unpublished personal diaries and correspondence bear unique and invaluable witness to the early history of his work with Balanchine, and it is not an overstatement to regard them as the Rosetta Stone of this dissertation. Although Kirstein’s perspectives can of course not be regarded as infallible or unbiased, they are nevertheless the most consistent and reliable chronicle of the events recounted in the chapters that follow. Evidence of their general reliability lies in the fact that Kirstein’s observations are very often corroborated by other sources or individuals, thus lending credibility to information not in evidence elsewhere. These sources also provide an important and interesting counterpoint to Kirstein’s published accounts of his collaboration with Balanchine (most notably *Blast at Ballet* and *Thirty Years*), which, as will be noted in due course, do not always accord with his own unpublished contemporary recollections.

Kirstein’s witness is especially important since so many of the other key players in the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise—Warburg, Dimitriev, and Balanchine—have not left a significant archival legacy. In fact, the figure least represented through unmediated primary sources is, unfortunately, Balanchine himself. Soon after Kirstein first met the choreographer in July 1933, he noted in his diary that Balanchine “has not a single photo or clipping of a single ballet he’s done,” and that he “has no interest at all in recording his
life or what he has made.”

Although Balanchine began to acquire more of a paper trail later in life when others took it upon themselves to preserve materials related to his life and work, for the first decade of his career in the United States primary sources from his hand are scant if virtually nonexistent. Thankfully, Balanchine’s comings-and-goings and thoughts are recorded in other sources, most notably through his statements to the press. Though more public than Kirstein’s personal observations—which often record Balanchine’s utterances in passing—these sources allow the choreographer’s voice to be heard at key points of this narrative, and to my knowledge, many have not been quoted or analyzed in previous accounts. If their polished tone sometimes suggests the presence of a ghostwriter (most likely the Russian-speaking Chujoy or Kirstein) they just as often resound with the cadences, idioms, and demeanor for which Balanchine is known.

Complementing and often corroborating Kirstein’s observations—and compensating for the absence of Balanchine’s own voice—is the testimony of a large number dancers involved with the enterprise from its earliest years: Annabelle Lyon, William Dollar, Douglas Coudy, Lew Christensen, Ruthanna Boris, and many others. The perspectives of these performers have been gleaned from a variety of sources: oral history interviews (Lyon), published accounts by themselves or others (Boris, Christensen), and scrapbooks, photographs, and press clippings (Dollar, Coudy). To this end, several artists involved in the early years of the enterprise feature prominently as well, most notably Virgil Thomson, George Antheil, and Pavel Tchelitchev, who provide additional

36 LK Diaries, July 19, 1933.
37 The majority of items in the George Balanchine Archive at Harvard University’s Houghton Library, for instance, are from the later decades of his career, with very few items from the 1930s. Among the many holdings of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library, Balanchine himself is represented only by a larger than average file of press clippings, whose items mostly date from after 1965.
perspectives on the development of the enterprise. Evidence from a broad survey of periodical literature has been culled from a dozen American newspapers and a comparable number of music and dance publications.

Although it is every historian’s elusive dream to allow primary sources to “speak for themselves,” in reality it has been only through a critical triangulation of primary source evidence, periodicals, and secondary literature that some of the puzzles of these early years of the enterprise have been solved. Taken together, however, these sources make it possible to understand Balanchine and Kirstein in a much different light: not in isolation as exceptional individuals—as much of the received history tends to do implicitly if not explicitly—but rather in the context of their colleagues, rivals, and contemporaries, as well as the wider history of music and dance modernism in which they worked and which they in turn would greatly influence.

Although the chronological narrative of this dissertation ends in 1936, its story continues for several years into the future. Balanchine continued to pursue an active career on Broadway and spent a considerable amount of time in Hollywood, collaborating on the 1937 cinematic adaptation of *On Your Toes* and the 1938 film *The Goldwyn Follies*. After the end of the American Ballet’s tenure at the Metropolitan Opera in early 1938, Kirstein made Ballet Caravan his more exclusive institutional focus, commissioning new scores and organizing ambitious nationwide tours for the troupe. In the early 1940s Balanchine and Kirstein would form the American Ballet Caravan, contracted by the Department of Inter-American Affairs (led by Kirstein’s close friend Nelson Rockefeller) to undertake several tours of South America, one of many endeavors
designed to promote friendly relations between the U.S. and its southern neighbors in the face of growing pro-Nazi sentiment in the region.

As noted, the incidents recounted in the succeeding chapters are typically glossed as prologue to the 1948 founding of the New York City Ballet, which recently completed its 65th year as a company, more than thirty years after Balanchine’s death in 1983. The School of American Ballet, now housed at Lincoln Center, has seen similar institutional success and stands as one of the country’s leading training academies for ballet. In contrast to the received history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise noted above, however, the first five years of the enterprise did not portend such a successful teleology. From a false start at Hartford’s nonprofit Avery Memorial museum, to the poorly-received debut of the company at New York’s Adelphi Theater, to a mismanaged cross-country tour, to an ill-conceived production of Orpheus and Eurydice at the Metropolitan Opera—these and other incidents did not suggest that success was just around the corner for Balanchine and Kirstein. Coupled with the competition of de Basil’s Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the international fame of Léonide Massine, not to mention Balanchine’s personal health issues, it was anything but certain that the Balanchine-Kirstein ballet enterprise would achieve the institutional permanence it enjoys today.

5. Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1, “But First, a Company—The Origins of the Balanchine-Kirstein Enterprise, 1933,” offers a substantially revised history of the origins of the ballet enterprise from those found in Balanchine’s biographies and histories of the New York
City Ballet. Based on a new examination of archival findings (most notably Kirstein’s own diaries), this account resituates the Balanchine-Kirstein collaboration within the crowded marketplace of dance performance and pedagogy of the 1930s, in which the newly founded American Ballet would struggle for many years to gain a significant foothold.

Chapter 2, “Balanchine’s First American Ballets, 1934,” recounts the history of the first year of the school and performing unit of the American Ballet to show how the institution from its earliest days focused not only on pedagogy but also performance. The first section shows how contrary to Kirstein’s previously articulated goals of focusing exclusively on training for the first years of the enterprise, Balanchine, along with Warburg and Dimitriev, made the preparation and performance of ballets a priority from very early on. In the process, the school and adjunct company of the American Ballet became not just a meeting place for the ever-growing community of Russian émigré dancers and musicians looking to make a living off of their unique talents and training in their new home, but also a platform for native-born composers George Antheil and Kay Swift. Although the enterprise did not lack for students, most of whom had already received extensive training at the ballet schools already operating in the U.S., the American Ballet made a somewhat shaky impression in its first two performance engagements in 1934, first at a semi-private outdoor event in June and subsequently at a series of performances in Hartford in December, discussed in sections two and three.

Chapter 3, “Balanchine’s Modernism and the Debut of the American Ballet, 1935,” offers a wider perspective on the American Ballet’s debut as a company at the Adelphi Theater in New York City (and the period of preparation leading up to it) in
order to evaluate more critically the aesthetics of the American Ballet’s initial repertoire, Balanchine’s early American style, and the company’s reception above and beyond the views of New York Times critic John Martin. As I will show, Balanchine’s choreography during the early 1930s, including the repertoire that made up the Adelphi programs, was widely viewed as idiosyncratic, experimental, and “personal,” what I will term “modernist” in its overall character (in contrast to the neoclassical style that would define his work beginning in the 1940s). The first section situates Balanchine’s early work for the American Ballet—as well as his previous work being performed in America by other companies and artists—within a larger trajectory of choreographic experimentalism and innovation, from the iconoclastic innovations of Soviet choreography in the 1920s to the newly emergent genre of “symphonic ballet” of the 1930s. The second section revisits a prolonged period of institutional turmoil at the School of American Ballet in early 1935, to show how Balanchine’s choreographic priorities and penchant for experimentation elicited intense criticism from his erstwhile partner and champion Vladimir Dimitriev and by extension called into question the governing aesthetics of the American Ballet’s repertoire. Section three examines the internal struggles that attended the two ballets added to the American Ballet’s repertoire for the Adelphi engagement—Errante (originally mounted for Les Ballets 1933) and Reminiscence (a newly-conceived suite of classical-style divertissements)—as well as an out-of-town preview engagement at Bryn Mawr College in early February. Section four chronicles the final preparations and execution of the Adelphi performances, which were hampered by Balanchine’s continued ill health and compromised by the fiscally unwise decision to extend the engagement beyond its initial one-week run. The final section surveys the critical reception of the
Adelphi performances, showing how the much-maligned opinions of John Martin—most notably, that the American Ballet (or as it was nicknamed, “Les Ballets Américains”) was out of touch and elitist—are corroborated by critical voices in a wide range of newspapers and more specialized music and dance periodicals.

Chapter 4, “On the Road to the Metropolitan Opera, 1935,” reexamines the process by which the American Ballet as engaged as the resident ballet company of the Metropolitan Opera and Balanchine as ballet master. The received history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise credits the engagement to the enthusiasm of the Met’s new general manager Edward Johnson. I argue that the appointment was in fact occasioned by general institutional turmoil at the Metropolitan Opera, an organization at which the family of Edward Warburg suddenly found themselves with considerable leverage in early 1935 owing to their association with the Juilliard Music Foundation, explained in sections one and two. Section three discusses the discourse that surrounded the announcement of the American Ballet’s new post, most notably the debates regarding whether the opera ought to employ an American ballet master or an artist with ties to modern dance. Sections four and five examine the reception of performances by the American Ballet that took place during the nine-month period between the company’s March New York debut and first appearances at the Metropolitan: summertime shows in New York and Philadelphia, a September benefit performance in Westchester county, and an ambitious nationwide tour in October abruptly canceled after less than two weeks. These performances and tour were intended to raise the institutional profile of the American Ballet and were touted as evidence of their ability to compete with their biggest competitors, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo directed by Colonel de Basil. The uneven
quality of their performances and the institutional mismanagement that resulted in the collapse of the American Ballet’s tour would instead call into question the company’s readiness to assume such a prominent post at the Metropolitan.

Chapter 5, “The Balanchine-Tchelitchev Orpheus and Eurydice, 1936” offers a new perspective on the American Ballet’s Orpheus, showing how the opera’s dramaturgy—exemplary of the arcane modernist aesthetics for which Balanchine and the company had already come in for criticism—was almost comically ill-suited to the institutional context in which it would premiere, that is, an initiative to create opera with broad popular appeal. Section one situates the Orpheus production within the larger history of modernist engagement with Gluck’s opera as well as wider experimental trends in early twentieth-century opera production. Section two explains the origins of the Metropolitan Opera’s newly-inaugurated “popular” spring season of 1936 and the place of the Orpheus production in its programming, as well as the other offerings of the American Ballet: dances for a new English-language production of Smetana’s The Bartered Bride and a new one-act ballet called The Bat, set to selections from Die Fledermaus. Section three details the dramaturgy and choreography of Orpheus, showing how the dance-intensive concept of the staging in and of itself did not doom the opera. Rather, the production suffered from an overly cumbersome design concept and insufficient period of rehearsal and preparation, both of which likely contributed more conclusively to its poor reception. Section four examines the overwhelmingly negative critical views of the opera, which provide further details regarding its staging and execution. In contrast, the positive reception of The Bat shows how the ballet was a popular foil for the ill-conceived Orpheus, while the lukewarm reviews of the Bartered
Bride dances provide further evidence of the incompatibility of Balanchine’s experimental inclinations with American audiences and critics.

Chapter 6, “Balanchine’s ‘Bach Ballet’ and the American Dances of On Your Toes (1936),” first considers an unrealized “Bach ballet” starring Paul Draper, showing how it represents not just an early rough draft of Concerto Barocco but rather a hitherto unexamined connection between the repertoire of the American Ballet and Balanchine’s first Rodgers and Hart musical On Your Toes. Evidently inspired in part by Lincoln Kirstein’s experience viewing On Your Toes, the ballet reveals the latent potential for artistic crossover among Balanchine’s projects at the time. Section two considers the genesis and larger plot of On Your Toes, focusing on the way that the contemporary enthusiasm for Russian ballet in America was foregrounded in its plot: a roman-à-clef of the Diaghilev diaspora, exemplified at the time by the de Basil company. In light of the musical’s engagement with ballet, section three analyzes the Princess Zenobia ballet as an instance of not just parody but also unironic balletic pleasure in On Your Toes. For many reviewers, Zenobia was a highlight of the show not only because of its comedy but owing to its straightforward virtuosity, and for some it bore almost too close of a resemblance to the object of its satire. Section four examines the title number “On Your Toes,” which through its juxtaposition of ballet and tap-dancing serves as a choreographic turning point for the plot of the show. This number foregrounds the very processes by which anonymous “lowbrow” creative material is made into art by an official author—the process by which Balanchine is understood to have adapted African-American dance idioms from his assistant on the show, Herbie Harper. More important, “On Your Toes” is also an example of how Balanchine’s independent creative interests—
including the mixing of black and white dancers and classical and popular styles—found a congenial creative outlet in *On Your Toes*. Section five turns to the concluding scene of the musical, the “jazz ballet” *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, which represents a creative synthesis in the context of the musical and with respect to Balanchine’s choreographic style. Like *Zenobia*, this ballet was received by its initial audiences as more serious business than might first appear and completes the process begun in “On Your Toes,” that is, a fusion of Balanchine’s modernist balletic background with the sensibilities of his new American home, in part thanks to the contributions of the ballet’s Irish-American star, Ray Bolger.

Chapter 7, “The American Ballet’s Caravan” revisits the genesis and first season of Ballet Caravan to show how the troupe was not entirely conceived in the independent and determinative terms understood by historians and was by no means a thoroughly American-focused endeavor in its inception. This new history of the Caravan’s origins draws upon journalistic accounts of the company’s first season, archival materials related to its performances, as well as Kirstein’s diaries and correspondence. These sources reveal not just the contradictions in Kirstein’s own accounts of the Caravan, but most important, they change our understanding of the troupe’s initial relationship with the American Ballet. By no means a dancer-driven initiative or a carefully conceived attempt by Kirstein to pursue an American artistic agenda, the Caravan was a hastily organized affair, conceived barely six weeks prior to its first performances in July 1936. The Caravan was in fact Kirstein’s practical response to an institutional crisis in the American Ballet and was precipitated by specific challenges suddenly faced by the company, including Balanchine’s continuing health problems and Edward Warburg’s growing
disinterest in the enterprise. If we are to regard the Caravan as Kirstein’s from the outset, it was “his” not necessarily as an intentional aesthetic or institutional endeavor, but rather as an insurance policy to secure the continued existence of the ballet enterprise in which he was so invested, both literally and psychologically. The Caravan thus was not intended as a schism (even though it was perceived of as such from its earliest days), but on the contrary was a means of ensuring the continued existence of the American Ballet in the event of the withdrawal of Balanchine or Warburg (or both) from the company.
Chapter 1

But First, a Company—The Origins of the Balanchine-Kirstein Enterprise, 1933

Among the most prominent narrative tropes in the received history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise is the choreographer’s alleged insistence of “But first a school,” meaning that a school was the first necessary step toward creating a ballet company in the United States. Bernard Taper’s biography of Balanchine is the most notable source for this now mythical pronouncement. When Kirstein swore to Balanchine that they would have a company by the time he was forty, as Taper writes, the choreographer is said to have replied, “But first a school,” a phrase that serves as the title of the chapter in which it appears.¹ Jennifer Dunning’s history of the first fifty years of the School of American Ballet grants these words even greater status by using them in the title, even though the author admits in the opening pages of her book that the statement’s exact origins “may be lost in time and embellished in myth.”²

This chapter offers a substantially revised history of the origins of the ballet enterprise from those found in Balanchine’s biographies and existing histories of the New York City Ballet. The first section discusses the origins of the enterprise in the context of the intense competition for the legacy of Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes that took place

¹ Taper, Balanchine, a Biography, 151. Robert Gottlieb’s more recent biography similarly maintains that starting with a school was one of the non-negotiable conditions laid down by Balanchine before agreeing to come to the United States in 1933. Gottlieb, George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker, 70.
during the 1933 summer season in Paris and London, in which both Balanchine and Kirstein were engaged participants. The second part examines the initial plans devised by Balanchine and Kirstein for the American Ballet and its school. The third section revisits the failed attempt to organize the American Ballet under the auspices of the nonprofit Avery Memorial Museum in Hartford, Connecticut. A postscript discusses the enterprise’s relocation in late 1933 to New York City.

It is important to remember before proceeding that in 1933 the need to establish an indigenous tradition of classical ballet in the United States did not register as a pressing national priority. For one, this was due to the fact that the country had barely begun the long process of recovery from the worst financial crisis in its history. During the fabled Hundred Days after he took office in March 1933—less than a year prior to Balanchine’s arrival in late October—President Roosevelt signed a slate of ambitious legislation to tackle the unprecedented insecurity facing the country: tighter regulation of the banking system to stabilize the nation’s finances, unprecedented work relief programs to alleviate massive unemployment, and large scale development projects to modernize and revitalize especially impoverished regions of the country. If these bold actions by the new administration brought a new sense of hope, the daily reality for most Americans was still quite grim, and would remain so for many years to come. Agricultural overproduction had lowered commodity prices to unsustainable levels and bankrupted countless farmers, while droughts and dust storms brought misery to large swathes of the Great Plains. In urban areas including New York discontent among industrial workers

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3 Scholarship on the Great Depression and New Deal is vast, but for a concise overview of the period, see Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).
and the increasing currency of progressive and socialist politics bred the fear—or anticipation—that the country might be on the brink of open revolution.

It was not just owing to politics or trying economic conditions that a new ballet company was not an urgent matter in the U.S., however, since ballet and other forms of dance had already established somewhat deep roots in the country by this time. In fact the Depression years proved an extremely fruitful period for the development of dance in America, and at the time Balanchine and Kirstein were organizing their new venture, the country by no means lacked for opportunities for aspiring dancers to study, whether in the numerous schools of ballet run by native or émigré instructors or the increasingly popular schools of modern dance. Indeed, beginning in the 1920s and even more so in the 1930s, modern dance in particular had come to be understood as the more viable and appropriate idiom in which to create a uniquely American movement vocabulary distinct from ballet. From the “free dance” of Isadora Duncan to the Ausdruckstanz of Mary Wigman to the contraction-release aesthetics of Martha Graham, modern dance had defined itself in explicit opposition to the allegedly artificial and academic vocabulary of

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ballet. For American modern dance, ballet was regarded as a decadent Old World import that could not truly speak to the experiences of the young nation, much less advance the left-wing political beliefs to which numerous choreographers and performers—many of whom were women and Jews (or both) from marginalized immigrant populations—were passionately committed.

Having turned twenty-six in May and left-leaning in his politics, Lincoln Kirstein was hardly unsympathetic to the dire challenges facing his fellow citizens in 1933, nor was he unaware of trends in the arts more generally and dance in particular in the United States. (Kirstein had by this time already published two articles on dance, defending the relevance of ballet in the Diaghilevian idiom and critiquing the unstructured aesthetics of modern dance.\(^5\)) It is without question, however, that the circumstances of his birth had inured Kirstein personally to the widespread despair that pervaded so much of the country, and this same privilege had made it possible for him to cultivate wide-ranging interests in literature and the visual and performing arts during this bleak period of American history.\(^6\) These opportunities were possible for Kirstein thanks to his mother’s family wealth and his father’s rags-to-riches success. Born in Rochester, New York, in 1867 to German Jewish immigrant parents, Louis Kirstein quit school at age thirteen and had run away from home to become a travelling salesman.\(^7\) He eventually made his way


\(^7\) The biographical information in this paragraph has been summarized from a selection of Louis Kirstein’s obituaries: “L. E. Kirstein Dies; Boston Merchant,” *NYT*, December 11, 1942; “Leaders Pay High Tribute to Kirstein,” *BG*, December 11, 1942; “Louis Kirstein,
back home and married Rose Stein, the daughter of a prominent local clothing manufacturer and subsequently joined the family business, the Stein Bloch Company. In the course of his work Louis became introduced to the Filene brothers, who recruited him to join their company in 1911, whereupon he and his family relocated to Boston. Louis remained affiliated with Filene’s (subsequently merged into Federated Department Stores in 1929) for his entire career while serving on numerous corporate boards. He and his wife were active and generous philanthropists in Boston and elsewhere, and Louis was a revered national leader of Jewish philanthropic causes until his death in 1942. Although the Kirstein family’s resources by no means ranked them among the Rockefellers or Vanderbilts, Rose’s inherited wealth and Louis’s earnings nevertheless put the family in a quite privileged social position, especially in contrast to the impoverished condition of the majority of Americans at the time. Indeed, a table printed in the New Republic comparing executive salaries with workers’ earnings lists Louis’s 1938 annual salary from Filene’s as $80,000, far above the average weekly industry wages of $17.86 (less than one thousand dollars annually).8

Despite his great success as a businessman, Louis had little expectation that his two sons, and much less his only daughter, would follow in his footsteps as a minor captain of industry, or at the very least he did not begrudge his three children their idiosyncratic decisions regarding how to occupy their time. On the contrary, he and his wife took pleasure, perhaps with some parental resignation, in the fact that their children were engaged in less than profitable careers, whether in literature, publishing, or the

performing arts. “My philosophy,” as Louis explained in a letter to his brother Henry in 1934, “is that I should like to do something for them while I am alive and get some enjoyment from knowing that they are having some pleasure as a result of the work and effort I have put in.”

Mina, the eldest, a professor of English at Smith College, was the first English-language editor of the letters of Marcel Proust and the author of a biography of Georges Bizet among many other publications. The youngest, George, went to Hollywood in 1932 to try his hand at the movie industry but returned East after what amounted to little more than what we would today term an internship; he worked briefly as an executive at Bloomingdale’s and was later the publisher of *The Nation* from 1955–65. But it was the middle child of the Kirstein family—named after President Lincoln, a personal hero of his father’s—who would most assiduously leverage his family’s literal and cultural capital and in the process emerge as a leading advocate for modernist expression in America, most notably as the longtime champion of choreographer George Balanchine, whom he would bring to America in the fall of 1933.

In contrast to Kirstein’s charmed life, the circumstances in which Balanchine was born and raised by no means lacked a certain degree of privilege, but had been considerably less stable. Three years older than Kirstein—and also a middle child with an older sister and younger brother—Georgi Balanchivadze was born in St. Petersburg in 1904. His father was Meliton Balanchivadze, a musician and aspiring composer who in

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9 Louis Kirstein to Henry Kirstein, September 18, 1934, LEK Collection.
10 “Mina Curtiss, Author and Editor, Dies at 89,” *NYT*, November 5, 1985.
11 “Publisher George Kirstein,” *CT*, April 5, 1986; “George Kirstein; Publisher of Liberal Weekly,” *LAT*, April 5, 1986.
12 The most definitive account of Balanchine’s upbringing and early career, from which the following information has been summarized, is Kendall, *Balanchine and the Lost Muse*. 
1889 had left his first wife and children behind in his native Georgia to pursue a career in the imperial capital. His mother, Maria Vasilieva, was a young woman of uncertain parentage (perhaps illegitimate) eager for social advancement, though it is not evident that Meliton ever divorced his first wife or that he was ever married to Maria. Regardless of their marital status, the couple nevertheless built a respectable *haute bourgeoisie* life in Petersburg for themselves and their three children—Tamara, Georgi, and Andrei—that included German and French tutors, music lessons, and a dacha at a fashionable new development in Finland. These luxuries were financed not by Meliton’s erratic income but rather from a sizeable lottery prize of 200,000 rubles won by Maria in 1901. Thanks to bad investments on the part of Meliton, however, the Balanchivadzes subsequently lost their fortune, and in 1911 they were forced to abandon their cosmopolitan Petersburg existence to relocate full-time to Finland. Maria in 1912 made a renewed effort to restore her family’s social standing by unsuccessfully attempting to have Tamara accepted into the Imperial Theater School to train as a dancer. The following year Tamara auditioned again, and this time her younger brother Georgi was introduced into the audition process as well, and to everyone’s surprise was accepted, unlike his sister. After a painful period of separation anxiety, the young Georgi eventually took to his new rigorously structured existence in the dance academy, where he and his fellow students were well provided for as members of the Imperial household, and he soon acquired a new first name, Georges.

Although Georges Balanchivadze did not ultimately emerge as a major dancing star, in the course of his study he developed an interest in choreography, creating solo numbers for friends and colleagues and eventually founding an experimental company called the “Young Ballet.” (This early choreographic career will be treated in Chapter 3.)
The Revolution in 1917 significantly disrupted the workings of the Imperial Theater system, and seeking new opportunities away from the chaotic environment of newly renamed Leningrad, in 1925, under the auspices of a short tour, Balanchivadze and a small group of classmates made their way to Germany. They had little incentive to return, however, and eventually joined the Ballets Russes, whereupon Serge Diaghilev decided to Gallicize his surname to the more marketable “Balanchine.” Balanchine would be the last major choreographer for Diaghilev, creating among other works two ballets still in the repertory, *Apollon Musagète* (Stravinsky, 1928) and *The Prodigal Son* (Prokofiev, 1929). After the death of Diaghilev in August 1929 the Ballets Russes organization collapsed, leaving Balanchine and the company’s other artists to scour the continent for professional opportunities. Over the next four years Balanchine—much like his erstwhile colleagues (and now competitors) Léonide Massine, Serge Lifar, and Bronislava Nijinska—found employment with a variety of individuals and organizations in Paris, London, Monte Carlo, and Copenhagen, working in venues ranging from the opera house to the variety stage.14

If family misfortune, political upheaval, the death of Diaghilev, and the financial downturn of the early 1930s—not to mention two modifications of his name—had brought a certain instability to Balanchine’s early life, Kirstein’s education and budding career had proceeded more smoothly. By the fall of 1933 Kirstein had already established himself as an ambitious impresario, his ventures made possible by the largesse of Rose

and Louis, who had financed his education at Andover, the Bershire School, and Harvard, as well as a long string of private tutors to assist the talented but attention-challenged student along the way. While still at Harvard, in 1927 Kirstein co-founded the literary quarterly *Hound & Horn* with classmate Varian Fry and critic Richard Blackmur. Modeled on T. S. Eliot’s *The Criterion*, in its seven years of publication the journal offered new work by Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Katherine Anne Porter, and included among its roster of critics young talents such as Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter, and Louis Zukofsky.\(^\text{15}\) A year later in 1928 Kirstein co-founded the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, which exhibited previously unseen work by artists including Constantin Brancusi, Alexander Calder, Isamu Noguchi, and Diego Rivera, and set an important institutional precedent for the Museum of Modern Art, organized less than a year after the Society’s inaugural show.\(^\text{16}\)

During the summer of 1933, however, Kirstein began to turn his attention away from literature and the visual arts to a new project, which like his previous ventures was made possible as much by his maniacal personal enthusiasm as the patrician *laissez-faire* attitude of his parents. On Wednesday, October 11, 1933, Lincoln Kirstein wrote a breezy, newsy letter to his mother, then vacationing at the tony Greenbriar Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.\(^\text{17}\) Addressed to “Mummy” the document is a telling


\(^{17}\) Lincoln Kirstein to Rose Kirstein, October 11, 1933, LEK Collection.
barometer of Kirstein’s diverse professional portfolio at the time, and the remove at which his family existed from the harsher realities of most Americans. He reports on interviews with the Russian émigré choreographer Michel Fokine in preparation for a forthcoming book, a recently published article in *Vogue*,¹⁸ and also includes updates on the latest issue of *Hound & Horn* (on whose letterhead the note was typed by his secretary, Doris Levine, whose salary was paid by his father). In other personal news, he reports on a party being thrown that evening by himself, Mina, and George, “for a lot of people we don’t know very well, and I think it will be quite nice for a change.” He also informs Rose about his decision to purchase a new bed quilt and curtains at Bloomingdale’s and have a “little red chair” reupholstered, for which he politely asks that she send a check for $100 to Miss Levine, as the bill was already two weeks past due.

Kirstein opens and closes this letter, however, with news of an event that would uniquely define the rest of his professional career. “My ballet people arrive on Tuesday [October 17], so you can imagine I am very excited,” he writes at the opening of the letter. In a similar nonchalant tone, Kirstein closes with the warning that, “I may have to go up to Hartford on Thursday [October 19] to take my Russians,” in retrospect a charming understatement given the challenging institutional journey on which he was about to embark with Balanchine, a collaborative relationship that would occupy him quite literally for the rest of his life. This journey was in fact already well underway, having begun three months earlier in Paris and London.

1. Balanchine and Kirstein in Paris and London, Summer 1933

In the summer of 1933 Kirstein found himself in Paris and London at a particularly auspicious moment in the history of dance in the twentieth century, witnessing and to a degree participating in some of the most significant institutional realignments in ballet since the 1929 death of Diaghilev and collapse of the Ballets Russes. Though this was not Kirstein’s first trip to Europe, nor his first time to take in ballet performances in Paris and London, this year was somehow different from previous seasons. “The ballet activity this year is more than there has been for a very long time,” Kirstein noted in his diary halfway through his time in Paris. 19 Indeed, in both Paris, and the following month in London, several dance organizations—all led by prominent members of the Ballets Russes diaspora—were giving performances in nearly overlapping engagements in an intense competition for international stature and a definitive claim to the mantle of Diaghilev. First and foremost was the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, co-founded by René Blum and the ambitious Colonel de Basil in 1932 (hereafter the “de Basil company”).20 Although Balanchine had been this troupe’s first ballet master, he parted ways with the group soon after its formation, and Léonide Massine was subsequently appointed its primary choreographer and star.21 Two ballets created by Balanchine in 1932 remained in the company’s repertory, however, *Cotillon*

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19 Lincoln Kirstein Diaries (hereafter “LK Diaries”), June 15, 1933.
and La Concurrence, both of which would be performed the summer of 1933 and in subsequent seasons, albeit without his direct oversight.²²

Competing with the de Basil troupe for the public’s attention this summer was a newly formed company called Les Ballets 1933, with Balanchine as its sole choreographer and organized by Boris Kochno (Diaghilev’s former assistant, dropped by de Basil around the same time as Balanchine) and Vladimir Dimitriev, the opera singer-turned-imprésario who had organized the tour that took Balanchine and his friends to Germany in 1925.²³ The troupe had generous financial backing from London banker Edward James—whose wife Tilly Losch was to be a featured performer, alongside “baby ballerina” Tamara Toumanova, briefly coaxed away from de Basil—which allowed them to commission new music and décor from important contemporary artists, true to its of-the-moment name. The company would not outlast the summer, presenting only two short engagements in Paris in June and London in July, and while it received mixed reviews was a modest success with a niche audience of Bloomsbury habitués and visiting Americans such as Kirstein. Coming in a distant third but not to be counted out was the similarly short-lived company of Serge Lifar, Diaghilev’s last male star, on whom Balanchine had created lead roles in Apollon Musagète, The Prodigal Son, and La Chatte, the last of which would be performed by his company that summer and into the fall.

If all three companies held their own in Paris, by the time they arrived in London the de Basil company had established itself as the clear victor of this three-way race, in particular after its triumphant engagement at the Alhambra Theatre in early July. The company’s July 4 performance has been deemed in retrospect a watershed moment in the history of ballet, comparable to the 1909 debut of the Ballets Russes. The company’s successful London engagement—ultimately extended through the end of the year—established the de Basil organization as the world’s undisputed leading ballet troupe and Massine as an internationally celebrated choreographer. Lifar’s company, by contrast, would continue on for a bit longer, with a short American tour later in the year, whereupon he would return to his duties as ballet master at the Paris Opera. Les Ballets 1933 collapsed even sooner, shortly after its London performances, with Toumanova rejoining the de Basil company, Edward James in a flurry of lawsuits against people involved with the company, and Tilly Losch dissatisfied with her erstwhile star vehicle.

Kirstein spent most of June in Paris, after which he followed the dance companies to London in July. In both cities he sampled freely from the many offerings while the competition raged, and his ultimate collaboration with Balanchine must be understood as deeply affected and even occasioned by this unique historical confluence. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to revisit completely the vicissitudes of the 1933 ballet wars, which have been given serious study by Kathrine Sorley Walker, Vicente García-Márquez, and Judith Chazin-Bennahum. More immediately germane to this prologue to his ballet endeavors are Kirstein’s impressions of and interactions with these three

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25 Ibid.
choreographers and their work, which he dutifully documented in his diaries. From his written recollections it is clear that not only did Kirstein attend multiple performances by all three dance organizations, but that over the course of the summer he took an intense personal interest in all three choreographers—Balanchine, Massine, and to a lesser degree, Lifar.

It is not entirely clear whether Kirstein set off for Europe in the summer of 1933 with the explicit goal of finding a choreographer to found an American ballet company, though such an idea had been on his mind for some time. Kirstein’s eventual partner in the American Ballet enterprise, Edward Warburg (who had also been a key player in the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art) claimed they had discussed the idea of a ballet company since their college days.26 “We spent many hours discussing the possibilities of art patronage,” Warburg recalled in his memoirs, explaining how Kirstein understood ballet as not just an artistic endeavor but an art form with unique organizational possibilities. Through this collaborative art form it was possible to create an institutional structure by which artists of all types could mutually benefit not just aesthetically but financially:

Our major concern was figuring out how to make sure that a painter, a composer, a poet—any artist—would be able to eat regularly. It seemed to us that in the art world, everyone made money except the artist. If a modern composer were fortunate enough to have Koussevitzky play his

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26 In addition to appearing in Warburg’s memoirs, this story was reported in the press around the time of the American Ballet’s December 1934 performances in Hartford, Connecticut (discussed in the following chapter): “During his freshman year at Harvard, Mr. Warburg discussed with his classmate, Lincoln Kirstein, the possibilities of an American ballet similar to the great Russian ballet.” “Ballet Will Make Debut December 6,” HC, November 23, 1934; “An eight-year-old dream, conceived in the minds of two Harvard freshmen, will achieve reality next Thursday night when the School of the American Ballet will give its initial performance in the Avery Memorial Theater at Hartford, Conn.” “American Ballet School Gets Test This Week,” BS, December 2, 1934.
symphony, he would get the royalties for that and subsequent performances, but this would in no way repay him for his months of effort. […] Lincoln maintained that the only art form that could bring the most artists together in a single production was the ballet. For this one could have musical composers, costume and set designers, choreographers and dancers—and everyone might receive a cut from the box office.\textsuperscript{27}

This conception was based on a somewhat rose-colored if not entirely inaccurate understanding of the organizational model of Kirstein’s hero Diaghilev. Although the Ballets Russes in its early years had helped raise the income of dancers, by offering salaries higher than those available in Russia, by the late 1920s when Balanchine joined the troupe inflation had for the most part eroded these gains, and with the exception of Diaghilev and his most prominent collaborators the organization did very little to enrich its many contributing performers and artists.\textsuperscript{28}

Regardless of how long these ballet plans had been in the works, Kirstein’s more pressing concern that summer was research on dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, about whom he was ghostwriting a book for Romola Nijinsky.\textsuperscript{29} In the course of the summer, however, Kirstein’s interests and goals morphed from those of a balletomane researcher to those of a dance impresario, and his new focus became the idea of founding a ballet school and company in the United States. The runaway success of the de Basil company would take Massine out of consideration for such a project, and although Lifar had perhaps less to lose than Massine in accepting an American post, he and Kirstein did not make a strong personal connection, despite several one-on-one encounters, nor did Lifar as a performer make a favorable impression. In the end it was Balanchine—who was both available and

\textsuperscript{27} Edward M. M. Warburg, \emph{As I Recall, Some Memoirs} (privately published, 1978), 32.  
\textsuperscript{28} Garafola, \emph{Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes}, 188–200 and 262–9.  
\textsuperscript{29} Romola Nijinsky’s \emph{Nijinsky} was published in 1934, and Kirstein received no official credit for his work on the volume. Kirstein’s manuscript is held by JRDD–NYPL.
interested, and whose work for Les Ballets 1933 was exciting and fresh—whom Kirstein connected with most readily, thanks to both the interest of the budding impresario and the initiative of Balanchine himself, as will be shown below.

Among the contested features of the pre-history of NYCB is the means by which Kirstein and Balanchine first met in the summer of 1933. This confusion has been sown in no small way by Kirstein’s own published writings, which credit a range of individuals with having facilitated this introduction. Kirstein’s 1938 pamphlet Blast at Ballet does not specify where or when he and Balanchine first met, instead reporting in vague terms that upon seeing performances by Les Ballets 1933 that he “felt here was a point of contact and a place to start.” In other published writings Kirstein credited artist Pavel Tchelitchev and composer Virgil Thomson for facilitating his eventual collaboration with Balanchine. Kirstein’s diaries confirm that although neither of these two brokered his first personal meeting with the choreographer, both did play a role introducing him to Balanchine’s work during his time in Paris.

Virgil Thomson had spent significant amounts of time in Paris since his first visit to the city in 1921, and although his own work had not been embraced by the French music establishment he was nevertheless an invaluable resource for visiting Americans

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30 Kirstein, Blast at Ballet, 28.
31 “I had met [Diaghilev’s] last and youngest collaborator, the ballet master George Balanchine in Paris, through Pavel Tchelitchev, the painter, in the summer of 1933.” Lincoln Kirstein, “The Ballet in Hartford,” in A. Everett Austin, Jr.: A Director’s Taste and Achievement (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1958), 65; both Thomson and Tchelitchev figure heavily in the version of events recounted in Thirty Years, 20–23. Anatole Chujoy writes that it was Virgil Thomson who first brought Kirstein to the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées to see Les Ballets 1933, but that it was Romola Nijinsky who first introduced Balanchine and Kirstein to one another backstage at London’s Savoy Theatre, Chujoy, The New York City Ballet, 18–19.
such as Kirstein.\textsuperscript{32} Both Harvard graduates and members of the university’s Liberal Club, Thomson and Kirstein had first been introduced in 1929, but had not been in regular contact subsequently.\textsuperscript{33} During Kirstein’s time in Paris in 1933, however, the two saw each other on an almost daily basis, dining together on June 3 following his landing at Le Havre.\textsuperscript{34} That night Thomson filled in Kirstein on “the various splits in the ballet-companies” and explained “how the g[rea]t chic was not American, but German now…It will be German for a year; then American again. The ballets must anticipate styles like *modistes*.”\textsuperscript{35} This was no empty observation on Thomson’s part, at least with respect to the Germans, as choreographer Kurt Jooss had one year earlier won the inaugural choreographic competition of Rolf de Maré’s Archives Internationales de la Danse for his seminal work *The Green Table*. The following Wednesday the two attended Kirstein’s first performance of the summer, the opening night of Les Ballets 1933 at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées. Kirstein described himself as in “a fever of excitement,” and he “applauded wildly at every opportunity” during the evening.\textsuperscript{36} The program opened with *Mozartiana*, which had “dull décor but nice costumes and very lovely choreography, witty and Mozartian by Balanchine.”\textsuperscript{37} Thomson was less impressed, noting in the intermission that it was “not up to last y[ea]r’s,” presumably referring to *Cotillon* and *La

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 432.
\textsuperscript{34} Thomson’s memoirs report of “daily morning visits from Lincoln Kirstein, deeply excited by the ballets and looking for a way to work with them.” Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, (New York, Knopf 1966, reprinted 1967), 224.
\textsuperscript{35} LK Diaries, June 3, 1933.
\textsuperscript{36} LK Diaries, June 7, 1933.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
Concurrence, both still in the repertory of the de Basil troupe. Bertolt Brecht’s Les Sept Pêchés capitaux (The Seven Capital Sins)\(^{38}\) followed—a cause or effect of the vogue for the Teutonic—set to the “familiar haunting delayed music” of Kurt Weill:

> It was wiry but intense, like a nightmare. Some of it I enjoyed. It has a deliberate shabby elegance, very German, that I liked. Lotte Lenya a perfect singer for it. There was some whistling drowned out in cultivated applause.\(^{39}\)

Kirstein was also effusive about Toumanova, calling her “amazingly strong in her extension.”\(^{40}\) Despite this avowed enthusiasm, the program did have low points, including the Darius Milhaud–André Derain ballet Les Songes (“Dreams”) which Kirstein found “very dull and boring,” and the rest of the program he “often thought was dull but was not bored,” a not so flattering distinction.\(^{41}\) Kirstein also had reservations about the company’s dance offerings more broadly, noting that it was “[t]oo much choreography by one man for Balanchine to do perfectly” and that he was “no Fokine.”\(^{42}\)

Two days later Kirstein would sit in on a morning rehearsal of Errante, which like the Brecht/Weill ballet was “in the German taste” according to the later recollections of Thomson, who may have arranged for them to see it.\(^{43}\) Kirstein found Errante “very much a motivated Tchelitchev painting” expressing “Balanchine’s tragic ideas of the

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\(^{38}\) While the ballet’s German title is Die sieben Todsünden, and the work is today best known by the English title The Seven Deadly Sins, Kirstein’s diary refers to it as The Seven Capital Sins, a more literal translation of the ballet’s original French title, as it was billed upon its premiere on June 7, 1933, Les Sept Pêchés capitaux: Spectacle sur des poèmes de Bert Brecht. On the ballet’s genesis and background and for a discussion and analysis of its scenario and score, see Stephen Hinton, Weill’s Musical Theater: Stages of Reform (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 199–213.

\(^{39}\) LK Diaries, June 7, 1933.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Thomson, Virgil Thomson, 225.
relation between men and women, always broken up by someone jumping between.” At
the rehearsal there was general agreement that Les Songes was a “great flop,” and that
Mozartiana “had not been praised highly enough.”

That same evening Kirstein was off to the Théâtre du Châtelet to see the de Basil
company. One of the new works on the program, Massine’s “symphonic ballet” set to
Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, Les Présages, he deemed “a wonderful choreographic
thing, but with such terrible costumes one could hardly see it.” Although the “chief
dancers” were fine overall, the corps was “often ragged.” Nevertheless Kirstein was as
enthusiastic about this performance as he had been over Les Ballets 1933 two nights
earlier, and after the show Kirstein and his friend Dickie Ames “fell into each other’s
arms in ecstasy over Massine.” After the show Kirstein’s ballet education continued,
with Ames explaining that “there’s no consolidating force behind the ballet” with
Diaghilev gone, and that a “split in tradition” now existed, with the “progressive” Les
Ballets 1933 on one side and the “reactionary” de Basil troupe on the other.

Kirstein would return to the Châtelet to see the de Basil troupe on June 16. He
“enjoyed Les Sylphides beyond anything” and Massine’s Scuolo di Ballo, despite
lackluster décor, “had moments of great charm.” He chatted with Alexander Calder and
Isamu Noguchi at the intermission, both of whose work had been exhibited by the
Harvard Society, and both of whom put him “in a rage”: Calder for “disliking the
dancing” despite being in discussions with the troupe about a project, and Noguchi for

44 LK Diaries, June 7, 1933.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 LK Diaries, June 16, 1933.
saying “it was all an edition de luxe with no point but the décor.” A week later at another performance by the troupe Kirstein was similarly impressed by its offerings, declaring that that he had never experienced “such extreme satisfaction” and that Massine in particular was “never so magnificent.”

On June 10 Kirstein returned to the Champs-Elysées for the second performance of Les Ballets 1933, with The Seven Cardinal Sins much improved having been “considerably speeded up.” Errante had “many fine things in it, wonderful shadows, crucifixions, suckings-off, la vie privée de Pavel Tchelitchev with a superb descent of lustrous enormous scarves.” Two nights later Kirstein was “good and lit” for the troupe’s next performance, at which he again enjoyed Mozartiana but found Les Songes “even worse than before.” Errante was improved, “except for Tilly Losch,” whom Kirstein at the June 9 rehearsal had decided had “a music-hall style I don’t like.” On June 19 Kirstein again saw Les Ballets 1933, and found Mozartiana “more charming than ever” and deemed it a “perfect complement in dancing for the music.” Errante was “more brilliant and touching than ever” and Kirstein thought it could be “superb on the stage of the Radio City Music Hall with a huge ballet company.”

Kirstein also sought out the performances of Serge Lifar, making his way to the Opéra on June 14 in time to see him dance one of Nijinsky’s signature works, Le Spectre de la Rose. Though Lifar was a well-regarded performer at the time—the head of the

50 Ibid.
51 LK Diaries, June 23, 1933.
52 LK Diaries, June 10, 1933.
53 Ibid.
54 LK Diaries, June 12, 1933.
55 LK Diaries, June 9, 10, 1933.
56 LK Diaries, June 14, 1933.
prestigious ballet of the Paris Opera lauded by French critics including André Levinson—for Kirstein the performance was a disappointing simulacrum:

A replica of the Nijinsky costume, décor, everything, except spirit. He danced well [but] absolutely unmoved me. It was no dream. The tempo was too fast, when he offered her his heart with his hands coming down in front of his breast, which Romola [Nijinsky] had showed me so well, with Lifar it was merely perfunctory.

This performance and his opinions aside, Kirstein had been trying to make personal contact with the artist and speculated that his lack of response was attributable to “a plot against Romola and me.” He eventually encountered Lifar at the intermission of a de Basil performance on June 23, and the dancer apologized for being out of touch but told Kirstein to call upon him at his hotel the next day. With only cryptic clues to go on, Kirstein sought out the hotel where Lifar was staying, eventually finding him at the Chatham, where he “was wearing a red bathing suit in bed” and, as Kirstein sat down, “pulled a corner of a yellow puff up, out of modesty, to his chin.” Although Kirstein did not take much away from the encounter, he did learn that Lifar would be performing in London on July 3, “I daresay,” Kirstein surmised, “to keep his end up before the ballet public, faced with Massine and Balanchine.”

Although Kirstein did not spend as much time with Pavel Tchelitchev as Thomson, two encounters with the artist made a big impression on Kirstein, who had been moved by his scenic contributions to Les Ballets 1933, in particular Errante. On June 21 he went to see the artist, who the same day was entertaining photographer George Platt Lynes, writer Glenway Wescott, and publisher and curator Monroe

57 LK Diaries, June 21, 1933.
58 LK Diaries, June 23, 1933.
59 LK Diaries, June 24, 1933.
60 Ibid.
Various relationships and mutual affiliations underpinned this network of men: the previous year Tchelitchev had provided zodiac drawings for Wescott’s book *A Calendar of Saints for Unbelievers* (1932); Platt Lynes and Kirstein knew each other from their high school years at the Berkshire School; and Wheeler and Wescott, who had been lovers for over a decade, had in 1928 entered into a triangulated relationship with Platt Lynes. At this particular gathering Kirstein found Tchelitchev “a little fancy, but charming to me when I told exactly how much I’d loved *Errante*.” The artist groused about the incompetent stagehands at the Champs-Elysées and told Kirstein to look him up in London. The next day Kirstein caught Tchelitchev again shortly before his departure for Boulogne and London (in Edward James’s car). Following up on their conversation from the day before, Kirstein described the stage of Radio City Music Hall “and what wonderful things could be done on it.” Tchelitchev declared that “he wanted to work for lots of masses of people, not just for snobs,” and declared that although “toe dancing was over”—a comment that made Kirstein wince—Balanchine was nonetheless “a great man.”

By the time he departed on June 27, Kirstein was “glad to be leaving Paris,” and after a brief stopover in the Netherlands, where he was reunited briefly with Romola

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61 The circles in which Kirstein, Thomson, and Tchelitchev were active in Paris and subsequently in New York resonate and overlap with in significant ways with the composers and other artists discussed in Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). This dimension of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise will be treated at greater length in the subsequent Chapter 7 on the origins of Ballet Caravan.
63 LK Diaries, June 24, 1933.
64 Ibid.
Nijinsky—most of whose living expenses Kirstein was paying at the time—he made his way to London. He arrived the day before Lifar’s July 3 performance, which was as underwhelming as the Paris Spectre rendition had been. The Beethoven Prometheus ballet was “a poor work” and “affected”; Afternoon of a Faun was done “without the nymphs,” and Spectre “with a lot of jumps.”65 “Sickening exhibition of cabotinage as I’ve ever seen,” as he summed up, although Lifar had redeemed himself somewhat with a “splendid” performance of Petipa’s Bluebird variation.66 Kirstein would see Lifar again on July 10, accompanied by Romola herself, who was even more critical of the performance. She said that Lifar had “no elevation” and had left out the tours en l’air from Spectre.67 He didn’t know Faun “at all” and had omitted certain entrechats from Sylphides, although she expressed pleasure that “he was keeping up to something.”

Although Thomson and Tchelitchev had helped bring Balanchine to his attention during his time in Paris, Kirstein did not actually meet the choreographer in person until the opening of Les Ballets 1933 in London. According to Balanchine’s biographers, it was Romola who facilitated this introduction, and Kirstein’s diaries confirm this, recording that on July 8 he accompanied her to the Savoy Theatre for performances by Les Ballets 1933. The program consisted of Mozartiana, Les Songes, and Errante, and afterward Romola sent a note backstage to Balanchine.68 She joked that Balanchine “made even the scenery dance, as he had no dancers,” a dig at the chamber company’s meager cadre of 8 women and 3 men, and further mused that, “Old Pa Diaghilev would

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 LK Diaries, July 10, 1933.
68 LK Diaries, July 8, 1933.
be pirouetting in his grave.” Balanchine looked tired and ill, according to Kirstein, as though he “had just had a fight on the stage.”

On July 11 Kirstein attended a performance by the de Basil troupe, where he saw Alexandra Danilova dance excerpts from *Swan Lake* and saw Balanchine’s *La Concurrence* for the first time, finding it to his liking: “very 1900 and sweet, pretty to look at.” Later that evening at a party at the home of Kirk and Constance Askew he and Balanchine had a “coy and satisfactory talk,” their first real personal interaction. Although Kirstein remembers Balanchine as “wholly charming” in demeanor he was nevertheless full of strong opinions about his rivals. Having long since given up a performing career, Balanchine declared that dancers “can rarely compose as they always think only of themselves, never of the others,” and that Lifar in particular hated competition and thus “didn’t want to give [Olga] Spessivitsa [sic] a thing in *Giselle* even.” Of Massine, Balanchine said that while he “does design good dances” he was “commercial,” and his studies with Spanish dancer Felix Fernandez had “left its strong imprint on him,” not in a good way. He was also critical of Massine’s “symphonic ballet” *Les Présages*, saying that Tchaikovsky’s fifth symphony “explains itself, it never needs an accompaniment, a masterpiece.” Not yet thirty years old, Balanchine also declared that no dancer is good “either as a choreographer or as a performer after 40” (Massine was about to turn 37 in August) and bemoaned his present lack of financial and artistic

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 LK Diaries, July 11, 1933.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
resources. He then laid out a vision that would quickly begin to consume the twenty-six-year-old Kirstein:

How he wants to come to America, with 20 girls and 5 men he could do wonders. Particularly the classical style or his adaptation of it. […] How Americans have real pointe but they are often dead from the waist up. They must be made to love the music and to love dancing. But they have spirit […]

Despite these lucid opinions and bold plans, Balanchine did not make a stronger physical impression than he had backstage three days earlier. During their conversation Kirstein noted that he “seemed worse and aspired through his teeth as if he really had T.B.” Nevertheless, Balanchine had successfully planted the idea in Kirstein’s mind for an American ballet company and at the same time made a not-so-subtle case for himself as the only suitable leader of such an enterprise, as a non-dancer comfortably below the age of forty. Whether the young Kirstein was aware that he was thus being played is perhaps open to debate, but the fact remains that he recorded every step of the transaction in his diary without comment to that effect. His account of this meeting contradicts his later recollections in Thirty Years, in which the conversational dynamic is entirely reversed. Kirstein claims to have “made a headlong onslaught” toward Balanchine and “proposed an entire future career in half an hour,” after which the choreographer said he would have to think over. That Kirstein would tell a different story later in life when he was in the driver’s seat, despite having access to his own written recollections, is perhaps only human.

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Kirstein, Thirty Years, 30.
After this initial exchange, Kirstein talked over the idea of an American company two days later with Romola, and on July 16 all three convened for a lunch meeting to discuss further the possible idea of an American company. 78 “Balanchine was charming in a fresh grey flannel suit,” Kirstein wrote, “his fine strong delicate Caucasian face very animated.” 79 The choreographer was all but through with Les Ballets 1933, barely on speaking terms with Losch and frustrated with James’s management of the company. 80 The trio got “frightfully excited” about the potential plans, and engaged in an enthusiastic planning session. Balanchine declared that working in America “had always been his dream” and that he “would give up everything to come.” He praised the talents of dancers Roman Jasinsky and Toumanova, whom he wished to bring along as soloists, and talked of plans to do a “big erotic ballet.” Romola for her part said that she would provide the rights to all of Vaslav’s ballets, and Kirstein pitched the idea of the two of them giving lecture-demonstrations, with the soloists providing live examples. Later in the day, she warned Kirstein privately that Balanchine was consumptive and had only two years to live, a concern that he dismissed with the cold calculation that “2 y[ea]rs work will be a lot out of him a real start.” That evening Kirstein wrote a sixteen-page letter to his friend A. Everett “Chick” Austin in Hartford, whom he had mentioned in the lunch meeting as a possible host for “the scheme of a ballet school.” Kirstein was so excited at the prospect that he could hardly sleep.

78 LK Diaries, July 13, 16, 1933.
79 LK Diaries, July 16, 1933.
80 Ibid.
2. Planning an American Ballet

Five years after Balanchine’s arrival in the U.S., Kirstein would write that although “there have been other ballet schools founded in America before us […] few have started with such complete plans, or with such a root-grounded base of organization and instruction.”81 It is perhaps to Kirstein’s credit that he believed strongly enough in the future of his still-fledgling organization that he was willing to misrepresent, or at least gloss over, the haphazard origins of the School of American Ballet and American Ballet company. But if the plans for the ballet enterprise would be in part scrapped and in part completely rewritten over the course of Balanchine’s first two years in America, and even if Balanchine had been responsible for sparking the idea in the first place, Kirstein developed his own strong personal vision of how the organization should take shape, first summarized in letters to a friend and colleague who shared his strong enthusiasm for the arts, A. Everett “Chick” Austin.82

From the same circle of Harvard-educated aesthetes as Kirstein, Austin was a logical person for Kirstein to reach out to, given his position as Director of the Avery Memorial Museum in Hartford, Connecticut.83 Since assuming his leadership role in 1927—the same time that Kirstein’s own arts endeavors had begun—Austin had transformed the staid institution in the “Insurance Capital” into an unlikely showcase of

81 Kirstein, Blast at Ballet, 28.
82 The original letter, dated July 16, 1933, is located in the archives of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, and a facsimile reproduction is included in (S) *MGZRS-Res.+ 82-4201, Scrapbook of the Producing Company of the School of American Ballet, NYPL. A published version of the letter, cited here, is found in Francis Mason, Ed., I Remember Balanchine: Recollections of the Ballet Master by Those Who Knew Him (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 113–19.
83 On Chick Austin’s life and career, see Eugene R. Gaddis, Magician of the Modern: Chick Austin and the Transformation of the Arts in America (New York: Knopf, 2000) and also Weber, Patron Saints.
modernist expression, from surrealist painting to Bauhaus architecture. Music and the performing arts had been an integral element of Austin’s program, most notably with the 1928 establishment of the “Friends and Enemies of Modern Music,” which presented concerts of works by contemporary composers. As it happens, Kirstein’s efforts to bring Balanchine to Hartford would coincide with (and delay the execution of) one of the most significant performance-related initiatives of Austin’s tenure, the commission of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*, eventually premiered in Hartford in February 1934.84

Kirstein was well aware of this conflict and had no qualms about and potentially pre-empting the opera’s premiere with his ballet plans, despite his close relationship with Thomson. Kirstein noted in his diary that during a lunch with Thomson on July 21 in London he explicitly did not mention his newly hatched ballet scheme, since the composer “might think I was militating against Chick’s producing his opera at Hartford, which I am.”85 In fact, the ballet project and its Hartford connection would not have come as a complete surprise, as Kirstein had already had some discussion with Austin about ballet prior to his departure, plans to which Thomson had been privy. Thomson’s memoirs report that Kirstein “had been urging Chick that they must next year in the museum’s new theater stage a ‘ballet demonstration.’”86 In a letter to the composer in mid-May Kirstein reported that he “went up to Hartford and had a long serious talk with

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85 LK Diaries, July 21, 1933.
Chick about the possibility of a ballet next year,” Kirstein wrote to Thomson, “that is, about the ballet demonstration I spoke to you about.”

If Kirstein’s initial ideas in May for a ballet even in Hartford had constituted a modest “demonstration,” by July they had become more ambitious, inspired by his summer of ballet-going and subsequent interactions with Balanchine. In a now-legendary letter to Austin—identified in its first sentence as “the most important letter I will ever write,” its intense energy and rhetoric indeed suggesting a primal scene—Kirstein articulated the key talking points of his nascent ballet enterprise. Although Kirstein would later characterize this letter as “more enthusiastic than honest,” it is nevertheless clear and explicit in its goals. Among the most salient themes of Kirstein’s July plan is an insistence on an educational and noncommercial mission for the organization, which would be aided by being located in Hartford in affiliation with the Morgan museum, with “plenty of chance to work in an easy atmosphere.” Balanchine was amenable to such a plan, Kirstein assured Austin, since while he was “socially adorable,” unlike artists such as Lifar, “he hates the atmosphere both of society … and the professional Broadway Theatre.” (In their July 16 lunch meeting, Balanchine had spoken of how he had refused social invitations from Edward James.) Tuition would not be charged so that students could be chosen “for their perfect possibilities.” In exchange for their training, however, students would be required to commit to appearing exclusively in performances under the

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88 Kirstein, Thirty Years, 31.
89 Kirstein to Austin, July 16, 1933, in Mason, I Remember Balanchine, 116.
90 Ibid.
91 LK Diaries, July 16, 1933.
92 Kirstein to Austin, July 16, 1933, in Mason, I Remember Balanchine, 117.
auspices of the school for a period of five years, a measure necessary to “obviate the danger of movies or Broadway snatching them up after they have been trained.”

If all went according to plan, within three years time they could have an “American ballet,” defined by Kirstein as, “a trained company of young dancers—not Russians—but Americans with Russian stars to start with,” specifically Toumanova and Jasinsky. Kirstein and these stars would go on tour throughout the northeast giving lecture-demonstrations to “prepare the way for the company, which will give performances not at the theater, but always kept on an educational level, with museums.” By operating in this different institutional sphere “out of the competition class,” as Kirstein put it, the company would not be subject to the whims of managers and theater owners but could rather pursue its mission on its own terms. The company would still produce and perform new work, however, and Kirstein promised Austin that, “by February you can have performances of four wholly new ballets in Hartford.” One aspect mentioned in this July plan that would not come to fruition was for the school to train a racially diverse group of dancers, in which African-American dancers would in fact constitute half of the company. “For the first,” Kirstein wrote to Austin, Balanchine would admit “4 white girls and 4 white boys, about sixteen y[ear]s old and 8 of the same, negros [sic].” This idea evidently arose from the primitivist imagination of Balanchine, who as Kirstein’s letter further elaborates, “thinks the negro part would be amazingly supple … They have so much abandon—and disciplined they would be nonpareil.”

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 115–16.
95 Ibid., 117, emphasis in original.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 116.
Aside from the objectionable premise of this concept—not to mention whether Kirstein even considered the practical challenges that such a plan would face given de facto segregation in the north\(^{98}\)—this ultimately unrealizable idea is further evidence of both Balanchine’s persistent fascination with African-American dancers and the utopian ethos of the nascent enterprise.\(^{99}\)

While Kirstein awaited a reply from Austin, he continued to plan with Balanchine and Romola. During a four-hour afternoon meeting on July 19, Kirstein procured a map of the United States to familiarize Balanchine with various towns, including Hartford, presumably.\(^{100}\) Balanchine was full of ideas of his own, though more focused on choreography and performance than training young dancers. He described excitedly his version of the Richard Strauss ballet *La Légende de Joseph* mounted in Copenhagen, which according to Kirstein evinced “real biblical insight,” and said that in America he wanted to present *Apollon Musagète* “at once.”\(^{101}\) The following day, Balanchine informed Kirstein that he had “received some sort of offer from N.Y. via Paris to teach for 6 weeks with a 6 months option.”\(^{102}\) He would leave for Paris the next day and asked Kirstein to stay in touch since “He’d much rather work in one project.”\(^{103}\) Never one to be deterred by ambitious plans, Austin gave Kirstein tentative approval via a telegram on

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\(^{98}\) Despite the liberal politics of the dance establishment (including Kirstein himself), black dancers faced significant challenges to full involvement in training and performance activities in both ballet and modern dance, due to segregation imposed by studio landlords and theater managers or the reluctance of many white students to take classes alongside African-Americans. See Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 54–6.

\(^{99}\) Balanchine’s interest in black dancers and the “Africanist” influences in his choreography has been the subject of much debate by scholars including Brenda Dixon-Gottschild and Sally Banes and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

\(^{100}\) LK Diaries, July 19, 1933.

\(^{101}\) Ibid.

\(^{102}\) LK Diaries, July 20, 1933.

\(^{103}\) Ibid.
July 26, and by early August had already raised $3,000 of the $6,000 necessary to prove to immigration officials that these foreign ballet specialists would not become “public charges.” 104 On August 8 Austin wired Kirstein with a more definitive green light: “Go Ahead, Iron-Clad Contract Necessary.” The day before, however, Kirstein had received a letter from his close friend Muriel Draper, who had some doubts about their choice of location—“she could see the poor Russians in Hartford, watching Chick Austin’s magic” (Austin was an avid amateur magician)—and that she was as suspicious of “the education museum chi-chi as much as the Broadway commercial chi-chi,” all of which upset Kirstein somewhat since “it was half true.” 105

With his plan taking shape, but with lingering doubts such as Draper had reminded him of, Kirstein apparently began to worry more about its actual execution, and sent Austin a follow-up letter on August 11 from Paris, where he had gone to track down Balanchine again, having not had word from him in a while. Only slightly shorter than his July letter from London, Kirstein in this letter delves into more practical details and rearticulates his overall vision for the enterprise. 106 Even though the necessary funds had been raised and the plan was in motion, Kirstein remains in hard sell mode, stressing the competing offers for Balanchine’s talents (both in Copenhagen and Paris), touting the talents of Jasinsky and Toumanova, and perhaps most important, singing the praises of Balanchine’s “friend and advisor” Vladimir Dimitriev, described as the choreographer’s

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104 Austin to Whom It May Concern, August 9, 1933, Scrapbook of Producing Company.
105 LK Diaries, August 7, 1933.
“regisseur” and “a perfect trainer and teacher” who “manages all his business.”\textsuperscript{107}

Although Dimitriev had not been party to the initial July discussions in London, Kirstein now found it necessary to add Balanchine’s partner to the plan.\textsuperscript{108} Kirstein explained to Austin that they would fulfill two different yet equally important roles in the enterprise:

Primarily Balanchine is a composer. Dimitriev takes the burden of teaching new pupils and making the rest practice. Composition and instruction are 2 full time jobs. If and when the School gets going, Dimitriev is a necessity just as a concertmaster is in a symphony orchestra.

He is also useful in […] other ways.\textsuperscript{109}

In fact, Kirstein saw Balanchine’s role in the enterprise as something novel and unique, and distinct from a traditional ballet master: “He wants to have a class for composition, that is a class for \textit{maître de ballets} [sic] – a thing never before attempted.”\textsuperscript{110} That no great demand existed for such a course of study did not apparently occur to Kirstein or Balanchine, who had initially proposed the idea in one of their July meetings in London; after all, the very premise of the enterprise was that no serious ballet tradition, much less any significant number of ballet choreographers, yet existed in the United States.\textsuperscript{111}

Continuing his pitch, Kirstein reiterates to Austin that they should “emphasize the non-commercial aspects of the venture and always disassociate it from commercial competition of any kind—whether Broadway scene-shifters or concert bureaus—and to

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Vladimir Pavlovich Dimitriev was an opera singer turned impresario who was responsible for organizing the tour of Germany that allowed Balanchine, Tamara Geva, and Alexandra Danilova to emigrate west. Dancer Lidia Ivanova was also to have traveled with the group but was killed in a mysterious boating accident two weeks prior to their departure. See Kendall, \textit{Balanchine and the Lost Muse}, 213–14 and 219–29.
\textsuperscript{109} Lincoln Kirstein to Chick Austin, August 11, 1933. Omitted text illegible.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} LK Diaries, July 19, 1933.
stress the educational side.”

It is thus as a school that the initiative should begin, not as a company performing for the public, a point Kirstein repeats with notable insistence and graphological emphasis. “At first everything should be centered around the foundation of a school,” he notes a third of the way through the letter. He again stresses this point several pages later, in greater detail:

The School first of all to feed the troupe. The dancers would be practicing things in the Ballets from the start. They would learn by doing at once. Only it’s much better to put all the exercise possible on the school. It is the source, training, base and pillar of the whole idea.

To drive home the point about the school completely, Kirstein toward the end of the letter exhorts Austin by name, reiterating the necessity of Dimitriev for the enterprise and the distinct role that Balanchine will play as “composer.” Kirstein’s syntax literally spins out of control, and he omits a definite article in his haste:

[Dimitriev] makes bricks without straw and he can keep [the] school, the all important school, never for a second Dear Chick, forget the school, when Balanchine is devoting himself to purely creative work, as the creation of ballets demands the most intense concentration.

Thus if Balanchine and others would later construe this insistence on a school as his own demand, these sources suggest that this aspect of the enterprise in fact originated in large part as a priority of Kirstein’s. Balanchine’s initial concerns centered on the creation and presentation of ballets; if he expressed interest in pedagogy it was mostly as a teacher of choreography, not of ballet technique.

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112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
Austin heard from Kirstein via cable on August 12 that everything was settled, but that he did not “dare bring Balanchine until you agree.”¹¹⁶ Kirstein himself was set to sail that coming Saturday, August 19 on the S.S. Degrasse, and said that Balanchine and Dimitriev could follow sometime after. In a summary of his August 11 letter, which Austin would have not yet received, Kirstein excitedly but nervously recounted the state of the project: “Rights secured for Derain Berard Tchelitchen [sic] ballets can be presented Hartford by January full of new plans Juilliard Copenhagen Paris bidding or [sic] Balanchine but he wants us alone announce nothing yet dont [sic] get cold feet.”¹¹⁷ Kirstein cabled Austin from his ship on August 26 to report that he would land the coming Tuesday, August 29, and alerted him to a “family meeting please if possible come.”¹¹⁸

Upon landing, Kirstein quickly reconnected with both Austin and his old college friend Edward Warburg, who would become the primary financial benefactor of the American Ballet for the first half decade of its existence. Although Kirstein by no means lacked privilege, Warburg was in a league apart, with access to virtually unlimited financial resources and an unparalleled network of familial, business, and political connections that would prove crucial in the early years of the American Ballet. His father Felix had been born into an already quite prosperous family from Hamburg, but through his subsequent marriage to Frieda Schiff—daughter of self-made immigrant and Wall Street titan Jacob Schiff, at the time second in wealth and influence only to J. P.

¹¹⁶ Lincoln Kirstein to Chick Austin, August 12, 1933, Scrapbook of Producing Company.
¹¹⁷ Ibid.
¹¹⁸ Lincoln Kirstein to Chick Austin, August 26, 1933, Scrapbook of Producing Company.
Morgan—he secured a position for himself and his children at the highest levels of New York’s Jewish elite. In his memoirs, Warburg suggests that his initial involvement in the enterprise was pitched as nothing more than sponsorship of one of the boat tickets, which if true, was a canny ploy on Kirstein’s part, given how deeply Warburg, and his family’s resources, would become invested in the enterprise in the years to come:

During the summer of 1934, Lincoln phoned me one evening at White Plains and asked if he could come out to see me. I was, as always, delighted; his visits never failed to be exciting. Lincoln arrived full of ideas. As we took a walk through the woods, he outlined his latest madness. He had just returned from Paris; he had talked to Balanchine and had persuaded him to come to the United States to attempt to start a ballet school here with American youngsters. The idea was to develop an American ballet company. All he needed was the guarantee of round trip tickets from Paris to New York for Balanchine and his business associate, a Mr. Dimitriev. Lincoln would gladly pay for one. Would I pay for the other?

“I agreed,” Warburg notes drily in closing, “little knowing what I was letting myself in for.”

After his return Kirstein stayed in touch with Balanchine by cable, during which time many elements of the plan they had worked out in Europe began to change, not necessarily at Kirstein’s initiative. On September 16, Balanchine wired Kirstein to say that it would in fact not be necessary to bring Jasinsky and Toumanova, as he would instead find American soloists. (It would later be revealed that Toumanova had returned to de Basil and Jasinsky had joined Lifar’s company.) Instead of star performers, Balanchine proposed bringing another Petersburg émigré, ballet master and

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120 Warburg, As I Recall, Some Memoirs, 53.
121 LK Diaries, September 16, 1933.
122 Gaddis, Magician of the Modern, 212.
former Maryinsky soloist Pierre Vladimirov to aid in the cause—along with his wife, ballerina Felia Doubrovska, also a Maryinsky graduate, who would later join the faculty as well—another indication of his intention to distance himself from the daily grind of ballet instruction.\footnote{LK Diaries, September 16, 1933.} On September 19 Balanchine wired that he and Dimitriev alone would be sailing, having received the $3,000 deposit they had requested to guarantee their passage and initial living expenses.\footnote{LK Diaries, September 19, 1933.}

3. The American Ballet’s False Start in Hartford

After some initial confusion over their visa status, resolved expeditiously by Warburg through the use of his “magic name” as Kirstein put it, Balanchine and Dimitriev disembarked from the Olympic in Manhattan on October 17.\footnote{LK Diaries, October 17, 1933.} The possibility that they might be greeted with any attention by the press was forestalled by the arrival the very same day of another distinguished émigré, Albert Einstein, set to take up a position at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.\footnote{“Ocean Travelers,” \textit{NYT}, October 17, 1933; “Untermyer to Greet Einstein for City,” \textit{NYT}, October 17, 1933; “O’Brien To Play Host To Einstein Due Here Today,” \textit{NYHT}, October 17, 1933.} The press aside, not even all of their own advocates had much time for Balanchine and Dimitriev, with Warburg going off to an unspecified dinner date, leaving Kirstein alone to spirit his Russians around.\footnote{LK Diaries, October 17, 1933. All subsequent info in this paragraph from this diary entry.}

After settling them in on the 34th floor of the Barbizon Hotel on Central Park South, whose expansive views impressed the new arrivals, Kirstein took them for a brief walk around midtown, after which they wasted no time in getting down to brass tacks. Over
dinner at the hotel grill, Kirstein mentioned to Balanchine rumors that he already had offers for work from the Roxy Music Hall as well as Juilliard, but Balanchine “shushed” away the concerns. At a continuation of their discussions later on back at the hotel, Balanchine made clear his goals, which did not include working at the Roxy, even though Kirstein thought it a good idea for him to accept it in order “to see what it would be like.” Balanchine disagreed, saying he intended to work full time at the school, and that he and Dimitriev “don’t want to start small but large.” Creating new work was still a priority, however: “He w[oul]d produce something by April or w[oul]d go back to Paris,” as Kirstein records. At this initial meeting, Kirstein also reports that Dimitriev expressed approval that the school was to be located not in New York but Hartford.

The planned school met with approving press coverage in both Hartford and New York, which provides additional corroboration for the educational and noncommercial concept that initially characterized the organization. The day after Balanchine and Dimitriev’s landing, the Hartford Courant announced the imminent opening of the ballet school, to be operated under the auspices of the Avery Memorial. Given its affiliation, the school “will not compete with commercial theaters” and its purpose is “to build a self subsisting ballet company” that would be able to present performances in three years’ time.128 The same day the Courant published an unsigned editorial praising the new dance initiative, citing it as yet another example of Austin’s foresight as a leader of the museum.129 They approved of the selection of “foreign ballet experts” to lead the enterprise, since this would make possible “early performances of public interest and of

128 “Project Free School for Ballet Here,” HC, October 18, 1933.
129 “Ballet in Hartford,” HC, October 18, 1933.
sound training in classic technique.” At the same time, however, the editorial noted that at some point Americans would need to “add their contribution of national genius, if indeed the school is actually to achieve the high ambitions of its founders.”

On October 19, the paper reported of the arrival in Hartford of the new artistic leadership, quoting Austin as saying that that the sets and costumes for two ballets, Les Songes and Mozartiana—misspelled as Songe and Mozartinia—would be made available to the school.

New York critics echoed these hopes and desires and found the noncommercial status of the enterprise particularly commendable. In a column for Modern Music, composer Marc Blitzstein (a friend of Kirstein’s sister Mina) made no issue of Balanchine’s nationality, declaring him “a prize” and “inevitably the right man to create a ballet out of our rich disorganized stuff.” Blitzstein was also optimistic about the noncommercial goals of the organization, maintaining that, “there is less likelihood now than some years ago that the best pupils of the school will be speedily pumped into the machines of the commercial revues.” In his Sunday column of October 22, the weekend after Balanchine’s arrival, dance critic John Martin similarly expressed unqualified praise for the ballet project, especially the fact that no public performances would be given for the first three years, with the exception of “informal performances and exhibitions in the school and elsewhere.” Although Martin would later criticize the

130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 “Two Arrive Here Today To Set Up School of Ballet,” HC, October 19, 1933.
134 Ibid., 36.
organization for its lack of American leadership, he struck a conciliatory tone in this initial column, arguing that since no bona fide ballet company yet exists in America, “it is obvious that a director must be found elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{136} Martin also expressed approval of the choice of Hartford as a location, not only because of the facilities made available by the Morgan, but also to avoid competition with commercial schools as well as to lessen “the temptation to burst prematurely into performance.”\textsuperscript{137} Kirstein records that he had met with Martin over lunch on October 4 to brief him on the school’s plans, when the critic had predicted they would be “swamped with applicants.”\textsuperscript{138} That concerns over art versus entertainment were indeed on Martin’s mind is confirmed by the impolite exchanges that occurred in another meeting on October 18 between him, Kirstein, and dancer (and Balanchine’s first wife) Tamara Geva, who had inexplicably invited herself along. There was no love lost between the dancer and Martin, whom Kirstein describes as “persistently tactless” in his behavior toward Geva, who herself came across as “a sinister bright bitch.”\textsuperscript{139} Martin accused Geva “of not starving and being an artist instead of being glorified as a Ziegfeld Beauty,” to which she shot back that she hated Uday Shankar, a critical darling of Martin’s, declaring him “too primitive.”\textsuperscript{140}

Despite such initial optimism, in the end, the school would not be founded in Hartford, owing to an array of inauspicious circumstances related to its geographic location, problematic public relations with existing dance schools in the city, but most significantly, the Avery Memorial as a nonprofit institutional host. “That the whole

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{138} LK Diaries, October 4, 1933.  
\textsuperscript{139} LK Diaries, October 18, 1933.  
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
notion of the founding of a ballet school and ballet company in Hartford was mad is self-evident,” Kirstein wrote with assured hindsight in a 1958 essay commemorating Chick Austin’s career. In this account, Kirstein posits a variety of reasons why the venture did not take root in Hartford, even though the initial association with a museum made sense on practical and philosophical grounds. After all, Kirstein surmised, if museums took an active role in preserving and curating set and costume designs associated with the theater, why should they themselves not become involved in the production of the performing arts themselves? In this respect, the Morgan Memorial was perhaps a most congenial institutional environment in which to attempt the integration of a ballet company and school into a museum, given Austin’s expansive interest and commitment to making the performing arts integral to his organization’s mission.

Two explanations for the Hartford failure have received the most attention in accounts of Balanchine’s career and histories of NYCB, neither of which concern the Morgan as an institutional host. Balanchine’s biographies focus on the simplest explanation for the move from Hartford: Balanchine and Dimitriev’s displeasure with the city as a place to live and work. The two Petersburg-raised cosmopolitans, so the story goes, did not appreciate the more modest milieu of Connecticut’s capital city, having spent most of the previous decade in Paris, London, and Monte Carlo. One documented example of this culture shock was Balanchine’s charming request for accommodations in eighteenth-century apartments, which had of course never existed in the city. Kirstein

142 Ibid., 65.
143 The remark about apartments is found in the unpublished memoirs of James T. Soby: “It was rather difficult to explain to [Balanchine] in French that people in Hartford did
echoes this concern in *Thirty Years*, saying that although Balanchine and Dimitriev were by no means interested in returning to Europe, “they had hardly left that continent to immure themselves in Hartford.”144 This later account by Kirstein also cites a second challenge, mentioned in Balanchine’s biographies as well: the vocal opposition of numerous local dance teachers to the founding of a ballet school in Hartford that might compete with their organizations and even worse, poach all of their best students with the lure of free instruction by famous foreigners.145 The same day that the *Courant* announced the arrival of Balanchine and Dimitriev, the paper reported on a meeting of a “score” of dance instructors “to consider the possible effect of the proposed new school on the private teaching of dancing in this city.”146 In an attempt to quell these concerns, Austin took to the press himself several days later, assuring the public that the new school “will be limited to about two dozen pupils and consequently will in no way interfere with activities of local dance teachers.”147

Both of these circumstances were indeed partly to blame for the dissatisfaction of Balanchine and Dimitriev with Hartford and the eventual failure of the plan there. “Fifty professors of Dance voiced their local regret that it w[oul]d be a free school, drive them out of business,” Kirstein recounted in his diary, “and that Americans were not going to be at the head of it, and that their opinion was not asked in the matter.”148 Although Dimitriev in particular was reportedly “disturbed” by this unpleasant welcome, Kirstein

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144 Kirstein, *Thirty Years*, 33.
145 Ibid., 32–33.
146 “Dance Teachers Object to Free School of Ballet,” *HC*, October 19, 1933.
147 “Says Ballet School Won’t Harm Teachers,” *HC*, October 22, 1933.
148 LK Diaries, October 19, 1933.
suggests that the controversy was not as consequential as its press coverage might indicate, and was a storm that could have likely been weathered: “In the papers, if one didn’t know Hartford, the teapot tempest looked formidable.” Paul Cooley, Austin’s assistant at the museum, maintained that the unrest was purposely fomented by the teachers—most notably two Italian sisters, Mary and Carmel Angelo—in order to make headlines and gain new students of their own. ⁴⁴⁹ To call this kerfuffle the “last straw” that led Balanchine and Dimitriev to flee Hartford for New York, as Kirstein does in Thirty Years, is as exaggerated as the Angelo sisters’ predictions of their impending financial ruin.⁴⁵⁰

Although both such causes were no doubt contributing factors for the transfer of the enterprise from Hartford to New York, it was more fundamental organizational concerns that were most decisive in the move, stemming from the divergence of the nonprofit status and institutional goals of the museum and Balanchine and Dimitriev’s ambitions for creative and commercial autonomy. The question of their living quarters and the histrionics of the ballet teachers aside, Balanchine and Dimitriev were underwhelmed by the museum’s facilities, which had just been renovated at great expense with performance in mind. In their first tour of the facilities, the two “were well satisfied with the space for the practice halls,” Kirstein records, but “when we came to the theatre it was a big disappointment”:

There is no height, they c[oul]dn’t use any scenery on it – anywhere else. The floor is too hard for dancing, the whole thing too small. Dimitriev said

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⁴⁴⁹ This claim and further details and context on the controversy are found in Gaddis, Magician of the Modern, 216–17.
⁴⁵⁰ Kirstein, Thirty Years, 32–33.
it might do well for rehearsals or for school performances or for small ballets but they couldn’t get more than 24 people at most on that stage.\textsuperscript{151}

The small dimensions of the museum’s theater were emblematic of the misalignment in institutional priorities of the Russians and Americans. The scale had been an intentional design choice, since as a 299-seat auditorium it would not be subject to Hartford’s building code requirements for official (commercial) theaters.\textsuperscript{152} Its inclusion in the heart of the museum was a point of great pride for Austin, and it was precisely the sort of noncommercial and educational venue that Kirstein had envisioned as the site of their initial lecture-demonstration events. But it was a far cry from the theaters of the European capitals in which Balanchine had worked, or venues available in New York.

From the moment Balanchine had stepped off the boat and over his first months in the United States, his creative ideas had been evidently tending in a direction more suited to the larger aesthetic possibilities and commercial entertainment infrastructure of New York than the more modest bucolic environment of the Avery Memorial. While strolling the streets their first night in New York, Kirstein recalls that Balanchine took note of a row of mannequins dressed as movie stars in a shoe store window and “said he wanted to do a film using masks of all the stars at once: imitate their voices, etc.,”\textsuperscript{153} and the following day mused about a “modern Sylphides with cellophane trees.”\textsuperscript{154} Although no practical steps had been taken toward the previously articulated goal of a racially diverse company, black dancers continued to occupy Balanchine’s imagination. As Kirstein records in his diary in November 1933, Balanchine thought, “it w[oul]d be fine to do a

\textsuperscript{151}LK Diaries, October 19, 1933.
\textsuperscript{152}Gaddis, \emph{Magician of the Modern}, 177.
\textsuperscript{153}LK Diaries, October 17, 1933.
\textsuperscript{154}LK Diaries, October 18, 1933.
classical ballet with negresses in tutus of gold and silver pailletes and white bodices.”\textsuperscript{155}

Although such an idea would in and of itself not have been unwelcome in Hartford given the progressive decision to employ an all-black chorus for the forthcoming \textit{Four Saints in Three Acts}, the underlying concept is clearly more in keeping with the Ziegfeld Follies or Harlem nightclubs than Austin’s high modernism. And indeed, Balanchine’s flights of racial fantasies would continue to tend in a different direction from those of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein. In a January 1934 interview with critic Arnold Haskell, Balanchine expressed his great interest in the aesthetic potential of dance on film, less feasible in Hartford than in New York, where the film industry still had a significant presence.\textsuperscript{156}

Although the degree of Balanchine’s actual commitment to such projects could be debated, accounts by Kirstein, both at the time of Balanchine’s arrival and in later decades, confirm that the question of the organization’s nonprofit versus commercial status was if not the only cause then at the very least a precipitating event in the Hartford plan’s collapse. Writing later, Kirstein maintained that he went to Austin because although Balanchine was famous, he was “stateless and moneyless” and needed to be brought to the U.S. under the auspices of more than a performance-driven initiative:

\begin{quote}
A legal instrument bearing some resemblance to a legal entity for a chartered school had somehow to be produced to satisfy our immigration service. It had to be tax-exempt and protected by trustees. It had to be done without the principal party to the whole thing, who was Balanchine, who wasn’t here, and who couldn’t get here without it.\textsuperscript{157}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{155} LK Diaries, November 7, 1933.
\textsuperscript{156} Arnold Haskell, \textit{Balletomania, Then and Now} (New York: Knopf, 1977), 98.
\textsuperscript{157} Kirstein, “The Ballet in Hartford,” 66.
Austin’s interest in bringing performance to his institution aside, an affiliation with an established museum such as the Morgan Memorial was the path of least resistance from a bureaucratic standpoint for Kirstein’s purposes. In this same later recollection, Kirstein writes that Balanchine “flatly refused to have anything to do with a plan which involved non-profits.” America was a wealthy country, and indeed, the Hartford museum bore the name of one of its richest citizens, J. P. Morgan, and thus “was it not proper that an artist be allowed more than a mere pittance?” Kirstein makes haste to point out that Balanchine was not out to enrich himself personally. Rather, his financial concerns centered on having the most expansive resources to create art. “Balanchine is famous for being the poorest great artist of his time,” Kirstein explained, and “it was not the money that bothered him even then; it was prestige and the potential of the provinces,” which could not provide the resources to realize the sort of projects (noted above) that he had been contemplating since his arrival.

Kirstein’s diaries corroborate this later characterization of the nonprofit mission of the Morgan as the primary problem with the Hartford plan. The crux of the matter was in fact reached very quickly, on Balanchine and Dimitriev’s second day in the city. At an after-dinner conference with Austin and Kirstein it became clear that the problems ran deeper than the protests of the dance teachers or Hartford’s modest civic environs. In the course of the discussion, a corporation was proposed, in which Balanchine and Dimitriev would be partners and own shares. Kirstein does not say who first raised such an idea, but it was evidently either Balanchine or Dimitriev, since he notes emphatically that the

158 Ibid., 67.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
161 LK Diaries, October 20, 1933.
“idea of a commercial venture being under the Morgan Memorial filled both Chick and me with utmost horror. Shares. My God! What were we getting in for.”162 Austin was particularly taken aback by the proposal, saying that “the whole idea had changed” and that the Russians had “delusions of commercial grandeur.”163

Aside from Kirstein’s recollections, this abrupt change in the institutional mission and structure of the enterprise was reported in other sources both public and private. On October 30 the Courant reported that Balanchine and Dimitriev “have returned to New York, where, it is understood, they will seek to found a school along lines which did not meet with Mr. Austin’s approval.”164 A report in the Hartford Times goes even farther and characterizes the collapse of the plan as an example of Austin’s principled leadership: “The flat refusal of A. Everett Austin, Jr. […] to commercialize the proposed American ballet which was to have been established in Hartford, has resulted in a complete cancellation of the arrangements.”165 Austin’s biographer Eugene Gaddis maintains that these talking points were intended to help the director save face following the less than two-week-long experiment in bringing ballet to Hartford, and the same could be alleged for Kirstein’s later recollections, even though his diary account makes a strong case for institutional concerns as not an invented cover for but rather an actual cause.

A few days before these articles had appeared in the press, however, the institutional drift of the project had somehow been reported to architect Philip Johnson, who had been a $500 donor to the project, a gift that he had regarded as something of a

162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 “Plans Abandoned Here for American Ballet,” HC, October 30, 1933.
financial stretch. “In spite of the fact that I am paying too much,” Johnson had written to Austin in late September, “I am very glad to if it will help the ballet.”  

A month later Johnson was taken aback by the abrupt change in plans, which aside from the involvement of Balanchine contradicted almost to the letter the agenda laid out by Kirstein during the summer:

When you came to me with Lincoln’s cable […] I was very happy to join a non-profit making venture to further the interests of ballet in this country. […] Concerning the new upset I know nothing at all, only that the School is to be founded in New York, is to be a paying venture and is to attempt to route a ballet to regular theatres throughout the country. This is not at all what I understood on our first conversation or Lincoln’s word from Europe, and I regret very much that I will be unable to contribute financially in any way to the new plan.  

Johnson reiterated his support for anything Austin might undertake in Hartford, but regarding the reconfigured American Ballet, he did not personally believe that in its new form “it is much more worthy of support than others which already exist in this City.”  

It would now be up to the erstwhile non-profit American Ballet to make its way in the already crowded commercial marketplace of dance performance and instruction in New York City.

4. Postscript and Prologue: A New Beginning in New York

If Diaghilev had been canny enough to rebrand Georges Balanchivadze as Georges Balanchine, the inexperienced Kirstein and Warburg did not think it necessary to Americanize his first name or mitigate the Parisian flair of his credentials in early

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166 Philip Johnson to Chick Austin, September 28, 1933, facsimile located in Scrapbook of Producing Company.
167 Philip Johnson to Chick Austin, October 26, 1933, facsimile located in Scrapbook of Producing Company.
168 Ibid.
publicity for the American Ballet’s school. Having not heeded the trouble that the Hartford press had had with the exotic titles of *Les Songes* and *Mozartiana*, newspaper advertisements for the school followed Francophile convention to announce the artistic leadership of not George but “Georges Balanchine, Maitre de ballet for *Les Ballets Russes de Sergei Diaghilev, the Monte Carlo Ballet Russe, and Les Ballets 1933*,” copy that aside from proper nouns and a number included only three words of plain English: “for,” “the,” and “and.”

Although one early ad announced classes would begin at the start of December, the opening date was pushed back to December 11 in a second notice, a date also mentioned in a short item in the same day’s paper.

John Martin announced the opening of the school, although not necessarily the first day of classes, as December 18 in his column of Sunday, December 17. Auditions were held on an ongoing basis, and although numbers were initially small, students kept “trickling in every day” and by December 28 Kirstein noted that, “things look nearly ready.” The first day of classes, according to Kirstein’s diaries, took place December 29, with 22 students in attendance. (By contrast, *Thirty Years* posits January 1934 as the opening of the school, and to this day, the School of American Ballet claims the more poetic January 2, 1934—as after the start of the New Year—as its first day of classes.)

Contrary to the decision articulated only two months before that no performances would be given for three years, notices of the opening of the school in New York did not

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172 LK Diaries, December 27, 28, 1933.
173 LK Diaries, December 29, 1933.
174 Kirstein, *Thirty Years*, 33.
attribute a purely pedagogical agenda to the organization. An article in the *Herald-Tribune* notes that three ballets would be presented “at a local theater” in March of the coming year,\(^{176}\) and John Martin’s column of December 17 similarly reported that, “the company when sufficiently developed will give its first program of three ballets at a Broadway theatre in March.”\(^{177}\) Whether by design or by grace, the New York press had not covered the collapse of the Hartford plan, with the only notable mention of the matter occurring in the same column in which Martin announced the new opening of the school. The critic delivered the news in the most generous and benign terms possible: “Originally planned to function from Hartford as a centre, the organization found it necessary to move to New York, where it would be more closely in touch with dance activities.”\(^{178}\) As was the case with the opening date of the school, these heralded plans for performance would be subject to numerous delays, and would ultimately take place not in March but in June of the following year, and even then would amount to only a private invitation-only event outside the city at the estate of Warburg’s parents. And while the enterprise was regrouping, the same rivals that Balanchine had encountered over the summer had followed him across the Atlantic to New York, again with many of his ballets in their repertories. In November 1933, Serge Lifar made his debut performances in the United States, including *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune, La Spectre de la Rose,* and Balanchine’s *La Chatte.*\(^{179}\) More consequential, the de Basil company made its first American appearance in December 1933 in New York, after which they toured the country for four months with

\(^{176}\) “School of American Ballet Opens Dec. 11,” *NYHT,* December 3, 1933.

\(^{177}\) John Martin, “The Dance: Massine Again,” *NYT,* December 17, 1933.

\(^{178}\) Ibid.

an extensive repertoire, which, as in Paris and London, included Balanchine’s *Cotillon* and *La Concurrence*. These outside rivals, and other internal dynamics, would put even more pressure on the nascent organization to present their own performances to the public, whether they were ready or not.

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Chapter 2

Balanchine’s First American Ballets, 1934

“In the absence of settings of the kind that the church, the court, and the state have traditionally provided in Europe,” Richard Crawford has written, “music in the United States has depended chiefly on the success musicians have had in finding customers and serving their needs.”¹ Like musicians and composers, dancers and choreographers in America have faced similar challenges, and it is thus not surprising that both have identified the same means of monetizing their talents, as Crawford explains, “by discovering a musical service or artifact for which demand is large, pricing it within many customers’ reach, and keeping control over the surplus income that results.”² This service with universal appeal and demand is not performing, but rather teaching. Crawford identifies teaching as “the American musical occupation,” insofar as it has provided a professional context for artists to sustain themselves both literally and figuratively, creating an institutional base from which they can make a living and in turn pursue other professional opportunities.³ This fact of life for the artist in America was nowhere more in evidence during the economic downturn of the 1930s, which had only increased the pressure on workers of all types, not the least of whom were creative artists.

As Virgil Thomson bluntly summarized in The State of Music in 1939: “It is not necessary here to go into the incomes of musical executants. They have engagements or

² Ibid., 55.
³ Ibid.
they don’t. If they don’t they take pupils. If they can’t get pupils they starve.” Happily, the New Deal had provided at least some semblance of a safety net for the un- or underemployed artist, as Thomson noted in closing that, “If they get tired of starving they can go on relief.”

In similar terms, teaching has been equally crucial for the sustenance of choreographers and dancers in the United States. By the time the School of American Ballet was up and running in New York in early 1934 this pedagogical strategy had already been adopted by a host of individuals, with the opportunities for instruction—and consequent competition for students—uniquely abundant in New York City. Although numerous dancing masters had been active in the U.S. since the 1830s, the runaway success of the proto-musical The Black Crook (1866)—starring the La Scala-trained ballerina Maria Bonfanti and a large chorus of alluring female dancers—created interest in the art form and a new market for ballet entertainment and training. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the barnstorming tours of Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Mordkin and Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes created a more sustained nationwide interest in ballet, in particular Russian ballet, in venues ranging from the Metropolitan opera to the variety stage. The subsequent rise of “prologs”—elaborate dance shows that preceded movies—was an additional boon for ballet instruction, as foreign-born performers were not in sufficient supply to staff these productions; dancers interested in careers on

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5 On The Black Crook and its impact on ballet performance and pedagogy in the U.S., see Barbara Barker, Ballet or Ballyhoo: The American Careers of Maria Bonfanti, Rita Sangalli, and Giuseppina Morlacchi (New York: Dance Horizons, 1984).
Broadway or in vaudeville, as well as the emerging film industry, similarly flocked to various schools for crash courses in the tricks and techniques necessary to earn a living dancing on the popular stage. Although many such schools were less than scrupulous in their pedagogy, choreographers such as Albertina Rasch took their mission quite seriously, and saw the entertainment industry as a place in which a genuine American form of ballet might be created. During this the same period, the modern dance techniques of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, and the Delsarte movement attracted hosts of students to dance studios, some interested in professional careers and others interested in improving their moral or physical well-being. By the 1930s when Balanchine and Kirstein’s enterprise began, modern dance had grown even more in influence and popularity, with New York as its undisputed hub, where students could choose from schools run by among others Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Helen Tamiris, and Hanya Holm (head of the American branch of the school of Mary Wigman).

Despite these abundant opportunities for instruction and performance, however, few students of any sort of dance were able to undertake the rigorous, full-time

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7 For a survey of the various opportunities for training and performance for American dancers at this time, with a particular focus on New York, see Jessica Zeller, “Shapes of American Ballet: Classical Traditions, Teachers, and Training in New York City, 1909–1934” (PhD Diss., The Ohio State University, 2011), 20–88.
9 On the “early moderns” and the Delsarte movement in America, see Kendall, Where She Danced; Soares, Louis Horst: Musician in a Dancer’s World.
10 Foulkes, Modern Bodies; Graff, Stepping Left; Franko, The Work of Dance; and Susan Manning, Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
instruction that had been available to Balanchine and his fellow émigrés in Europe and
Russia. The one notable exception in the realm of ballet was the training available at
Metropolitan Opera’s ballet school, which had been in operation since 1909 and offered
girls a strict training in Italian-style ballet in exchange for several years of work at the
opera afterward.\footnote{On the early history of the Metropolitan Opera Ballet school and its first ballet
mistresses, Malvina Cavallazi and Rosina Galli, see Zeller, “Shapes of American Ballet,”
155–76 and George Dorris, “The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, Fresh Starts: Rosina Galli
“The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, Fresh Starts: The Influence of the Ballets Russes, 1917–
1919,” \textit{Dance Chronicle} 35, No. 3 (2012), 281–314.} Whatever their chosen path of study, however, students were often
willing and eager to curtail their training as soon as a professional opportunity arose,
much to the dismay of their teachers. It was ballet instruction untouched by these
pressures of the marketplace that the American Ballet enterprise had been conceived of to
provide, and which had hitherto been available in America only at the Met. Despite
Kirstein’s lofty intentions, however—codified in the original plan to locate the institution
in the noncommercial environs of the Morgan museum—the American Ballet quickly
found itself competing in the commercialized field from which it had hoped to exempt
itself and its students.

This chapter recounts the history of the first year of the school and performing
unit of the American Ballet to show how the institution focused on not just pedagogy but
also performance from its earliest days. The first section shows how contrary to
Kirstein’s previously articulated goals of focusing exclusively on training for the first
years of the enterprise, Balanchine, along with Warburg and Dimitriev, made the
preparation and performance of ballets a priority from very early on. In the process, the
school and adjunct company of the American Ballet became not just a meeting place for
the ever-growing community of Russian émigré dancers and musicians looking to make a living off of their unique talents and training in their new home, but also a platform for native-born composers George Antheil and Kay Swift. Although the enterprise did not lack for students, many of whom had already received extensive training at the ballet schools already operating in the U.S., the American Ballet made a somewhat shaky impression in its first two performance engagements in 1934, first at a semi-private outdoor event in June and subsequently at a series of performances in Hartford in December, discussed in sections two and three.

As will become clear in the discussion that follows, over the course of its first year of operations, the American Ballet racked up more setbacks than triumphs. For one, Balanchine’s ongoing health problems made the future of the organization seem less than assured. And despite the good intentions of the well-heeled organizers, the American Ballet’s performance engagements were geared mostly toward an elite audience of Kirstein and Warburg’s peers, who like them had been largely untouched by the financial downturn. Indeed, the five ballets that comprised the company’s early repertoire were neither obviously American nor especially calculated for mass appeal, for the most part comprising re-stagings of Balanchine’s work for Les Ballets 1933. Complicating our understanding of this early repertoire is the fact that only one ballet from this first year of the American Ballet has survived to the present day, Serenade, Balanchine’s so-called “first ballet in America.” Serenade is today one of Balanchine’s most-performed and best loved works and has come to serve as a mythical point of origin for his American career, a status that has caused it to overshadow its now-lost repertorial siblings in biographies and histories of NYCB. As the following discussion will show, however, during the
American Ballet’s first year, *Serenade* was by no means the most significant of the company’s offerings, and its eventual canonical status, along with the future of the American Ballet and Balanchine’s career as a choreographer, was anything but a certainty.

1. Pedagogy, Performance, and the Beginnings of the American Ballet

Despite the initial plans to focus on training and not performance for the first three years of the existence of the school, Balanchine did not wait long to begin setting some of his existing work on his new students, many of whom arrived at the school with considerable ballet training behind them already. Although the teaching of excerpts and even full works to dancers who will not immediately (if ever) perform them publicly is a time-honored feature of ballet instruction, Balanchine by no means regarded these efforts as merely academic. Three weeks after the school opened, Kirstein reports of a “savage fight” between Balanchine and Dimitriev, because the choreographer focused only on “the Philadelphia girls whom he considers his own”—dancers from the well-established Philadelphia school run by Catherine and Dorothie Littlefield, several of who had been recruited to study at the school.\(^{12}\) Balanchine was especially attentive to these experienced dancers—including rising star Holly Howard and Dorothie Littlefield herself—as he was evidently “desperate ab[ou]t not doing ballets this y[ea]r, the first time in ten y[ea]rs he w[oul]d be showing nothing in the spring.”\(^{13}\) That his and Kirstein’s visions for the enterprise had been misaligned from the start was now becoming clearer. Balanchine evidently “had not fully perceived the idea this was a school, only a school

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\(^{12}\) LK Diaries, January 22, 1934.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
and no company.”\textsuperscript{14} That his erstwhile colleagues and competitors were coming to his new home to perform for the public no doubt added to his frustration.

Even with no public performances on the horizon, Kirstein’s diaries record the rehearsal of a named ballet just a week after the school opened. The work was \textit{Errante}, not to be performed by the company for well over a year as part of its official New York debut in March 1935 (discussed in Chapter 3). It was a momentous moment, at least for Kirstein, who reports that it all “seemed to go amazingly quickly. The room though big seemed full of kids....As we started, full conscious of the hour’s significance, I felt as if there sh[oul]d have been a salute of 21 guns.”\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Errante} is not mentioned again in Kirstein’s diary until the middle of March, however, and in the meantime, Balanchine turned to two other ballets that he had created for Les Ballets 1933, \textit{Mozartiana} (to Tchaikovsky’s Orchestral Suite No. 4, Op. 61, “Mozartiana”) and \textit{Les Songes} (“Dreams,” to a specially commissioned score by Darius Milhaud). Whether to alleviate his despair at not creating new work, to accommodate the character and talents of his new dancers, or some combination of both, Balanchine made numerous changes and additions to these two ballets in the coming months.

The first rehearsal of \textit{Mozartiana} was recorded by Kirstein as January 18, and in the following weeks the ballet was not just set on the dancers but modified and added to.\textsuperscript{16} Balanchine first created new choreography for the final “Ave Verum” movement (Tchaikovsky’s wordless setting of Mozart’s motet), with the thirteen-year-old Marie-Jeanne Pelus “on her points—a living Maypole between 4 other girls who danced in bare

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} LK Diaries, January 6, 1934.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} LK Diaries, January 18, 1934.
\end{itemize}
feet,” an arrangement echoed in a later version of the ballet, in which four small girls frame an adult ballerina.\footnote{LK Diaries, January 22, 1934.} For the New York City Ballet’s 1981 Tchaikovsky Festival Balanchine created a new \textit{Mozartiana}, originally starring Suzanne Farrell and still in repertory, but never claimed that it bore any substantial resemblance to the 1930s versions.\footnote{See \textit{Balanchine Catalogue}, 282–3.} In the following weeks Balanchine continued creating new “very lovely” choreography for the ballet, and reworked the “Gigue” movement, “now arranged for 2 boys and 1 girl (as in Paris),” which Kirstein declared “delicious and logical.”\footnote{LK Diaries, January 23, 25, 1934.} By early February they had worked to the end of the ballet, which looked “brilliant and close to the music.”\footnote{LK Diaries, February 3, 5, 1934.} A week later, however, the ballet was “going raggedly, on account of a lot of new people being put into the parts but the changes vary things.”\footnote{LK Diaries, February 10, 1934.} These cast changes were not necessarily intentional, as later in February Kirstein noted that Balanchine was “depressed at rehearsal that people don’t show up, or get sick, or leave,”\footnote{LK Diaries, February 21, 1934.} a far cry from the regimented atmosphere in which the choreographer had been trained and that the idealistic organizers had first imagined for the enterprise.

Around this same time, Kirstein and Dimitriev conspired to plant the idea in Balanchine’s mind to “enlarge \textit{Mozartiana} for more dancers, and diminish the solo parts since we have no solo dancers,” a suggestion that he evidently took, since only days later he began enlarging the minuet movement of the ballet and the whole work was “getting amplified and improved.”\footnote{LK Diaries, February 22, 24, 1934.} Rehearsals of the ballet would continue into March.\footnote{LK Diaries, February 22, 24, 1934.}
Although the American Ballet would not tout the ballet as a premiere in its first performances, these observations suggest that if it was not remade entirely, then at the very least large sections were significantly reworked from its previous European versions.\(^\text{25}\) Gisella Caccialanza, goddaughter and protégée of the legendary Italian pedagogue Enrico Cecchetti and an early soloist for the company, recalled that the ballet was “very classical, not so different from his classical steps today.”\(^\text{26}\) The Brooklyn-born Ruthanna Boris, who had received her first training at the Metropolitan Opera school before joining the American Ballet, remembered it as “all very technically difficult and nice—a lovely score.”\(^\text{27}\) Boris said that parts of the *Emeralds* section of *Jewels* (1967) reminded her of the now lost choreography: “lots of marvelous arms and beautiful pictures forming, a very delicate thing.”\(^\text{28}\)

While *Mozartiana* was in rehearsal, discussions began about reviving *Les Songes*—or as it would be known in its new American incarnation, *Dreams*—despite the lack of enthusiasm that had attended the work the previous summer. Although the décor and elaborate costumes for the ballet by André Derain had been brought over by Balanchine and Dimitriev, Milhaud’s score was not used for the new production, according to Kirstein and others because it was not available for performance.\(^\text{29}\)

\(^{24}\) LK Diaries, March 3, 10, 29, 1934.

\(^{25}\) The *Balanchine Catalogue* notes only two official revisions to *Mozartiana* while it was in the repertory of the American Ballet, dating from 1935: “Sections originally danced by [Tamara] Toumanova and [Roman] Jasinsky differently apportioned, with single pas de deux for leading couple; pas de six in “Theme and Variations” danced by six women (three in men’s costumes).”

\(^{26}\) Quoted in Reynolds, *Repertory in Review*, 44.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) *Les Songes* is not discussed in Milhaud’s autobiography *Notes Without Music*, and the only mention of Balanchine is in relation to a ballet for which Milhaud did not write the
According to one account by Balanchine this was due to the fact that Milhaud could not be contacted, a dubious claim given the composer’s close working relationship with his publishers, his diligence as a correspondent, and his general eagerness to have his work performed in the United States at this time. Balanchine or Kirstein could have had recourse to a number of contacts in Paris—Thomson or Tchelitchev, to name only two—in order to reach Milhaud personally, and the score had been published by Salabert the year of its premiere.

The more likely explanation for the abandonment of Milhaud’s score for *Dreams* is that either Kirstein or Balanchine or both did not especially care for the music and instead simply wanted something new. For the new score they would approach “bad boy” composer George Antheil, who had been introduced to Balanchine and Kirstein by Russian-born dancer Lisa Parnova in January. Antheil soon became a frequent visitor to the school—his apartment was just around the corner—and was recruited for several projects, both realized and unrealized, during the American Ballet’s first two years.

Able to converse in French, Antheil and Balanchine developed a close personal bond,

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30 Quoted in Reynolds, *Repertory in Review*, 42. Per the Balanchine Catalogue, Milhaud’s score for *Les Songes* “could not be obtained for performance in America.”

31 Milhaud maintained very close relationships with his publishers and in the early 1930s was especially eager for the income that would result from performances of his works, especially his operas, in the United States. On Milhaud’s business correspondence and general attitudes regarding the relationship between art and finance, see Louis K. Epstein, “Toward a Theory of Patronage: Funding for Music Composition in France, 1918–1939,” (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2013), 260–85.


34 Ibid., 261–5.
sharing a rebellious modernist sensibility and a more modest social status than the wealthy Kirstein and Warburg. In February Balanchine had eagerly followed the development of Antheil’s opera Helen Retires (based on John Erskine’s novel The Private Life of Helen of Troy) attending rehearsals and listening to the score on the piano at the composer’s apartment.

On February 22, a week before the Helen Retires premiere, Kirstein discussed the possible revival of Dreams over lunch with Balanchine and Dimitriev, and they decided to offer the project to Antheil. The next day they discussed ideas for the ballet with Antheil himself, who “was delighted to do it, and we to have him,” and the afternoon of March 2 the composer came for a more official conference about the new project, at which Dimitriev made sure Kirstein informed him that, “he would get nothing for his work but author’s rights.” With the help of dancers Charles Laskey and Kathryn Mullowny, Balanchine demonstrated several parts of the ballet and noted how long each section should be. Antheil agreed to work for no fee and was “very pleased and excited about the subject” and got right to work. Only five days later at a dinner gathering Antheil played several “charming and danceable” excerpts of his work so far, and everyone was “overjoyed” by the preview.

The recruitment of Antheil in lieu of Milhaud might be seen as a way of giving the organization’s repertory a modicum of American credibility. But the composer’s own

35 Ibid., 262, 264.
36 LK Diaries, February 1, 14, 15.
37 LK Diaries, February 22, 1934.
38 LK Diaries, February 23, 1934.
39 LK Diaries, March 2, 1934.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 LK Diaries, March 7, 1934.
recollections suggest the exact opposite result. Despite the company’s name, Antheil in his memoirs characterized the American Ballet’s aesthetics as “pure Paris à la Russe” and that far from being eager for distinctively American music, Balanchine “was looking for an American ballet sufficiently Parisian!” The choreographer found what he was looking for in Antheil, to the composer’s subsequent regret:

I regret to say that he found exactly the combination of Americanness and Parisianness he wished in me. He had attended the premiere of Helen Retires, liked it (he was probably the only one), and on the strength of that commissioned me to write him a ballet. I did. It was called Dreams and had a décor and book by Derain, explained by Balanchine in gorgeous Balanchinesque choreography.  

“What was wrong,” Antheil asked of himself later, “that of all the American composers I was the only one to fit in with his ideals?” Antheil’s score for Dreams and his other work for Balanchine (as an arranger for Serenade and Transcendence, discussed below and in the following chapter) were thus “pivotal” in his development, but only insofar as the projects stiffened his resolve not to be pigeonholed as a “European” composer and leave New York for fresher fields.

With Antheil thus on deck to compose a “sufficiently Parisian” replacement score for Dreams, Balanchine in mid-March would turn his attention to the first wholly new ballet he would create in the U.S., Serenade. Ruthanna Boris recalled in her memoirs that Balanchine began the ballet several months after classes and rehearsals were underway and describes an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation on the part of the dancers.

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44 Ibid., 277.
45 Ibid.
46 Ruthanna Boris, “Serenade” in Robert Gottlieb, Reading Dance, 1063, 1066. Boris recalls incorrectly that the ballet was begun “in late 1933,” which is inconsistent with
In an interview given later in life, dancer Annabelle Lyon, unlike Boris, does not recall the start of *Serenade* as a particularly special event: “I don’t know whether *Serenade* was the first ballet he did for us or a ballet called *Reminiscence;*” the latter not begun until 1935.47 (Only when reminded by her interlocutor that “legend” holds that *Serenade* was the first does Lyon aver that, “It could be. It could very well be. So we started out with *Serenade.*”48) Kirstein’s diary reports March 14 as the first day of rehearsal for *Serenade,* and that it was a moment of some import at least for Balanchine, who “said his head was a blank and asked me to pray for him.”49 Balanchine would later maintain that part of his creative process was a spiritual communion with the composers whose music he used, in particular Tchaikovsky and, after his death, Stravinsky:

> Tchaikovsky is always with us. I don’t want to talk about it; I’m afraid that I’ll be misunderstood. Maybe it’s not right to talk about it. But it’s true. In everything that I did to Tchaikovsky’s music, I sensed his help. It wasn’t real conversation. But when I was working and saw that something was coming of it, I felt that it was Tchaikovsky who had helped me. Or else he would say don’t! […] When I was doing *Serenade,* Tchaikovsky encouraged me. Almost the whole *Serenade* is done with his help. I feel that way about Stravinsky, too. When we were preparing the Stravinsky festival [1972], he was with us.50

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47 Annabelle Lyon Interview, 1979, conducted by Elizabeth Kendall, MGZMT 3-1861 (transcript), JRDD–NYPL, 68, hereafter “Annabelle Lyon Interview.”
48 Ibid.
49 LK Diaries, March 14, 1934.
50 Solomon Volkov, *Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky: Interviews with George Balanchine.* Trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985). 35. Although Solomon Volkov’s writings on other subjects, most notably the life of Dmitri Shostakovich, have now been revealed to have been based on embellished or falsified sources, these interviews are regarded as a reasonably reliable guide to Balanchine’s views on Tchaikovsky and other subjects. Their contents and tone are consistent with statements made by Balanchine in other similar interview contexts.
Like Kirstein’s recollection of a prayer request, Boris’s memories of the ballet also allude to a focused and somewhat spiritual frame of mind on the part of Balanchine, who at one point “appeared to be having a conversation with himself; his lips were moving but no sound came out.”

Kirstein noted at the time how Balanchine took great care in arranging the dancers for the start of the ballet, and that there was indeed something special about the opening of Serenade from this very first rehearsal:

He lined everyone up according to their heights and commenced slowly to compose a hymn to ward off sin. He tried two dancers breaking the composition, first in toe-shoes, then without; without one. The gestures of the arms and hands already seemed to me to have Balanchine’s creative quality.

Boris provides greater detail on this initial process of arranging the dancers mentioned by Kirstein, noting how Balanchine brought each dancer out one by one “in the manner of a cavalier”:

He walked the distance between the center of the studio and the center of the watching bench but did not seat himself; he looked all around again, from one of us to the next, from bar to bar; then, striding purposefully, he walked over to the bar on studio right, lifted Kathryn Mullowny’s arm off the bar, put it through his own arm, walked her to the direct center of the studio, turned her to face the mirror, disengaged her arm, and returned to stand at the watching bench.

After all the dancers had been placed, they found themselves in an asymmetrical arrangement later described as an “orange grove” formation by Balanchine, according to legend made necessary by the uneven number of dancers (seventeen) who were present in class when it was started. That this arrangement was wholly the result of happenstance is

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52 LK Diaries, March 14, 1934.
open to some debate. For one, choreographing the piece for sixteen dancers, and thus leaving a dancer in reserve as an understudy, would have itself been an eminently practical consideration, and very soon after the ballet’s iconic opening, one dancer discreetly slips off stage so that the remaining sixteen dancers can arrange themselves in equally proportioned groups of four. What is more, asymmetrical arrangements of dancers had by this point become a hallmark of the “symphonic ballets” of Léonide Massine (discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3). Balanchine also evidently used Serenade as a platform to experiment with the underlying elements of technique, as Kirstein’s observations above indicate: with one or two dancers “breaking the structure,” a few dancers off pointe, and the intriguing experiment of having a dancer wear only a single toe shoe.

Nancy Reynolds has written that although “some of Balanchine’s early dancers were excellent technicians,” many lacked stage experience “either because they were very young, or because few jobs were available” and Serenade was thus “a ballet to train an ensemble.”54 This functional quality, by which Serenade was conceived of to teach purportedly inexperienced dancers “how to be on the stage,” as Balanchine would describe the origins of the work in later interviews, has become deeply embedded in the ethos and mythos of the ballet. It is important to remember, however, that it was not necessarily inexperience that was the primary challenge facing the corps of the American Ballet; rather, the greater obstacle was the disparity of the styles in which its newly recruited dancers had been trained. Lyon, who had been a student of Fokine’s, recalled of these early days of the school that, “it must have been very difficult for [Balanchine] to

54 Reynolds, Repertory in Review, 36.
work with the group of dancers that he was presented with, and very discouraging too.\textsuperscript{55} This was not because of the dancers’ complete lack of training or experience, however, but rather because they all “came from different schools so there was a great variety of styles.”\textsuperscript{56} As noted already, a significant number of dancers came from the Littlefields’ school, and others had studied with teachers including Mikhail Mordkin, Adolph Bolm, and Enrico Cecchetti.\textsuperscript{57} We might thus better understand the functional origins of \textit{Serenade} as a means not to break in raw talent, as has been stressed in many accounts of the origins of the ballet, but rather to homogenize a disparate group of dancers, a quality for which the ballet is indeed still prized today.

If \textit{Serenade} was Balanchine’s first new ballet in America, it was by no means his first choreographic encounter with its score, Tchaikovsky’s \textit{Serenade for Strings}, Op. 48. Tchaikovksy’s \textit{Serenade} is one of several pieces identified by Richard Taruskin as having been unjustly confined to “marginal” status by a cadre of musicologists who asserted that the piece—along with another score from the American Ballet’s early repertoire, \textit{Mozartiana}, set to the Orchestral Suite No. 4—was too exemplary of Silver Age imperial nostalgia to be considered “typical” Tchaikovsky.\textsuperscript{58} But far from marginal, the \textit{Serenade} was very much a known quantity for Balanchine and his colleagues, owing to his experience dancing to the music in Fokine’s ballet \textit{Eros}, in which School of American

\textsuperscript{55} Annabelle Lyon Interview, 59.
\textsuperscript{56} Annabelle Lyon Interview, 59.
\textsuperscript{57} Sowell, \textit{The Christensen Brothers}, 105–6.
Ballet instructor Pierre Vladimirov had originated one of the lead roles.\textsuperscript{59} Balanchine professed not to have cared for Fokine’s version, as he recalled later in life:

Fokine did Tchaikovsky’s Serenade for strings, he called it Eros. I didn’t like it very much, so I did Serenade my own way. Maybe tomorrow someone will decide that my Serenade isn’t very interesting after all and will do it his way. If the public likes it, then let his Serenade run.\textsuperscript{60}

At least one resonance exists between Serenade and Eros, however, specifically the “angel” tableau of the final movement, which had a more literalized image (complete with actual costumes) in Fokine’s version.

Musically speaking, Serenade in its earliest incarnations in the 1930s had a much different profile from its current form, omitting the final up-tempo “Tema Russo,” closing instead with the third movement, the adagio “Elegy.” (Balanchine added the “Tema Russo” to the ballet in the 1940s, although he would interpolate it between Tchaikovsky’s second and third movements, leaving the “Elegy” as the closing scene.) Balanchine is not definitively on record as to why this movement was initially omitted and Kirstein’s diary is silent regarding the issue, but several practical hypotheses come to mind. By eliminating the most obviously “Russian” movement of the piece, the American Ballet could be seen as being more true to its mission and name, or at least not invite obvious criticism.\textsuperscript{61} The movement does, in fact, use material from two folk songs collected by Balakirev, so such a concern would not have been entirely baseless.\textsuperscript{62}

Another more practical explanation is that the fastest movement of the piece may have been more trouble than it was worth for the American Ballet’s newly assembled corps, or

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\textsuperscript{59} Volkov, Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky, 214.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Solomon Volkov’s liner notes for the Balanchine Album released by NYCB posits this reason for the omission of the “Tema Russo” from the original version of Serenade.
\end{flushright}
at the very least the ballet in its three-movement form would be shorter and thus more manageable. Most consequentially with respect to the ballet’s reception history, however, the omission of the “Tema Russo” means that the chorale-like opening of the work, and along with it the reprise of the opening “orange grove” formation, would not have been present in the ballet’s earliest versions. This asymmetrical formation of seventeen dancers has become one of Balanchine’s most famous choreographic structures, regarded as an emblem of his style and a defining creative statement at the start of his American career. In its original performances, however, this formation and its accompanying music would have only occurred once, rendering it less iconic than it is regarded today.

Whether through the intercession of Tchaikovsky or thanks to Balanchine’s practicality, the ballet progressed over its first week of rehearsal, and both Kirstein and even the less easily impressed Dimitriev saw the emerging choreography as something new and distinct from his previous work. Kirstein saw a unique fusion of elements from earlier ballets, seeing “arms as in Mozartiana and groups from Errante” and also traces of Cotillon, albeit with “new uses of lines” and “new romance.” Dimitriev declared that the choreographer “has now hit his stride and style. For years he was doing trick stuff hoping for surprise; something no one had ever done before. Now it was pure Balanchine.”

While Serenade was in preparation, the de Basil company returned to New York from its triumphant cross-country touring, and a delegation from the American Ballet dutifully attended its performances to assess the competition. Kirstein reports on feeling “empty” about Massine’s Les Matelots and found his Tricorne “confused” but with

63 LK Diaries, March 15, 21, 1934.
64 LK Diaries, March 21, 1934.
“wonderful clothes” (designed by Picasso).65 Balanchine’s Cotillon, however, was “done better than anybody dared hope,” and was a “most wonderful ballet and well received,” including by Antheil, who was “extremely moved and inspired” by the work.66 If Balanchine could exert no direct control over his ballet, which was the legal property of the company, he did have the opportunity to provide unofficial supervision for his previous choreography. During their New York engagement, de Basil dancer Leon Woizikowsy came by the School and took down “all of Balanchine’s criticisms of the performance for the benefit of rehearsing the dancers for the next time.”67 For its part, the de Basil troupe made its own contribution to the success of its new competitor, insofar as it was the experience of seeing Cotillon and La Concurrence that evidently drew some students to Balanchine’s new school.68 “We were interested,” Annabelle Lyon explained, when asked how she and other dancers first heard about the School of American Ballet, “because when we had gone to see the Ballets Russes, we particularly enjoyed Balanchine’s ballets and were impressed with his works.”69 Although Massine’s ballets were enjoyable, they “didn’t interest me particularly as a dancer,” Lyon recalled. Cotillon and La Concurrence, by contrast, were “very creative, very fresh” and “created such an unusual atmosphere.”70

65 LK Diaries, March 15, 1934.  
66 Ibid.  
67 Ibid.  
68 The de Basil company had begun their 1933–34 U.S. tour with performances at the St. James Theatre on Broadway, opening December 22, 1933, giving dancers such as Lyon the opportunity to see Cotillon and La Concurrence at precisely the time when the American Ballet school was being organized. See Sorley Walker, De Basil’s Ballets Russes, 31–4.  
69 Annabelle Lyon Interview, 47.  
70 Ibid., 48, 50.
Rehearsals of *Serenade* continued through March, with the women at one point complaining of having to be on their knees, to which Balanchine replied that, “when he was composing *Prodigal Son* for Lifar he was on his knees for two weeks.”\(^71\) Another de Basil dancer, Tatiana Riaboushinska (like Toumanova a “baby ballerina” discovered by Balanchine), stopped by to observe the new ballet taking shape, and like Dimitriev saw something distinct and new. Viewing the new pas de trios with dancers Heidi Vosseler, Charles Laskey, and Kathryn Mullowny—from the final “Elegy” movement—the dancer “couldn’t believe Balanchine could do anything so tender.”\(^72\) By April both *Serenade* and *Mozartiana* were both shaping up “very well,” and Kirstein could tell himself that “it looks like a company.”\(^73\)

With two ballets in relatively good form, attention returned to *Dreams*, which had been put on a hold while they negotiated with André Derain via telegrams about using his décor (with no mention of comparable efforts to secure the use of Milhaud’s score).\(^74\) By mid-April Derain had given them the green light, and Antheil was “charmed to be able to go ahead.”\(^75\) Balanchine and Antheil were in a mutual admiration society about their respective work, although the students continued to struggle with some elements of the choreography, particularly the “Can-Can” sequence.\(^76\) Balanchine continued to experiment with the rotating cast of dancers coming through the school, in early May setting the “Acrobat’s Dance” of the ballet on William Dollar, a native of St. Louis who had trained with Mordkin and Fokine, and who had already achieved modest success

\(^71\) LK Diaries, March 20, 1934.  
\(^72\) LK Diaries, March 26, 1934.  
\(^73\) LK Diaries, April 10, 1934.  
\(^74\) LK Diaries, March 7, 26, 1934.  
\(^75\) LK Diaries, April 13, 1934.  
\(^76\) LK Diaries, April 23, 1934.
dancing at Radio City Music Hall and other venues. Dollar had by this point “become very attached to the School,” to the chagrin of dancer Charles Laskey, who had been the standout male dancer thus far.\textsuperscript{77}

During these initial months the dancers were not always just in class or rehearsal but were almost continually being watched by VIP observers and in some cases quite large groups of spectators. In addition to the de Basil dancers noted above, individual guests noted in Kirstein’s diary include his mother, Rose, Anne Lindbergh and her sister Constance Morrow, Muriel Draper, Nelson Rockefeller, Felix Warburg, and Nicholas Nabokov.\textsuperscript{78} By the end of March with several ballets somewhat complete, there were “enormous crowds of people at rehearsal,” to the displeasure of Dimitriev, who was “furious at the onrush.”\textsuperscript{79} In late April \textit{Serenade} and \textit{Mozartiana} “were danced before a large mob” of over fifty people, again incurring Dimitriev’s ire, who declared “it would be the last open rehearsal for a long time as it wasted Balanchine’s time.”\textsuperscript{80} This suggests that groups of spectators may have been more common than Kirstein’s diaries indicate, so routine as to be worth noting only when they prompted a problem. Indeed, only two days after the audience of fifty crowded the studio, Kirstein notes that despite Dimitriev’s ultimatum there were again “too many people at the rehearsal.”\textsuperscript{81} (At least one such open rehearsal during this time functioned as a semi-official audition for the Theatre Guild, which the organizers hoped might take on the company to manage.\textsuperscript{82}) Although the presence of special visitors in the dance studio is by no means a novel phenomenon, these

\textsuperscript{77} LK Diaries, May 3, 1934.
\textsuperscript{78} LK Diaries, January 26, February 2, 13, April 17, 26, 1934.
\textsuperscript{79} LK Diaries, March 29, 1934.
\textsuperscript{80} LK Diaries, April 24, 1934.
\textsuperscript{81} LK Diaries, April 26, 1934
\textsuperscript{82} LK Diaries, May 8, 1934.
incidents nevertheless demonstrate how students from the school were functioning as a semi-public performing unit from the very start, serving if not the educational goals initially articulated by Kirstein, then helping cultivate support for the future endeavors of the enterprise. All of which is to say that by the end of May the dancers had in all likelihood been observed by a far greater number of people in studio rehearsals than would attend their first official performance engagement outside the school in early June. 

In the absence of any official artistic offerings to evaluate, however, debate continued in the press about the theoretical merits of the nascent enterprise, with performance remaining a prominent aspect of its mission. Writing in the April 1934 issue of *The Dancing Times*, British ballet critic Arnold Haskell spoke approvingly of the collaboration of Kirstein and Balanchine, stressing both pedagogy and performance:

> Through the enthusiasm of that great balletomane, Lincoln Kirstein, who has so long been unique in America, George Balanchine has been able to start an American academy of the dance, where he is assisted by Pierre Vladimirov, and the intention is to train an all American company to give performances several times a year. No better person could have been found to harness the American point of view to the old tradition.  

Less enthusiasm was to be found in the pages of the modern dance–oriented *Dance Observer*, whose inaugural February 1934 number had included an advertisement for the school. This modest contribution to the journal bought the American Ballet no special favors, however, and if anything seems to have helped make the organization and Kirstein himself a lightning rod for the journal’s general antipathy toward ballet. The lead editorial of its second number in March took Kirstein personally to task for his critiques of modern dance (most recently articulated in a January article for *The Nation*), but

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84 Advertisement, *DO*, February 1934, 10.
criticized first and foremost his “persistence for the ballet,” whose artificial and superficial practices should be discarded in favor of the more straightforward and vital modes of modern dance:

[W]hereas the classical ballet remains in essence these exercises ordered according to a superimposed choreography, in the modern dance the exercises perform specifically the function for which they are contrived. They do not obtrude themselves upon the completed dance. They are not immediately and superficially apparent as are the whirling turns on one toe that “bring down the house” or the brilliant, dazzling, but pointless leaps of the ballet. They are not the dance itself but a means of attaining that flexibility and precision of movement which Mr. Kirstein fails to recognize. […] For the ballet is an inflexible set of movements which, when applied to any composition other than the rigidly formal sort, proves itself woefully, and at times ludicrously, inadequate. 85

Moreover, the ultimate reason for the artistic bankruptcy of ballet is that it “cannot exceed its own limits, for where it does it becomes shoddy,” or even more consequentially when it does seek to reform itself it “is transformed into a phase of the modern dance.” This was evident, the writers maintained, in works such as Fokine’s Petrushka, Nijinska’s Les Noces, and—notably—Balanchine’s La Concurrence, all of which bore more resemblance to the work of Charles Weidman or Martha Graham than to anything by Petipa. 86 If such a critique were not enough, in a subsequent editorial in May they took issue with the questionable claims of a Russian-led organization to have produced an authentically American ballet. The object of their ire was not the Kirstein-Balanchine enterprise, however, but rather the de Basil company, which had premiered Massine’s much-touted American-themed Union Pacific in the course its U.S. tour. 87

86 Ibid.
87 “American Ballet?” DO, May 1934, 38.
American Ballet had as yet not produced anything that the likes of *Dance Observer* might critique as insufficiently American, although that would change by the end of the year.

Kirstein came to the defense of himself and the American Ballet in both a letter to *Dance Observer* in May and a separate essay “In Defense of the Ballet” for the May–June edition of *Modern Music*, both of which defended the vitality of the classic form, in particular its ability to be handed down as a continuous tradition, unlike the more idiosyncratic schools of modern dance that, he alleged, were premised not upon timeless principles but rather cults of personality unable to withstand the test of time.\(^{88}\) Soon after Kirstein’s essay appeared, there would finally be an opportunity to render judgment on an actual performance by the new organization, albeit not on a public stage in New York City, but for a small and elite audience many miles outside of town in the exclusive environs of Westchester County.

2. **The American Ballet’s Private Debut: Woodlands, June 1934**

In an essay written later in life, Edward Warburg shows bemused indifference about how the outdoor summertime performance by dancers from the School of American Ballet came to happen at Woodlands, his family’s Westchester county estate near White Plains, in early June 1934. “Suddenly it was decided,” Warburg recalls, “that what I wanted more than anything else for my upcoming birthday was a performance by this company of ballet dancers.”\(^{89}\) Given his family’s financial resources and history of

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\(^{88}\) Lincoln Kirstein, Letter to the Editor, *Dance Observer*

entertaining, any pretext was somewhat beside the point.\textsuperscript{90} The official occasion aside, in accounts of the history of NYCB and in Balanchine’s biographies, this engagement—though at the time not regarded as an official debut of the company—has come to function as a symbolic point of origin for Balanchine’s American career, in particular for the “first in America” \textit{Serenade}.\textsuperscript{91} As noted above, \textit{Serenade} was indeed the first entirely new ballet created by Balanchine after his arrival in the U.S., although the two other ballets performed at Woodlands—\textit{Mozartiana} and \textit{Dreams}—were to a certain degree new as well. With its replacement score by Antheil, \textit{Dreams} in particular offers compelling grounds for an honorary “first in America” status, and on a bureaucratic level, this novelty is already acknowledged by an entry separate from the previous Les Ballets 1933 version in the catalogue of Balanchine’s works.\textsuperscript{92} On an aesthetic level, moreover, an exclusive ascription of novelty to \textit{Serenade}—at the expense of what might have been new about \textit{Mozartiana} and \textit{Dreams}—runs afoul of Balanchine’s commitment to the seamless blending of music with movement and his penchant for frequent revision. The allegation that only insignificant changes would be made as previously composed choreography was combined with a new score (in the case of \textit{Dreams}) or set on new dancers (\textit{Mozartiana}) is something to which even a lax Balanchine adherent might greet

\textsuperscript{90} The Warburg family had an established record of lavish entertaining that frequently included performance events. See Weber, \textit{Patron Saints}, 243.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Serenade} is identified as such in literally innumerable sources. Three such examples are: “...the ballet was the first created by Balanchine when he came to the United States,” Peter Brisson and Clement Crisp, \textit{The International Book of Ballet} (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 225; “…Balanchine’s first ballet in America…” Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, \textit{No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 268; “Serenade, to music by Tchaikovsky, was Balanchine’s first American ballet,” Jennifer Homans, \textit{Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet} (New York: Random House, 2010), 515.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Balanchine Catalogue}, 120–21.
with some skepticism.\(^{93}\) In the absence of reliable evidence, the question of the newness of the 1934 *Dreams* and *Mozartiana* will likely never be conclusively adjudicated, nor is any such verdict strictly necessary. And as one of Balanchine’s most beloved and often performed ballets, *Serenade* and its Woodlands debut now almost inevitably loom large in myth if not history.

Less than a month before the Woodlands engagement, however, it was not clear that any ballets, whether new or old, would be performed in June, and contrary to Warburg’s recollections, Kirstein’s diaries allege that it was very much a decision in his own hands. By early May the organizers had already been in discussions with designer Jo Mielziner about lighting and staging a performance of *Mozartiana* and *Serenade*.\(^{94}\) But on May 14 Kirstein wrote that Warburg had not yet determined “whether or not he would give the private performance at his place, or not, and how to give it.”\(^{95}\) Although Kirstein was frustrated with Warburg’s indecision and his “kidding of the kids,” he nevertheless deferred to him and could not imagine “anyone else doing what he’s done.”\(^{96}\) Kirstein records that not just the date but the program for Woodlands remained in flux in the weeks prior to the event, with considerable disagreement among the four players about what should be presented. Even more notably, while driving back from Jones Beach on May 20, Balanchine expressed to Kirstein dissatisfaction with the entire program that was then in preparation. Balanchine declared that, “ballet, in the Diaghilev, Petipa idiom is dead” and that *Serenade, Mozartiana, and Dreams*, “all that with him is only commercial,

\(^{93}\) The *Balanchine Catalogue* says of the 1934 version of *Dreams* that “most of the choreography was from the 1933 production.”

\(^{94}\) LK Diaries, May 5, 8, 1934.

\(^{95}\) LK Diaries, May 14, 1934.

\(^{96}\) Ibid.
of no interest.” Instead he “must find new ideas, although the exercises are valuable in themselves.”

At the end of the month and even closer to the engagement, Dimitriev similarly voiced concern that they were “on the wrong track about repertory, which was invented to save time and money” and instead it “should be entirely something new.” Two days later, Dimitriev was back on board, but now with different criticisms, “in a great burst against Warburg’s niggardliness about our spectacle in the country a week from Saturday: saving on ridiculous small things, pianos, lights, etc.” The next day discussions continued about whether to present Dreams or Mozartiana or both. Dimitriev held that Dreams was not ready, and that the large amount of time invested in its rehearsal did not mean that it must be performed, holding forth portentously that “Stanislavsky had the courage to throw out something he had rehearsed for 30 months.” Warburg wanted to give Mozartiana and was even ready to place an order for newly-designed costumes, despite Kirstein’s concerns as to the cost. In the end they struck the compromise of giving most but not all of Dreams and all of Mozartiana, and “Eddie and Dimitriev both considered they’d won a major decision.” Serenade would round out the program and would be mounted with minimal cost, though its costumes—

97 LK Diaries, May 20, 1934.
98 Ibid.
99 LK Diaries, May 28, 1934.
100 LK Diaries, May 30, 1934.
101 LK Diaries, May 31, 1934.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
not finalized until days before the performance and in the end store-bought practice
clothes—would still cause some consternation.\textsuperscript{104}

In a letter to Mielziner written ten days before the Woodlands performance,
Warburg makes clear that the company’s plans were hampered by both financial
restrictions and dissension among the leadership. “After many long talks and
consultations,” Warburg writes, “we have made up our minds fairly definitely” that since
the Christian Bérard costumes for \emph{Mozartiana} were available, they would use those in
order to save funds for future projects.\textsuperscript{105} The Bérard sets would not be used, however,
since they were “pretty terrible,” having prompted them originally to consider doing “the
whole thing over afresh.”\textsuperscript{106} Economy was also the reason for using “plain white practice
costumes” for \emph{Serenade}, and for this outdoor performance, “it will not be possible to have
many light effects either, but all that can wait for a later time.”\textsuperscript{107} If the show was indeed
a birthday present it was being mounted on a somewhat restricted budget, and it was
certainly not a surprise, given Warburg’s extensive personal involvement.

Although the production values of the performance would be relatively simple,
the larger setting of the Woodlands estate was anything but modest. Frieda and Felix
Warburg’s residence in White Plains sprawled over 500 acres of Westchester County, at
the time a relatively undeveloped area at considerable remove from the city.\textsuperscript{108} In
addition to the main house—a Tudor-style mansion with a large central tower and Gothic
windows, reached by a mile-and-a-half long driveway—the estate boasted among other

\textsuperscript{104} LK Diaries, May 31, June 5, 6, 8, 1934.
\textsuperscript{105} Edward Warburg to Jo Mielziner, May 28, 1934, MGZM Res War E Warburg, NYPL.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Chernow, \emph{The Warburgs}, 95.
amenities a stable of thoroughbred horses and miles of bridal paths, a greenhouse that enclosed a tiled swimming pool with trapezes above the water, and a herd of prize-winning cows to provide fresh milk.109 (The Warburgs’ city residence, a mansion at the corner of 92nd Street and Fifth Avenue that today houses the Jewish Museum, was built on a comparably spectacular scale.110)

The day before the scheduled Saturday, June 9 performance the weather was appearing uncooperative, at least in the city. Friday June 8 was a “good day for old clothes,” according to New York World-Telegram reporter Helen Warden, who in response to steady downpours took the practical if unbecoming measure of donning an unflattering green poncho.111 Warden had been told by Antheil to stop by the School of American Ballet at three in the afternoon, and the composer did the organization no favors on the nationalist front by describing the school to her as “very interesting” with a “European background.”112 Warden was met at the school not by Antheil but “Monsieur Balanchine,” who “has been here only six months and speaks practically no English.”113 Balanchine, described as a “small, slender, quick-moving Russian, with an impish expression to his eyes,” kept saying “pleesee” over and over to Warden—a mark of his unsteady English (the Russian word pozhalsta meaning both please and you’re welcome).114

109 Ibid., 95–6.
110 Ibid., 92–4.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
Warden’s report and other advance press indicate that the program was perhaps not completely final until shortly before the performance and that the event would not constitute a conclusive debut by the company. Nevertheless, several of the ballets were touted as world premieres, and not only the “first in America” Serenade. According to Warden’s column, seventy-five dancers were slated to board a bus out to Westchester Saturday afternoon to perform two ballets, Serenade and Dreams.115 John Martin’s Sunday dance column (which had evidently gone to press the day before), similarly reports that the School “was scheduled to give an out-of-doors performance of two ballets choreographed by Georges Balanchine last night,” Serenade and Dreams, and characterizes the event as a private and not public engagement, clarifying that the “first public performances of the organization are planned for next season.”116 A shorter more up-to-date notice in the same day’s Times, likely filed closer to press time, reported that rain had suspended the performance after Mozartiana and that the audience would reconvene the following evening “to witness the world premiere of two works,” Serenade and Dreams.117 The next day the Times reported on the successful if delayed “world premieres” of the two ballets, as well as the reprise of Mozartiana.118

Kirstein’s diaries provide more detail regarding the events of the weekend, and according to his recollections, by 3 pm on Friday the bus had already left for the evening’s rehearsal at Woodlands (leaving Warden with perhaps only Antheil and Balanchine to speak with at the School).119 No one greeted the delegation upon their

115 Ibid.
117 “Rain Defers Recital of Ballet School, NYT, June 10, 1934.
119 LK Diaries, June 8, 1934. All details in this paragraph from this diary entry.
arrival at the estate, whose mansion had the “air of a castle deserted before the onslaught of invaders.” Warburg was evidently lecturing at the Westchester County Center about the Museum of Modern Art, and in the absence of any host, the house “was ransacked for overcoats, sweaters and bath-robes,” in response to a cold turn in the weather. The proceedings got off to a rocky start. Frances Mann, one of the “second-line dancers” hurt her foot, and Gisella Caccialanza tripped and fell, while yet another woman “was suspected to have female ills.” The food that had been provided “was not nearly enough and very poor,” and Balanchine was “furious,” announcing that, “afterwards he would ask Eddie to a Russian restaurant, and show him how one eats.” Dimitriev urged calm, saying that such action “would cause a scandal.” The dancers were also displeased, “cold and peaked and hungry” such that Kirstein “feared a revolution.” Having returned from his lecture, Warburg for his part “was furious with all of us.” In the end, however, the dress rehearsal produced satisfying results:

It got dark around nine and *Mozartiana* looked heavenly. Very brilliant and the kids were superb. Vladimirov was in all his states: “Voila votre Ballet American.” When he saw Marie-Jeanne Pelus come on, in the “Ave Verum,” he said he was reminded of the debut of Pavlova. Eric [sic] Hawkins was sweet and very enthusiastic and inspired as indeed was everybody. The lights didn’t go very well, but the stage was absolutely magnificent. A superb floor and the pianos sounded well. Except Antheil was for the first time furious because that fool, the accompanist Mikeshina, had not learned his lovely Finale.

At the end of the evening Kirstein drove Balanchine and Dimitriev back to New York in his car, with Balanchine saying he was “pleased enough.” When asked by Kirstein “who with us had talent,” Dimitriev replied that his choices were (in order), Annabelle Lyon, Charles Laskey, Gisella Caccialanza, and, to Kirstein’s surprise, Erick Hawkins.
By the time they reconvened on Saturday, a “light drizzle” had set in, costing them over an hour of planned rehearsal time. With some guests already arriving, a decision was made to cancel and reschedule for the next day, but then the question arose as to what would happen if it rained on Sunday as well. The weather remained as ambivalent as the collective resolve to perform, with the “tarpaulin over the pianos and the stage taken off and put on three separate times.” A “wholly indifferent” Balanchine left the scene entirely and “went off in his car to White Plains to get some decent food.” When the weather suddenly cleared they scrambled to get things set, with Dimitriev searching “in vain” for Balanchine to rehearse *Mozartiana*, and Kirstein getting nervous and screaming at two of the boys to hurry up, for which Dimitriev upbraided him.

Despite a “ridiculously stupid audience” with “little enthusiasm,” *Mozartiana* “looked lovely.” After the stage had been reset for *Serenade*, however, “the rain set in in earnest” and the guests repaired to the house. There was “great scandal of the Russians against Eddie who had not invited them in” to join the invited guests. Dinner for the performers had been set up in the garage, at which a “furious” Vladimirov declared that, “he had never yet eaten with the horses and didn’t propose to now.” With mock-socialist rage, Dimitriev similarly groused that, “Eddie would learn better manners when it was here like it was now in Russia.” Kirstein evidently mustered up a similar display of anger in solidarity, getting “as excited about the garage-dinner as I could for their satisfaction.”

There was “a little sun” when Kirstein awoke Sunday morning, and “in spite of threats” the company “again completely embarked for White Plains, with an added cargo of husbands, mothers, friends.” Upon arrival they rehearsed *Serenade* on a “sticky stage,”

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120 LK Diaries, June 9, 1934. All details in this paragraph from this diary entry.
but as they worked the weather seemed to clear up. They decided to reverse the program, with *Dreams* first, followed by *Serenade* and closing with *Mozartiana*. They evidently put *Dreams* first since there was consensus that it was “not yet a success,” and rationalized the reshuffle to Antheil with the explanation that they wanted some of the ballet to be shown first in case rain showers again interfered. There was light drizzle throughout the performance, but they continued on, despite the fact that the piano keyboards became “so wet that Kopeikine and Mikeshina could hardly play.” *Serenade* “looked very lovely,” and *Mozartiana* “passed well,” despite one of the dancers fainting at the end, which “spoiled the last group.” Attendance was actually higher than the night before, and among those who returned were Nelson Rockefeller—then actively involved in his family’s business empire, including their new midtown development, Rockefeller Center—and Museum of Modern Art director Alfred Barr, both of whom “seemed impressed.”

Although the Woodlands engagement, rain delays and all, received nominal coverage in the *Times*, there was no official review, and it is not clear whether John Martin even attended either the original performance on Saturday or the rescheduled Sunday show. The event did merit several paragraphs, however, in Lucius Beebe’s society column for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, which dubbed the event a “safari to Woodland [sic]” by the “Connecticut Valley Athenians.”121 The fact that weather ended the Saturday show after *Mozartiana* “didn’t tend to abate the smart art even a little bit,” in part because for many of those gathered the highlight of the evening was as much the company of one other as the performance itself:

It was a right gay gathering, whooping and handkerchief waving at each other across the damp grass and the ballet amateurs were there to a youth and lady. Phyllis Byrne, Gloria Bragiotti, Kay Halle and Jean Sears arrived with Harry Bull, practically enough for one man, and in the dripping *dedans* were the Gilbert Seldes, the Chick Austins, Muriel Draper and Paul Draper in white tie and mess jacket, looking somehow askew. There were also a gentleman in a straw top hat, a fellow in a buster brown cravat as big as a feather duster and six candid camera practitioners. The elder Mr. Warburg, affable and handsome in a military cloak over his dinner clothes, looked a little startled by it all, but behaving with accustomed *nonchalance*.122

The column notes that while Warburg “bore the rain and necessary postponement bravely,” Kirstein evidently “dripped gloom,” and it also confirms that the company and guests spent the rest of the evening in starkly different ways.123 While the dancers “hung up their tights to dry in the Warburg furnace room,” most of the guests “went off to the Westchester Embassy Club at Armonk.”124 The column’s source—whether Beebe himself or someone else—did not apparently return for the rescheduled engagement on Sunday.

The surviving program from the Woodlands performances is modest in scale, and evinces a certain degree of amateurism insofar as it makes the charming and perhaps predictable mistake of listing Mozart and not Tchaikovsky as the composer of *Mozartiana*.125 (Figure 1). Several performance photos have been handed down from the performances themselves, evidently the work of some of the “candid camera practitioners” mentioned by Beebe. (Figure 2, 3) These photos attest to the minimalist production values of the engagement, which according to a letter from Warburg to Jo

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122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
125 American Ballet Programs, *MGZB (Programs), JRDD-NYPL.*
Mielziner were not regarded very highly by the not so easily impressed upper-class attendees. “The performance at Woodlands taught us many things,” Warburg wrote at the end of June, specifically that “costumes, lighting, etc. are items to be reckoned with—much larger in this country than we had counted on.”¹²⁶ The problem of course was how to pay for such things, but following the engagement they had “circularized” the attendees to ask them “to become annual subscribers to the Ballet,” from which they hoped to raise $20,000 to cover the annual budget of the school.¹²⁷ Warburg also noted in closing that, “Thank God, the Russians are gradually learning English, which means less misunderstandings,” presumably including any future conflicts over performers’ amenities.¹²８

A month after Woodlands, however, a much graver challenge than weather or language barriers presented itself to the enterprise. In July during the school’s summer break, Kirstein and Balanchine were driving to the home of costume designer Aline Bernstein when suddenly Balanchine “gripped his left arm, became rigid and red” such that for a moment Kirstein “thought he was like Nijinsky, acting.”¹²⁹ It soon became clear that the episode was no joke, and Kirstein saw all of their efforts suddenly coming to naught:

His eyes glazed. He slavered. Tried to stiffen himself out of the car. I lost my way. I shouted at two boys for a hospital; terrified, they left. I drove wildly up, made a right turn, up a hill, thinking it was the Bernstein house. The car stalled. Balanchine became violent. Before, he became grey and yellow at his crisis. I thought he was dead or dying, or he would go insane. The School. The future of all of us. I fought him wildly in the car. He

¹²⁶ Edward Warburg to Jo Mielziner, June 28, 1934, MGZM Res War E Warburg, JRDD–NYPL.
¹²⁷ Ibid.
¹²⁸ Ibid.
¹²⁹ LK Diaries, July 12, 1934.
broke with his foot, my hand brake. His shoes came off. His tongue emitted a ghastly groaning sputter. A maid came out of the nearby house. Horrified, I yelled my car was stalled. She thought I said it was stolen and called for the State Troopers. Meanwhile, Balanchine broke my yellow eye-glasses. I tried to hobble him with his belt; he fell out of the car into the dirt-road.\textsuperscript{130}

With help he managed to get Balanchine into a nearby house, and a first doctor called to the scene broke a needle trying to administer morphine. Soon after a second doctor arrived, and Balanchine suffered a second, slightly less severe attack, after which Kirstein recalls that he “could not speak nor know who I was. He could not see, I think. I tried to talk to him firmly thinking it was best; I couldn’t believe he was really ill.”\textsuperscript{131}

Balanchine was taken to a nearby hospital and Kirstein called on him the next day. He was “sane, unparalyzed, but hiccoughing” and could not recall anything that had happened.\textsuperscript{132} Cutting short their vacation at Lake George, Dimitriev and Vladimirov arrived the following day, and speculated about various causes for the attack, including a lack of sex and mysterious injections he had purportedly received some time earlier.\textsuperscript{133} A week later the doctors concluded that, “the convulsions were largely toxemic and emotional” but that they had also found two active tuberculosis lesions, and prescribed four to eight weeks of rest.\textsuperscript{134} Although Dimitriev assured him that they “can get on without Balanchine,” Kirstein was “depressed and too bored and tired to be angry,” and consoled himself with the grim comfort that “a week ago tonight I thought Balanchine was dying next to me, and he is neither dead, insane nor paralyzed.”\textsuperscript{135} Kirstein’s sister

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} LK Diaries, July 13, 1934.
\textsuperscript{133} LK Diaries, July 14, 1934.
\textsuperscript{134} LK Diaries, July 19, 1934.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
Mina speculated that the cause was related to Dimitriev’s recent announcement to Balanchine that “there would be no ballets, just the School,” news that was particularly hard on him since he “has no interest in the School, all he cares for is producing the ballets.” These concerns—over Balanchine’s health, his opportunity to produce new work, and a possible causal relationship between the two—would loom large in the coming months, and years, in Kirstein’s mind.

3. The American Ballet’s Unofficial Debut: Hartford, December 1934

The “Dance and Studio Notes” of the June–July 1934 Dance Observer reported that the School of American Ballet was “busy hanging a veil of secrecy over its activities for next season.” “The only information available,” the unsigned notice related, “is that it is planning for a long tour and a long New York season; that Antheil has composed the music for E. E. Cumming’s [sic] version of Uncle Tom’s Cabin; and that Lincoln Kirstein is going to be a premier danseur.” Of these three items, only the first would come to fruition (and even then only partially) but in the meantime the School had many other issues to confront, the least of which was snarky gossip. After a summer break, the School reopened on August 27, and although Balanchine “seemed well and happy, a changed and healthy man” after a month of rest, the organization would immediately be plunged into intense discussions regarding its future, in particular how and when they should make a more official public performance debut.

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136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 LK Diaries, August 27, 1934.
If a year before the enterprise had been focused on ensuring that its dancers would not be poached by commercial entertainment, financial realities led them to reconsider this orthodox position. Balanchine had personally been approached with several offers of commercial work: Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur, and George Antheil with a new movie starring comedian Jimmy Savo, and Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz with a musical comedy project *The Tricorne*. Balanchine ultimately declined both offers and around the same time made clear to Kirstein what he was more interested in working on, that is, an ambitious original program to be performed at a house such as the Metropolitan Opera, to rival even the most ambitious undertakings of not just the de Basil troupe but the great Diaghilev himself: “Stravinsky, Hindemith, Kurt Weill; all new works; Braque, Tchelitchev, Picasso.” Although struck by the “obviousness of his idea, and the intensity of his tone,” Kirstein ultimately found in Balanchine’s ambitious program renewed cause for worry, “that he was sickening because he had no chance to produce on his own.” Soon after a new version of the *Tricorne* offer emerged, involving not just Balanchine but the whole School, which would be explicitly included in the billing.

Virgil Thomson counseled Kirstein that the School should “by no means do Broadway stuff,” but should rather “start small and exclusive,” and in two or three years “Broadway would catch up with it.” Thomson noted that *Four Saints in Three Acts* had been written in 1927 and had only been just produced, and that the Ballets Russes

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141 LK Diaries, August 27, 28, 29, 30, 1934.
142 LK Diaries, September 6, 1934.
143 Ibid.
144 LK Diaries, September 11, 1934.
145 LK Diaries, September 12, 1934.
repertoire of 1926 was just now becoming popular in New York.\textsuperscript{146} They should “steer strictly clear of the Metropolitan Opera,” and instead let Balanchine “do lots of small things.”\textsuperscript{147} Discussions continued about what kind of season they should attempt to produce, however, with Balanchine “not anxious to do anything but ballet, but he wants primarily to produce.”\textsuperscript{148} Although Balanchine continued to dream big of his “greatest season ever seen” of Hindemith and Stravinsky, they would eventually settle on the goal of a more modest season of six ballets, most of which had already been produced or were already in production: \textit{Mozartiana, Errante, Dreams, Serenade, Touch Down} (an early working title of \textit{Alma Mater}), and another work to be determined.\textsuperscript{149}

Among those who had attended the Woodlands performance was Chick Austin, who according to Kirstein’s diary on Saturday, June 9 (before they had even put on their entire program) extended an invitation for the troupe to perform in Hartford, scheduled in advance of an appearance there by the de Basil troupe.\textsuperscript{150} After this new, more modestly conceived season had been settled on, discussions began about possible Hartford performances, with an engagement “tentatively arranged” on September 20.\textsuperscript{151} Consensus emerged that a program of four ballets presented outside of New York would prepare them for more extensive performance opportunities the following year and was additionally preferable to compromising their institutional priorities by taking the offer from Schwartz and Dietz (which in the meantime had been offered to and tentatively

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} LK Diaries, September 17, 1934.
\textsuperscript{149} LK Diaries, September 18, 19, 1934.
\textsuperscript{150} LK Diaries, June 9, 1934.
\textsuperscript{151} LK Diaries, September 20, 1934.
accepted by Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman). A week later when Austin came to town to talk the matter over in person, however, some questions and concerns had again arisen, regarding the small scale and nonprofit status of the Avery Memorial, the same problems that had contributed to the collapse of the original Hartford plans of the American Ballet: “the stage there seems too small; not enough cash; seems unlikely.” Nevertheless plans for the engagement proceeded, with Kirstein traveling to Hartford October 8 and Austin making another visit to the School on October 11, with ticket prices agreed upon the following day. Days later, however, last minute doubts arose again about Hartford, sparking discussion as to whether “to abandon Hartford, treating Chick Austin badly, twice,” but by October 17 the dates for the engagement had been settled on, December 6–8. The program for Hartford would ultimately include two of the three ballets presented in June at Woodlands, Mozartiana and Serenade. The two other ballets would be entirely new, Transcendence and Alma Mater, and would be given at all four performances. Mozartiana would open the program for Thursday and Friday nights and the Saturday matinee, along with Alma Mater and Transcendence; Serenade was slated for performance for the final Saturday night program only, between Alma Mater and Transcendence.

152 LK Diaries, September 26, 1934.  
153 LK Diaries, September 28, 1934.  
154 LK Diaries, October 8, 11, 12, 1934.  
155 LK Diaries, October 16, 1934.  
156 In addition to being listed in numerous press notices, this schedule of all four performances was printed in the “gala premiere” Thursday night program, facsimile located in Scrapbook of Producing Company; a program for the Saturday matinee performance (in which the order was Mozartiana, Alma Mater, Transcendence) is located in Yvonne Patterson and William Dollar Papers, (S) *MGZMD 259, Scrapbook 1934–36, Box 18, JRDD–NYPL, hereafter “Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.”
Of the two new ballets, *Alma Mater* was longer in preparation and in its earliest conception was somewhat different in theme from its ultimate form. Over lunch in early February, Kirstein, Dimitriev and Warburg discussed a “Rover Boy ballet in the spirit of *Barabau.*” An avowed fan of westerns and adventure films, Balanchine was much taken with the idea of a dance based on the popular American book series, in which a band of boys at a military academy get themselves into and out of sticky situations, and even proposed a teaser ending: “in the next book you will follow the Rover Boys on the Great Lakes.” Balanchine suggested Antheil for the music, and several days later Kirstein ran the “Rover Boys” concept by the composer, who “warmed up marvelously” to the idea. Antheil understood the proposed 1915 setting for the work and began improvising at the piano on “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” for Kirstein, also noting that the score “must have what above all Stravinsky said every good piece of music must have: charm.” The next day Kirstein realized that he may have been too hasty in pitching the project to Antheil, and he and Balanchine paid the composer another visit, apparently to vet his music more thoroughly. Kirstein “trapped” Antheil in the kitchen and entreated him to play some more of his music for Balanchine. Among the excerpts Antheil played were selections from his soon-to-be mounted opera *Helen Retires*, and a week later they would offer Antheil the commission of not the new ballet, but rather the replacement score for *Dreams.*

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157 LK Diaries, February 11, 1933.  
158 Ibid.  
159 LK Diaries, February 11, 14, 1933.  
160 LK Diaries, February 14, 1933.  
161 LK Diaries, February 15, 1934.
The “Rover Boy” ballet was off the table for Antheil because Warburg, who was not just bankrolling the work but also writing the libretto, thought the composer was “too high-brow” and instead had decided to tap his cousin, Broadway composer Kay Swift, for the music.\textsuperscript{162} Warburg also had a different time period and concept in mind for the work, wanting it to be “more literal and reminiscent of 1890,” although ultimately the ballet would be set in the 1920s, in New Haven on the day of the annual Harvard-Yale football game.\textsuperscript{163} It would be two months before any of the music was ready, however, and in mid-April Kirstein, Warburg, Dimitriev, and Balanchine paid a visit to Swift’s apartment to hear excerpts from the new ballet, then called \textit{Rah Rah}, having acquired at least its general theme by this time.\textsuperscript{164} The waltz movement Swift played for them was “OK but nothing much” according to Kirstein, who was at least nominally more positive than Balanchine, who “did not care for the musical mood” and expressed misogynistic resignation at the results thus far: “D’abords, elle est femme.”\textsuperscript{165} Balanchine offered Swift some suggestions and advice, telling her to ignore Warburg’s libretto and “just write what she wanted, but not jazz; towards 1910–20, Rover Boys, college-annuals.”\textsuperscript{166} Kirstein lamented that Swift was “unprofessional” but held that “Balanchine’s humor can save it, if it ever does get written.”\textsuperscript{167}

By early May, Swift had made some progress, and Kirstein noted that the “collegiate” ballet was “coming out better than we’d dare hope.” By May 22 the ballet

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{164} LK Diaries, April 14, 1934.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
was in rehearsal, with Balanchine starting on a “football-dance.”

The second day of rehearsal Kirstein was cautiously optimistic, and even though the ballet made him “impatient,” with its “football gestures, jazz, and a sweet enough entrance on a wheelless bicycle,” and he again noted in a backhanded compliment that the score was better than anyone had anticipated. Work on the ballet was put on hold in deference to the imminent Woodlands engagement, but rehearsals resumed immediately after on June 11, with the ballet having acquired a new working title, *Time Out.* Perhaps sensing Balanchine’s lack of enthusiasm for the project Kirstein expressed his hope that the ballet “will sustain his interest until he can finish it.” The ballet would soon encounter more significant setbacks when Swift’s marriage to James Warburg broke down, owing to an affair with composer George Gershwin, who, ironically, had initially been offered the ballet commission and had recommended Swift instead. On June 14 Swift arrived with “a little more inconsequential music,” but Balanchine had to have one of the rehearsal pianists improvise so that he could begin work on the “Dream Wedding” sequence, since “there was as yet no proper music composed.”

A week later Swift would officially plead “personal difficulties at home” as the reason for her slow progress on the ballet, which had received yet another new title, *Touch Down.* By October the ballet acquired

168 LK Diaries, May 5, 22, 1934.
169 LK Diaries, May 23, 1934.
170 LK Diaries, June 11, 1934.
171 Ibid.
173 LK Diaries, June 14, 1934.
174 LK Diaries, June 21, 1934.
its fourth and final title, *Alma Mater*, and work continued on it up until the Hartford performances.

According to some sources, Balanchine’s lack of enthusiasm for the score extended to the ballet as a whole, with Warburg disappointed that the choreographer had refused to attend an actual football game in order to understand the subject matter.\(^{175}\)

“The real puzzle,” as Nancy Reynolds has written, was indeed “how Balanchine, recently arrived from life in Paris, Monte Carlo, Copenhagen, and Leningrad, had the vaguest idea what he was doing.”\(^{176}\) Ruthanna Boris recalls that if actual football had not informed the ballet, certain elements in the daily life of the School made their way into the work, at least in its opening scene:

He got it from us. The ballet was divine! It opened with kids in the corps dressed in shorts, bush hats, little jackets, lying on the floor reading the funny papers. That was because on Sundays when we rehearsed we did the same—read funnies and chewed gum. [Balanchine] thought these things were very American.\(^{177}\)

Balanchine for his part later claimed that he did attend a football game, and that it wasn’t so much different from the soccer he had once seen in England: “It’s practically the same thing—well, that is, there’s a ball and they’re running.”\(^{178}\)

The second new ballet to be performed at Hartford was a little more than two months in preparation from initial conception to performance. While they were still negotiating the Hartford engagement, Kirstein and Balanchine discussed over lunch on September 28 the idea for a ballet called *Rhapsody*, “on the theme of Liszt-Paganini.”\(^{179}\)

\(^{177}\) Quoted in Reynolds, *Repertory in Review*, 39.
\(^{178}\) Ibid.
\(^{179}\) LK Diaries, September 28, 1934.
Kirstein was following up on a discussion the day before regarding what they should do for a new ballet, during which Balanchine had declared that he wanted to do something Austro-Hungarian on “the lives of Liszt and Paganini with a great Hungarian wedding at the end.”\(^{180}\) Back in April Hungarian music had been used for the first character class given by Balanchine at the School. The “superb character exercises” and Balanchine’s own demonstrations had made quite an impression at the time: “So much stamping that our neighbors on the floor below came up to complain. Balanchine danced marvelously with terrific abandon; very broad; high clicks and big stamps, huge whirls.”\(^{181}\)

Kirstein quickly turned *Rhapsody* into a project of “period modernism,"\(^{182}\) reading Sacheverell Sitwell’s book on Liszt, surveying the composer’s music (including the “Mephisto Waltz,” which would feature prominently in the score), going to the Metropolitan Museum to look at drawings by Distelli, and even looking “in vain for Hungarian national costumes.”\(^{183}\) Kirstein took Balanchine to a music store where he bought up “almost all of Liszt,” and later at the school Antheil, taking a break between film projects, explicitly invoked the Diaghilevian precedent of *Pulcinella*, saying that he wanted “to do for Liszt what Stravinsky did for Pergolesi,” and would in fact end up as the arranger of the score.\(^{184}\) Kirstein discarded an initial libretto draft since “there was too damned much plot to it, like Massine’s *Blue Danube*,” and subsequently consulted on the scenario with Balanchine, and they “agreed that a violin virtuoso, like Paganini was

\(^{180}\) LK Diaries, September 27, 1934.
\(^{181}\) LK Diaries, April 14, 1934.
\(^{182}\) On the method and philosophy of “period modernism” first developed by Diaghilev around 1915, see Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, 90–97.
\(^{183}\) LK Diaries, September 28, 29, October 1, 4 1934.
\(^{184}\) LK Diaries, October 1, 1934.
banal” and “changed him into a chef d’orchestre.” By October 10 the ballet’s music was “pretty well lined up,” and Balanchine and Kirstein had decided to approach Philadelphia artist Franklin Watkins for ideas on costumes and scenery. A photo from the Hartford engagement published in *Vogue* shows that the set consisted of a somewhat abstract forest scene, while the costumes strove for a degree of ethnic authenticity, with elaborate headpieces for the women. The score would ultimately comprise arrangements of Liszt’s *Mephisto Waltz*, *Ballade*, and Hungarian Rhapsodies Nos. 10, 13, and 19. *Transcendence* bears a resemblance to several previous works, for one Bronislava Nijinska’s *Le Bien Aimée*, created for the company of Ida Rubinstein in 1928, which had used music by Liszt and Schubert arranged by Darius Milhaud. In early 1932 Balanchine himself had choreographed a short pantomime for the play *Les Amours du Poète* about poet Henrich Heine’s unrequited love for his cousin Amelie, inspired by and in part using the music of Robert Schumann’s song cycle *Dichterliebe* (whose texts are by Heine.)

Balanchine began the ballet in mid-October, creating “a lovely beginning,” while Kirstein was still in research mode, having found “a fine book of Hungarian folk-customs and costumes.” Work continued on the ballet with Balanchine arranging “semi-erotic groups” and a “spectacular and difficult adagio for [William] Dollar and Elise Reiman,” and around this same time the work acquired its ultimate title, *Transcendence.*

185 LK Diaries, October 4, 9, 1934.
187 Balanchine Catalogue, 121–22.
188 Collaer, *Darius Milhaud*, 322.
190 LK Diaries, October 15, 1934.
191 LK Diaries, October 18, 19, 1934.
meantime, Dimitriev provided critical feedback on Balanchine and Kirstein’s efforts, pointing out the great expense of having the Liszt music completely orchestrated, complaining that there was “as yet, no dancing in it,” and expressing frustration that Balanchine continued to treat the same “personal, subjective” subject of love in this new ballet. He also objected to Balanchine’s having commenced the choreography before a designer for the costumes and décor had been finalized, that he never “thinks of such practical details as scene-sequences to allow for changes of costume.” Watkins was at first reluctant to accept the commission since he had never worked on a stage project before and said he would have preferred to relocate temporarily from Philadelphia to New York in order to better understand the totality of the project. He did ultimately accept, however, and would work from Philadelphia, and on November 3 Balanchine traveled down to see his progress thus far. Two days later Watkins returned to New York to observe the ballet, which had “changed so much that Frank was pretty confused” and made Kirstein anxious “by saying he thought Philadelphia was too far away for him to do anything,” though everyone was ultimately very pleased with his designs once they appeared, and he refused to accept any compensation for his work.

Repertoire was not the only item under negotiation around this time; the underlying organizational structure of the enterprise was also being reconfigured. Although known today as the “School of American Ballet,” the initial name was the “School of the American Ballet,” a small but important distinction since the school and its related performing company would operate in a close and often contentious

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192 LK Diaries, October 19, 1934.
193 LK Diaries, October 22, 1934.
194 LK Diaries, October 23, 1934.
195 LK Diaries, November 5, 1933.
relationship for the next five years. The official adjunct corporation of the “Producing Company of the School of American Ballet,” as the performers would be billed in Hartford, was organized in October 1934. All of the four key players in the enterprise were initial shareholders in this company (as they were in the school), and although the specific duties and responsibilities of each with respect to the school and company would remain somewhat fluid, generally speaking, Warburg and Balanchine would focus more on the company side, while Kirstein and Dimitriev would assume more responsibility for the school. An article written by Warburg in January 1937 for Dance magazine articulated the rationale for the producing company as a complementary adjunct of the school:

Of course no ballet company can exist satisfactorily without a school behind it to maintain standards and supply from time to time the necessary new material. And likewise, no school has any meaning unless it has an outlet in some form of working unit. While such a school can lay the grammatical foundation and physical discipline necessary for ballet production on the stage, only the stage can teach a dancer projection, presence and the coordination of ensemble work.

Whereas Kirstein’s initial plans had held training to be the priority, Warburg repositioned the performance side of the enterprise as equally educational and important for the development of the company and the success of the school. Later in life, Kirstein would posit a more flip explanation for this division of labor, credited to Dimitriev’s savvy.

“Whatever a school cost,” Kirstein wrote in Thirty Years, Dimitriev knew that “a

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196 LK Diaries, October 9, 25, 1934; billing found in Program for Saturday December 8 matinee performance, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
company would cost more, and Eddie’s father seemed a more solid resource than mine.”

Today the official debut of the American Ballet is regarded as its March 1935 engagement at New York’s Adelphi Theater (discussed in the following chapter), and the first performances of many of Balanchine’s early American ballets are officially dated from this time, with the Woodlands and Hartford engagements regarded as unofficial previews or out-of-town tryouts. At the time, however, the Hartford engagement was regarded as anything but unofficial and constituted a very public debut for the company, covered in the regional and national press. For the purposes of promotion, the organizers were eager to tout the newness of their offerings, and the press followed suit. A press release (listing Kirstein as contact) announced the December 6 show as the “first public performance” of the American Ballet and stressed the novelty of the entire program, saying that all four ballets presented are “new to this country” and that of the four “three will be world premieres” (with no reference the Woodlands performances). Advertisements for the engagement touted the “world premiere” of “3 new ballets,” and a photo of Holly Howard and Charles Laskey rehearsing for the “American premiere” of Mozartiana appeared in the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times. Warburg is quoted in one report saying that although the company had “a little try-out of some of the ballets last spring” the Hartford performances were “our first major

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198 Kirstein, Thirty Years, 41.
199 Press release, Scrapbook of Producing Company.
200 Advertisement, NYT, November 18, 1934; Advertisement, NYHT, November 25, 1934; Advertisement, NYT, December 2, 1934; Advertisement, HC, December 6, 1934.
effort.” Other reports explicitly characterized the performances as the company’s “debut” or “premiere,” or referred to the “first fruits” of the enterprise being offered. “Four ballets, all new to this country,” opened a review in *Musical America*, “and three of them having their first appearance anywhere, made up the repertoire of the year-old American Ballet in its initial bow.” In a year-in-review column on January 1, 1935, the *Hartford Courant* would subsequently report on the performances as a “world premiere,” and dance journalist Ruth Eleanor Howard’s *Story of the American Ballet* (published in 1936) would also describe the Hartford engagement as the organization’s world premiere.

The organizers also endeavored to build up the native credentials of the organization, despite the fact that only one ballet, *Alma Mater*, had a literally American theme. *Mozartiana* is described in previews as “the only ballet on the program that has been produced before” and as the only “wholly foreign” work on the program, since all of its collaborators, from choreographer to décor, were non-Americans. For the other ballets, not just *Alma Mater*, much was made of the participation of American artists. One preview touted the fact that three ballets had “native settings,” a reference not to their subject matter but rather the three American artists who had contributed sets and

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207 “Year 1934 Marked By Succession of Notable Events,” *HC*, January 1, 1935.

Although Antheil’s *Dreams* was not on the program in Hartford, the composer was still prominently in the mix, touted as having provided the orchestral arrangements for *Transcendence* and also *Serenade*. Several previews report that not just *Alma Mater* but two of the ballets had American music—though they do not specify which—a claim perhaps deriving from misunderstanding or inadvertent elevation of Antheil’s role as arranger.

If the organizers wanted to make as much of all four ballets as possible, they nevertheless placed the greatest emphasis on *Alma Mater*, which had an indisputably American score by Swift and Ivy League setting imaginatively realized by Held, complete with 1920s fashions such as raccoon coats and flapper dresses. The press release devoted a full paragraph to the work, asserting that “great interest will center on *Alma Mater*” and describing the collaboration of Swift, Warburg, Held and Balanchine in full. (The other three ballets, by contrast, were dispatched with one sentence each in passing.) The press followed suit and rearticulated these talking points. “The number which the young impresarios think is going to make the biggest hit is called *Alma Mater,*” as one preview put it. Another reported that the ballet “promises to be the most radical

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212 Press release, Scrapbook of Producing Company.
213 Ibid.
departure from the traditional ballet themes, with a college football game as its background, and music ‘bitterly reminiscent’ of American college songs.”

The performances were also an occasion for Balanchine to make some of his earliest pronouncements in the press about his opinions regarding the potential of ballet in America, in particular regarding the physical aptitude of American women (in this instance not necessarily women of color, presumably). Balanchine maintained that since his arrival he has been able “to analyze and define more clearly the qualities that make the American girl the ideal ballet material”:

“The American girl is ‘mieux construit,’ or, as you would say, better built, than girls of other countries. I think this is due to the freedom allowed American women and to the eager way these girls as well as their brothers enjoy athletics from childhood on,” the ballet master has said. “The American girl finds greater zest in her sports and athletics because they are not so much a matter of regimentation but enjoyment and freedom. She enters into them with high spirits and gets a kick out of them. For this reason she develops naturally a more graceful coordination of motions. In fact, she retains her femininity—most important to a ballet dancer.”

To what extent Balanchine can be granted sole authorship of such remarks is debatable, and the assistance of a ghostwriter is likely given the evidence of his lack of proficiency in English at the time. Nevertheless, such remarks did circulate under his name and constitute important evidence on his emergent views on American women dancers.

Whether by design or on its merits, Alma Mater was indeed the hit of the Hartford engagement. “Coming in for chief acclaim was Alma Mater,” as the Christian Science

215 “American Ballet School Gets Test This Week,” BS, December 2, 1934.
216 “Ballet Will Make Debut December 6,” HC, November 23, 1934; “American Ballet School Gets Test This Week,” BS, December 2, 1934.
217 In interviews conducted by McNeil Lowry, Balanchine toward the end of his life maintained that he “couldn’t even speak English” when he arrived in the U.S. and that around 1935 “I really couldn’t read; I couldn’t understand what I read.” McNeil Lowry, “Our Local Correspondences: Conversations with Balanchine,” The New Yorker, September 12, 1983, 57.
Monitor put it, drawing “roars of laughter, shouts, and cheers” from the crowd. Other reviews describe “laughter and cheers” from the audience and praised the “hilarious pantomime and character dancing.” The Washington Post called all three new works “fresh evocations” and proof that ballet is indeed “a completely articulated art form capable of weaving a vital and original pattern from the shuttle of contemporary America,” but the “music, book, sets, costume and treatment” of Alma Mater were “so new as to be in the very mood of the future.” Impressions of the other ballets were scant but generally positive. To Mozartiana Balanchine had brought “an elegance, a courtliness, a simplicity and joyousness drawn not only from Mozart but from the times as well,” asserted T. H. Parker in the Hartford Courant. Although Transcendence was evidently created “with their limitations in mind,” the dancers nevertheless “brought it precision, fluency, fine moods and fine dancing by principals and by corps.”

But despite its appealing ethos and crowd-pleasing charm, Alma Mater did come in for criticism, and to the chagrin of the organizers, did not necessarily pass muster as an American ballet. As Parker explained:

> [E]ven admitted under the head of “character” it all seemed so little ballet in form, so much nearer musical comedy, so rather obvious in its comic strip humor, that I doubt whether it can be called “an American ballet,” and with all due deference to the amusing qualities it does have, or perhaps because of them, I think it must eventually be relegated to the category known in professional circles as “diverts.”

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220 “Ballet Appears In a Burlesque Of Our Foibles,” WP, December 7, 1934.
222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
Previews of the Hartford engagement had surmised as much and averred that ballet “cannot, even in the form Diaghilev gave it, strike roots in every national soil.”

“A really American ballet might be much closer to musical comedy routine than enthusiastic balletomaniacs would care to believe,” the reporter theorized, and “the scraps of information about Alma Mater suggest that it points in that direction.”

This quality of Alma Mater helps explain Kirstein’s persistent lack of enthusiasm for the work, which he noted in his diary after the second night’s performance was “already beginning to pall.”

The opening night show on Thursday was an especially festive occasion thanks to the attendance of “notables from the worlds of music, art and the theater, and of social eminences from all parts of the country,” including George Gershwin, A. Conger Goodyear, Tod (Mrs. Nelson) Rockefeller, Kirk and Constance Askew (in whose London home Balanchine and Kirstein had first spoken the previous year), Salvador Dalí and his wife, as well as members of the Warburg and Kirstein families. (Kay Swift was not among them, having gone to Reno, Nevada, to establish residency for her divorce from James Warburg.) The party had begun for many of these audience members earlier in the evening at Grand Central Station, where a specially commissioned Pullman railcar whisked them directly from New York to Hartford, with both wardrobe facilities and

225 Ibid.
226 LK Diaries, December 7, 1934.
228 Weber, Patron Saints, 257; Ohl, Fine and Dandy, 93.
refreshments on board, with Gershwin himself playing host.\textsuperscript{229} As had been the case at Woodlands six months earlier, for this audience the ballet was not necessarily the main attraction of the evening. Lucius Beebe in the \textit{Herald-Tribune} reports that a “tidal wave of sables began engulfing the Avery Memorial Theater promptly three quarters of an hour after curtain time” and that of the two staircases leading to the theater “the entire assembled chivalry surged down one of them—the one where the photographers were stationed.”\textsuperscript{230} During the first intermission talk in the lobby did not center on the dance, but was rather given over to the mission of securing an invitation to the after party hosted by James T. Soby and his wife.\textsuperscript{231} Accordingly, the second intermission was “devoted to the business of securing transportation to the Sobys’ party,” and the hosts themselves “telephoned home to put more beer on ice and get the gardener into a waiter’s suit” in anticipation of the onrush.\textsuperscript{232}

Such ostentation did not sit well with John Martin, who in lieu of a review included an open letter to the American Ballet in his Sunday dance column of December 16. Martin’s “words of welcome and of warning” enumerated three categories of error to which projects such as the American Ballet were prone, namely “glamour, snobbery, and provincialism.”\textsuperscript{233} “The accounts of your Hartford debut,” he noted with concern, “dealt considerably more with the ermine and diamonds on the near side of the footlights than with the accomplishments over which you have labored devotedly for a year or more”:

This is, of course, through no fault of your own, and no one who has followed your organization from the beginning will believe for a moment

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\textsuperscript{229} Lucius Beebe, “An Evening Dedicated to the Arts,” \textit{NYHT}, December 9, 1934.  \\
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.  \\
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that you are aiming merely to please a fashionable audience. There is, indeed, every evidence of your sincere and almost passionate purpose to create an American ballet for whatever audience there may be. But you are faced with the delicate problem of making yourself clear on this point. The chic and smartness which are automatically expected of a ballet company breed a perilous success. The bravos of the comparatively small company of the ermine-clad are transitory. It is the broad American audience that you must reach if you are to create the real American ballet which is so much to be desired.  

Although Kirstein would subsequently cross swords with Martin, he evidently did not take issue with these particular criticisms, making note in his diary of the “excellent open letter to the American Ballet by John Martin” the day the column was published. That the cultivation of a high society ethos had been driven more by Warburg is suggested by Kirstein’s declaration the following day of a “campaign against Warburg” to isolate him from Balanchine and Dimitriev and thus gain more control over the future direction of the organization. Kirstein, Martin, and Charles Laskey lunched together several days later, and the critic was “very flattering about Balanchine and practically helpful.” What is more, Kirstein’s father Louis, whose money was helping bankroll the entire operation—thus literally and not just figuratively implicated in the problematic elitism identified by Martin—concurred with the critic’s observations and did not evidently take any offense. “I think it is by far the best article I have seen on the subject,” he wrote to his son the day after the open letter appeared:

[H]e treats it sympathetically, understandingly and encouragingly and if I were you I would write him a nice note. I happen to know these fellows like this very much and it will only cost a few pennies and perhaps cement a friendship which I understand you already have with Mr. Martin.

234 Ibid.
235 LK Diaries, December 16, 1934.
236 LK Diaries, December 17, 1934.
237 LK Diaries, December 20, 1934.
238 Louis Kirstein to Lincoln Kirstein, December 17, 1934, LEK Collection.
If the organizers had done much to tout their trio of world premieres, in the end, they would present only two of the three allegedly new works. Serenade, scheduled for the final Saturday evening performance, was in the end scrapped in favor of a fourth presentation of Mozartiana.239 It was not the readiness of the dancing, but rather the sets and the suitability of the ballet to the space that occasioned the replacement. Kirstein’s diary records that after the opening night performance, he took off his tailcoat and joined the team that worked until 2:30 a.m. “trying to put up Oakie’s set for Serenade, which had to be done if we were to rehearse tomorrow morning, the last chance we would get.”240 One preview article on the engagement described Oakie’s staging of the ballet as “treating the stage picture as a plastic space by the use of a large pendant sculptural shell.”241 This central feature was evidently one of the chief challenges with the set, with Kirstein recalling that the “big spiral looked like hell but we finally got it into some kind of shape.”242 Despite their heroic efforts, the rehearsal the next morning produced “dubious effects” since the stage “really is too small for this ballet.”243 After sleeping in Saturday morning Kirstein found out that the ballet would in fact be scrapped completely, owing to the stage problems and issues with the costumes:

When I got to the Museum they had decided not to give Serenade at all. The stage wasn’t big enough; the costumes were impossible. No use in trying to fool ourselves. It would ruin an otherwise good ballet by getting it set off on the wrong foot.244

239 LK Diaries, December 8, 1934.
240 LK Diaries, December 6, 1934.
242 LK Diaries, December 6, 1934.
243 LK Diaries, December 7, 1934.
244 LK Diaries, December 8, 1934.
Kirstein notes that for the evening’s performance *Mozartiana* was indeed given as the third ballet on the program, meaning that Balanchine’s so-called “first ballet in America” was not performed at any of his company’s first four public performances (and neither was *Dreams*, for that matter). Although *Serenade* is mentioned in several reviews, most references occur in articles published before the ballet was scrapped on Saturday, and even so the ballet is described in brief and vague terms that in effect paraphrases copy from the surviving press release and other reports.

Even without all of its premieres, the Hartford engagement helped Warburg, Kirstein, and the American Ballet make up with Chick Austin and the Avery Memorial for the failed launch one year earlier, and also brought local closure of a different sort. The Sunday afternoon of December 9 witnessed a gathering of the New England Council of Dancing Teachers in Hartford, at which lessons in ballet instruction were a featured event, “scheduled exclusively for this meeting in honor of the world premiere of the ‘American Ballet’ last week in the Avery Memorial.” Whether the angry cadre of local dance teachers who had protested the American Ballet’s residence in Hartford attended this meeting—much less any performances by the American Ballet itself—is not recorded. Had they been present they may have found renewed grounds for protest, however, since the “prominent teacher of the ballet” Constantine Kobeloff selected to instruct the teachers was drawn not from their own ranks, but rather invited for the occasion from New York City. But for now the American Ballet would return to New York to regroup for more challenges in the coming year.

245 LK Diaries, December 8, 1934.
246 “Ballet Demonstrated To Dancing Teachers,” *HC*, December 11, 1934.
247 Ibid.
Figure 1: Program from Woodlands, American Ballet Programs, *MGZB (Programs)
JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 2: Uncredited photograph, *Dreams*, Woodlands, June 10, 1934, Patterson-Dollar Scrapbook, JRDD-NYPL
Figure 3: Uncredited photograph, Serenade, Woodlands, June 10, 1934, Patterson-Dollar Scrapbook, JRDD–NYPL.
Chapter 3

Balanchine’s Modernism and the Official Debut of the American Ballet, 1935

The previous chapter showed how the American Ballet was understood to have already premiered several new ballets by the end of 1934: the June performances at Woodlands saw the debut of *Serenade* and the new Antheil-scored version of *Dreams*, and the December engagement in Hartford witnessed the first performances of *Alma Mater* and *Transcendence*. But despite the fact that both Woodlands and Hartford were reckoned as debuts of a sort in contemporary sources, the official company premiere of the American Ballet is nevertheless regarded as its March 1–17, 1935 engagement at the Adelphi Theater in New York City. It is from these performances that two notable sources, the *Balanchine Catalogue* and the related resources of the Balanchine Trust, date the premieres of most of Balanchine’s early work in America.

Questions of record-keeping aside, however, the Adelphi performances have served as a focal point for evaluating the critical reception of the American Ballet’s early repertoire and understanding Balanchine’s choreographic style and aesthetic priorities at this time. Three years after the fact, Lincoln Kirstein wrote in *Blast at Ballet* that the Adelphi performances “pleased many people and disappointed others,” adding that “I think it was John Martin who called it *Les Ballets 1935*, and with some reason.”¹ Subsequent accounts of the Adelphi debut have focused quite intently on Martin’s alleged critical bias against anything that Balanchine and his new company would undertake. Indeed, in Balanchine’s biographies Martin—the most influential dance critic in America

at the time— is caricatured as either a modern dance partisan or obstreperous heretic (or both) who would only years later undergo a miraculous Damascene conversion to the Balanchine cause.

This chapter offers a wider perspective on the American Ballet’s debut at the Adelphi and the period of preparation leading up to it in order to more critically evaluate the aesthetics of the American Ballet’s initial repertoire, Balanchine’s early American style, and the company’s reception above and beyond the views of Martin. As I will show, Balanchine’s choreography during the early 1930s, including the repertoire that made up the Adelphi programs, was widely viewed as idiosyncratic, experimental, and

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3 “[I]n those earlier years, when Balanchine and the American Ballet were first trying to get established in the United States, Martin was not merely lukewarm on the subject of Balanchine but actively antipathetic. […] Martin repeatedly attacked Balanchine’s approach as precious and decadent, an example of the kind of ‘Riviera aesthetics’ that America should be spared. […] At this point, he wrote, the very best thing that the American Ballet could do would be to get rid of Balanchine, with his international notions, and hire a good American dance man. For the next decade and more, Martin’s reviews and articles expressed variations on that theme,” Taper, *Balanchine: A Biography*, 161–2; “One of the crosses Balanchine and Kirstein had to bear was that the only dance critic in the country of any consequence, John Martin of the *New York Times*, was strongly opposed to their venture because he thought Balanchine was too European, too Russian, not American. The best thing for the American Ballet could do, he was to suggest, was ‘to get rid of Balanchine and his European notions, and hire a good American dance man.’” Gottlieb, *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker*, 81; “Martin had been raised on modern dance and believed that only an American-born choreographer such as Martha Graham could create a distinctively American style of dance. His obtuseness was an unintentional tribute to Kirstein’s farsighted vision.” Teachout, *All In the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine*, 66.

4 Balanchine’s biographers situate Martin’s conversion in 1948, in the wake of Ballet Society’s premiere of *Orpheus*: “Even John Martin was impressed” (225) and “Even John Martin had now become a convert” (236), Taper, *Balanchine: A Biography*; “The critical reception was enthusiastic, even from John Martin,” Gottlieb, *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker*, 113; “Martin’s belated conversion was no less pivotal,” Teachout, *All In the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine*, 92.
“personal,” what I will term “modernist” in its overall character (in contrast to the neoclassical style that would define his work beginning in the 1940s). At this time in America, composers Sergei Prokofiev and Aaron Copland were promoting their respective beliefs in “new simplicity” and “imposed simplicity” in music, and choreographers such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey were advocating directness and clarity of expression in modern dance, views widely regarded as containing an implicit leftist political bent. In fact, the rise of progressive political ideologies, promoted by the labor movement and the Popular Front, saw many artists putting their work to use for political and even propagandistic purposes. In such circles, dance was regarded as a potent weapon and music as a means to promote political action, and art that did not take a political stand was viewed with suspicion if not disdain. It is thus not entirely surprising that the arcane and art-for-art’s-sake aesthetics of Balanchine and the American Ballet in the mid-1930s were greeted with lukewarm interest if not outright hostility, and was by no means understood as an authentically American reinvention of ballet.

The first section situates Balanchine’s early work for the American Ballet—as well as his previous work being performed in America by other companies and artists—with a larger trajectory of modernist choreographic experimentalism and innovation, from the iconoclastic innovations of Soviet choreography in the 1920s to the newly emergent genre of “symphonic ballet” of the 1930s. The second section revisits a

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prolonged period of institutional turmoil at the School of American Ballet in early 1935, to show how Balanchine’s choreographic priorities and experimentation elicited intense criticism from his erstwhile partner and champion Vladimir Dimitriev and by extension called into question the governing aesthetics of the American Ballet’s repertoire. Section three examines the internal struggles that attended the two ballets added to the American Ballet’s repertoire for the Adelphi engagement—*Errante* (originally mounted for Les Ballets 1933) and *Reminiscence* (a newly-conceived suite of classical-style divertissements)—as well as an out-of-town preview engagement at Bryn Mawr College in early February. Section four chronicles the final preparations and execution of the Adelphi performances, which were hampered by Balanchine’s continued ill health and compromised by the fiscally unwise decision to extend the engagement beyond its initial one-week run. The final section surveys the critical reception of the Adelphi performances, showing how the much-maligned opinions of John Martin—most notably, that the American Ballet (or as it was nicknamed, “Les Ballets Américains”) was out of touch and elitist—are corroborated by critical voices in a wide range of newspapers and more specialized music and dance periodicals.

Virtually none of Balanchine’s choreography from this period has been preserved in performance, surviving only in photographs and written accounts. Through the insights of the many witnesses cited in the course of this chapter, however, we can recover the general ethos and feel of his choreography, which was evidently still grounded in the modernist modes of his preceding work for his own “Young Ballet,” Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, the de Basil company, and most recently, Les Ballets 1933. This new account also provides a way to re-imagine the early versions of the single ballet from this time.
that has been preserved in repertory, albeit in a substantially altered form, Balanchine’s “first in America” *Serenade*, discussed in a postscript.

1. Balanchine’s Modernism

Balanchine is today regarded as one of the twentieth century’s most important exponents of neoclassicism, a style first codified in ballets including *Concerto Barocco* (1941), *Ballet Imperial* (1941), *The Four Temperaments* (1946), and *Le Palais de Cristal* (1947, later renamed *Symphony in C*). In the early 1930s, however, Balanchine’s artistic disposition was by no means exclusively understood in such terms, and on the contrary was in fact still grounded in an experimental and what I will term a “modernist” idiom, and the classical bona fides of his style were hardly a settled issue.

Balanchine’s first experiences as a choreographer in the early 1920s had been inspired by several iconoclastic and experimental figures and trends in dance, all of which would contribute to the modernist character of his work in subsequent years. Many of these innovations centered on the renegotiation of the relation of choreography to music, providing important theoretical precedents for Balanchine’s own ideology of choreomusical relations. Around the time that Georges Balanchivadze was completing his ballet studies, Fyodor Lopukhov was tapped to be artistic director of the Petrograd Opera and Ballet (as the Maryinsky was then known). The Petersburg-trained Lopukhov had distinguished himself through revivals and revisions of classic Petipa story ballets.

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7 For a larger survey of the changing relations of choreography to music in twentieth century ballet, see Jordan, *Moving Music*, 3–61, especially 46–50 on the artists discussed in this paragraph.

while also experimenting with contemporary themes and fusing ballet technique with acrobatic effects. Lopukhov also advocated for abstract and plotless dance, exemplified by his controversial *TanzSymphonia* (also known as “The Grandeur of the Universe,” 1923) set to Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony, in which Balanchivadze and several of his classmates had danced.⁹

During this same period, Kaskan Goleizovsky’s Chamber Ballet at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theater also profoundly affected Balanchivadze and his fellow dancers when they performed in Petrograd. Goleizovsky favored music by composers including Chopin and Ravel for his ballets, many of which foregrounded dramatic and often explicitly erotic relations between men and elusive or otherwise inaccessible women.”¹⁰ A “Funeral March” dance created by Goleizovsky to music of Nikolai Medtner exerted an especially powerful influence on Balanchivadze, prompting him to stage his own *Marche Funèbre* (to Chopin’s Prelude No. 20 in C minor) for his own choreographic collective, the Young Ballet, organized in 1923.¹¹ Balanchivadze and his fellow dancers incorporated these and other concepts—the “new ballet” of Michel Fokine and the innovations of Bolshoi-based Alexander Gorsky—into their work for the short-lived company, his first sustained effort at choreography.¹²

Several scholars have already noted the way in which these early influences on Balanchine’s style were manifest in his subsequent work with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes,

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⁹ On Lopukhov’s role in Balanchine’s early education and career and the *TanzSymphonia* production, see Kendall, *Balanchine and the Lost Muse*, 155–6 and 175–7.
from 1925–29. Lynn Garafola has argued that Balanchine’s neoclassicism developed and evolved gradually out of earlier experimental and modernist methods, with *Apollon Musagète* (1928) as a crucial turning point in his choreographic development, inspired in no small measure by the neoclassical idioms of Stravinsky’s score.\(^\text{13}\) Also with respect to *Apollon Musagète*, Susan Jones has compared the original ballet with later revisions to show how the work originally represented a more conflicted play of Nietzschean Apollonian and Dionysian elements, in which its modernist character was more prevalent.\(^\text{14}\) As Gay Morris has demonstrated, moreover, Lincoln Kirstein was well aware of this dimension of Balanchine’s style and explicitly promoted aspects of the choreographer’s modernist lineage to appeal to certain audiences in the 1930s. Kirstein on the one hand touted Balanchine as an exponent of iconoclastic choreographic innovations from the early Soviet Union in an attempt to win over left-leaning audiences.\(^\text{15}\) Subsequently Kirstein placed Balanchine in the context of the “neo-romantic” idiom of surrealist art exemplified by artists such as Pavel Tchelitchev, the designer of *Errante* and later of the 1936 staging of Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* at the Metropolitan Opera (discussed in Chapter 6).\(^\text{16}\)

With this background in mind, we can return to the 1933 summertime rivalry between Balanchine’s Les Ballets 1933, the de Basil company led by Massine, and the troupe of Serge Lifar. Despite the fact that Balanchine did not set foot in the United States until October 1933 and did not himself offer work in a public venue until one year later in Hartford in December 1934, American audiences did not have to wait for the

\(^{13}\) Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, 135–41.

\(^{14}\) Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance*, 63–69.


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 42–3.
American Ballet to take the stage to familiarize themselves with his work, whether through written accounts or in live performance. As noted earlier, many ballets from Balanchine’s Diaghilev and post-Diaghilev years followed him across the Atlantic only a couple months after his own passage, albeit presented by artists and organizations without his direct oversight or involvement (as had been the case in Paris and London in the summer of 1933). In November 1933, Serge Lifar’s debut performances in the United States included *La Chatte* (1927), which Balanchine had choreographed for the Ballets Russes with Lifar in the central role.\(^\text{17}\) The de Basil company included *La Concurrence* and *Cotillon* in the repertoire for its first American tour in late 1933 and would continue to present both works for many years afterward.\(^\text{18}\) Reviews and reports of European engagements by Lifar, the de Basil company, and Les Ballets 1933 provided further access—if only in text and photographs—to Balanchine’s latest offerings.

Balanchine’s style found a few unqualified supporters in America. A *Modern Music* review of the 1932 Paris season of the de Basil company identified *La Concurrence* as one of a very few ballets of the season that exemplified the now all-too-rare “exquisite taste of Diaghilev.” This was not because of its dancing per se, however, but owing to the synthesizing recipe that the Ballets Russes had made famous, and it is thus the company more than the choreographer who gets most of the credit. “It is just this

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ballet,” Andre Schaeffner wrote, which “with its incredible fantasy of costumes, flexibility and drollness of choreographic situation, and rich vitality of the score, seems to me to be the peak of the season and to justify the hopes placed in the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo.”

Schaeffner also found Balanchine’s Cotillon “quite successful,” though almost too realistic, and he “should have liked to see it more mysterious and less monotonous too, with the nostalgia of worldly cotillions accompanied by an evocation of more unreal things.”

In a Modern Music article from late 1933—a report announcing the founding of the School of American Ballet in Hartford—composer Marc Blitzstein similarly described Balanchine’s style as “very personal” with “a flair for the soundly spectacular,” and still considered it to be ballet. Blitzstein in fact offers an apologia for the choreographer that reads like talking points by Kirstein himself:

He has effected an individual and satisfying solution of classical ballet and new theatre, and has not fallen into the modern pitfall of becoming a mere pantomime régisseur. He has great tenderness and purity (Apollon [Musagète]), graceful malice and wit (La Chatte), he knows his low-comedy vaudeville (Le Bal) and can be dramatic and violent with exhaustless line and verve (Le Fils Prodigue).

Reviews of American performances of Balanchine’s works as performed by Lifar and the de Basil company in late 1933 and early 1934 similarly show that American critics understood the choreographer’s work as experimental and overall quite varied in character. “The episode had a modernistic background,” noted a review in Musical America of Lifar’s 1933 performances of La Chatte, “and the assistance of a group of young men, whose antics, clever in design and acrobatics as they were, did not shed

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20 Ibid., 41–2.
much light on the story.” The *Monitor* said that the ballet served to show Lifar as “an executant more endowed with acrobatic skill than with artistic inventiveness.” The *Monitor* glossed *La Concurrence* as performed by the de Basil troupe in December 1933 as “a farce in a street and shop window setting, amusingly realistic if conventionally satirical.” John Martin approvingly described this same ballet as “extraordinarily witty and ingenious,” even if its story of “rival tailors and their unscrupulous methods of entrapping customers” had “neither line nor logic.” Reviewing the U.S. premiere of *Cotillon* three months later, Martin described the ballet as quintessentially Balanchine, insofar as it was “like Gertrude Stein’s opera libretto [for *Four Saints in Three Acts*], apparently about nothing at all, yet in performance it achieves a certain mysterious meaning.” To an even greater degree than *La Concurrence*, *Cotillon* had a “novel approach to movement,” and in it Balanchine “has woven ingenious designs made from movements which indicate clearly that for him experimentation has no terrors.” (A year later Martin was still very much taken with the “brilliant” *Cotillon*, calling it a “gem among modern ballets.”)

Ballet was evidently in the eye of the beholder, however. The forward-thinking pages of *Modern Music* found Balanchine’s eclectic modernism praiseworthy and still sufficiently grounded in classical technique, and other American critics greeted his experiments with approval, even if they sometimes bordered on the bizarre. But most

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27 Ibid.
Anglo-American critics reached contrary conclusions regarding the offerings of Les Ballets 1933, which had evidently gone too far. L. Franc Scheuer in the *Dancing Times* concluded that Balanchine’s “fondness for the subtle in his art has frequently led him out of insinuation and into obscurity”:

As this tendency is one shared by a great number of contemporary painters and musicians he has had no difficulty in finding collaborators. With a solidarity that has something frightening about it, these artists have so successfully managed to suppress everything in ballet that has to do with Dance proper that what remains of their efforts is mostly *mise-en-scène.*

More specifically, two ballets later remounted by the American Ballet were not well received the first time around in Paris and London: *Mozartiana* was deemed a series of divertissements that “makes hesitant genuflections to the Classical School, and shows up the disparity of the corps de ballet,” while *Les Songes* offered “the slim dream of a young danseuse in the midst of [André] Derain’s libretto and the simplicity—extreme—of his décor.”

Emile Vuillermoz, a respected Paris music critic who had covered ballet for many years, noted in a review for the *Christian Science Monitor* that the company’s debut performances had “called upon the most diverse elements” to assemble its repertoire but with disappointing results. *Errante* was a “nebulous fantasy on Schubert’s music” and the Brecht-Weill *The Seven Cardinal Sins* “scarcely belongs to choreographic technique” and “rests on a peculiarly harsh theoretical idea.”

A review of the company’s London season in the *Monitor* offered similar judgments, noting of *Errante* that “[p]osturing and running about bare-footed” were “once more a poor substitute for

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30 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
the vocabulary of the classical dance.” The choreography of *Mozartiana* “turned out to be curiously ineffective,” and *Les Songes* was similarly underwhelming, for which the critic averred that, “some here will point to the influence of the Central European school,” which Kirstein would elsewhere vociferously criticize and against which he would posit Balanchine as a classical antidote.  

If Balanchine was thus still grounded in modernist experimentation, which he had taken (in the view of some) to the extremes of good taste, “pure dance” had acquired a new champion in the person of Léonide Massine. Henry Prunières, a music critic and longtime editor of *La Revue Musicale*, in a review of the 1933 Paris season of the de Basil company for the *New York Times* posited Massine as a prodigal son returned home, having abjured the wild experiments of his youth:

> After a period of wandering after strange gods—acrobatics, gymnastics, a style of mechanical and desiccated gestures—he has returned to a more human and natural conception of the dance, fertilized, indeed, by these experiments with differing techniques. He has enriched the classic ballet with all that it could assimilate of rhythm, plasticity, acrobatics and the rest. By acquiring an unusually wide range of methods whereby to realize his ideas, he has made himself, in my opinion, the first man in his profession today.

Almost to a letter, this description of the style that Massine had recently disavowed could double as a summary of the modernist mode in which Balanchine was apparently still active. Other critics concurred, and remarked that the superiority of the de Basil troupe over its competitors derived not just from their more ample and seasoned roster of

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34 Ibid.  
dancers, but due to “the timely decision taken by Massine, its ballet master, to present works in which the protagonists really dance.”  

In 1933 this renewed commitment to serious art was most evident in Les Présages, the first of Massine’s “symphonic ballets,” set to Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, a piece “which really seems to have been awaiting such treatment,” according to the Dancing Times, which termed it the “pièce de résistance” of the de Basil troupe’s offerings in the summer of 1933. Despite unappealing costumes and décor, and “its rather bombastic symbolism opposing Man to his Destiny,” the ballet has the potential to “stimulate our imagination by virtue of its proper movement, which is the highest function one can demand of dancing.” Of Massine’s work during this time, it was these ballets that most clearly represented an aesthetic break with his previous work under Diaghilev and were regarded as perhaps the most notable choreographic innovation of his whole career. As Stephanie Jordan has argued, with his turn to symphonic ballet “Massine rejected his folk interests, his brilliant characterizations and noisy futurist blasts for something more grand in scale and serious in tone.”

Although it was the first, Les Présages was not most controversial of Massine’s symphonic ballets, which would subsequently come under attack after his decision to use Brahms’s Fourth Symphony for the ballet Choreartium—Les Présages having not aroused similar ire since it had not raided the more hallowed canon of Austro-Germanic masterpieces. Articulated among other places in a series of articles in London’s Sunday Times: 

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36 L. Franc Scheuer, “Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and Ballets 1933,” DT, July 1933.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 For a more detailed discussion of Massine’s symphonic ballets, especially Choreartium, see Jordan, Moving Music, 50–6.
40 Ibid., 52.
Times in 1936 by music critic Ernest Newman, the objections to and defenses of this new practice are summarized by Jordan as follows:

[A] piece of great music is self-sufficient, forming an organic whole; such music is too complex in its own internal workings for dance to match up to it; symphonic music is essentially a matter of the intellect and spirit, not the body; the composer never intended the music to be choreographed. Enthusiasts for symphonic ballet on the other hand argued that not only was it instrumental in bringing great music to a new public, but its large-scale organicism was an important advantage for ballet, helping to unify the form of the choreography, and providing a model for structuring plotless dance over a broad time span.41

The genre earned an advocate in the person of Russian émigré dance critic and historian Anatole Chujoy (subsequently a close confidant of Balanchine and the first historian of the New York City Ballet). In a short volume published in 1937 Chujoy offered a short history and *ars poetica* of this still contentious genre, whose essence derived from a congruity between symphonic texture and choreographic structure:

Every dancer becomes as important on the stage as every instrument is in the orchestra. The group, the mass, loses the anonymity of the *corps de ballet* and becomes a unit with an important role to perform. The soloist gives up the outstanding position of the *ballerina* or *premier danseur* and becomes an integral part of the *ensemble*. [italics in original]42

Massine was not regarded as its only exponent, however, and in defense of this new art form Chujoy recruits virtually all of the great choreographers of the Diaghilevian era—including Fokine, Nijinsky, Nijinska, Lifar, and Balanchine. Of all of these, however, it is Massine and Balanchine who are regarded as the two key figures. But although Chujoy maintains that the smaller-scale orchestral works such as suites and tone-poems are also to be included under the rubric of “symphonic ballet”—such as Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade for Strings* and Orchestral Suite No. 4 “Mozartiana” used by

41 Ibid.
Balanchine—he nevertheless grants most favored status to Massine, in part since he choreographed to actual symphonies. “George Balanchine came closer than any other choreographer to the production of symphonic ballets,” Chujoy explains, and “understood better than any one else the aesthetics and structure of symphonic ballet,” exemplified by “outstanding creations” such as *Errante*, *Transcendence*, *Serenade*, and *Mozartiana*.\(^43\)

Where Balanchine fell short, however, was in confining himself to smaller musical forms, leaving to Massine “the honor and hardship of creating the first symphonic ballet which conforms with the strict terms of its definition.”\(^44\) This ballet was *Les Présages*, and four years after its premiere, according to Chujoy, Massine remained “the only choreographer who creates full symphonic ballets, who regards symphonies as a definite ballet idiom.”\(^45\) To strengthen his case, Chujoy recruited André Levinson, by then deceased, who “was no great admirer of symphonic ballets,” but only because he did not live to see Massine’s later symphonic ballets *Choreartium* and *Symphonie Fantastique* (to Berlioz).\(^46\) Levinson had seen *Les Présages*, however, and maintained (by Chujoy’s account), that with this ballet Massine had “restored the primacy of the dance.”\(^47\) Indeed in an article for *Dance* magazine, Chujoy offered a shorter defense of Massine’s symphonic ballets with no mention of Balanchine at all, and describes his innovations in terms that if not Balanchine than at least Kirstein might have zealously coveted:

> With this realization Massine has not only kept ballet alive and widened its scope, but has brought it through a period of decadence without losing

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 29–30.  
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 30.  
\(^{45}\) Ibid.  
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 32.  
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
the thread of its past. He has welcomed a new age instead of fighting against it, but he has also stood by the underlying principles of the classic tradition. If there was any other way of saving the ballet from stagnation and ultimate decay, someone, possibly Fokine, should have indicated it.48

“Up to now,” as Chujoy similarly concludes in The Symphonic Ballet, “the history of modern ballet was divided into two periods: pre-Fokine and Fokine. Now we have to add another period—Massine.”49

It might come as a surprise that Chujoy’s rhetoric in praise of Massine seems to have been lifted verbatim from the Balanchine neoclassical playbook. And indeed, thanks to the ultimate success of both men’s “symphonic ballets,” which at the time merited a special label, we are today able to enjoy such works (at least the few that have survived, notably Serenade) as simply “ballets,” so routine, if not obligatory, is the practice of choreographing to “absolute music” not originally composed for dance. But if history today might easily draw a line from Petipa to Fokine to Balanchine, it is worth noting that credit for “reinventing” or “preserving” ballet, at least in the United Stats, was initially bestowed upon Massine, as Balanchine, unlike his rival, had yet to turn away decisively from his modernist promiscuity.

As much as Balanchine’s neoclassicism has been praised as his most salient contribution to twentieth-century ballet, this turning away from his modernist inclinations can also be understood as something of a loss. Later in life, Elliott Carter recalled of the repertoire of Les Ballets 1933 that “I never saw anything quite as interesting as that again,” and implied that Balanchine deliberately tempered his experimental inclinations in order to be successful in America:

49 Chujoy, The Symphonic Ballet, 42.
He said to me once that one of the problems later, when he came here, was that he felt obliged to do ballets that would be successful. He felt responsible to Lincoln and to the whole company. As time went on, from my point of view, he began to lose some of that very novel character that was striking at the beginning of his career.\textsuperscript{50}

This quality would occasionally reemerge, Carter added, for example in the Webern ballet \textit{Episodes} (1959). And not just this work but other later works such as \textit{Ivesiana} (1954) and \textit{Bugaku} (1963) as well as the 1958 revival of \textit{The Seven Deadly Sins}, show evidence of Balanchine’s continued interest in the unconventional choreographic conceits and bizarre and overtly erotic themes that defined his early modernist style.

2. Reorganizing the American Ballet; Negotiating Balanchine’s Style

In late 1934 and early 1935, any excitement following the Hartford performances quickly faded as the American Ballet regrouped to consider its next steps. In a post-mortem talk, Warburg, Dimitriev, and Kirstein resolved that the “disorganization must cease” and the “amateurish elements in the Company must be weeded out.”\textsuperscript{51} The three were also concerned about “elements attacking our morale,” which was evidently part of the reason for the dismissal of Erick Hawkins from the company.\textsuperscript{52} Back in April Hawkins had reported to Kirstein of “how piddling the talk was in the boy’s dressing room” in particular “Charles Laskey saying he wanted to be The Star.”\textsuperscript{53} But according to most reports, it was Hawkins who had become insufferable, with even Kirstein noting how he came across as “slightly uppity and fractious […] as if at any point he might soar

\textsuperscript{50} Elliott Carter, in Francis Mason, Ed. \textit{I Remember Balanchine}, 164.
\textsuperscript{51} LK Diaries, December 10, 1934.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} LK Diaries, April 24, 1934.
off into a mania of self-importance.”54 Although he would be reinstated soon after, his interpersonal challenges would continue, with Kirstein learning later from Eugene Loring that Hawkins acted liked “a prig even in the dressing rooms” and wouldn’t engage in any jokes with the other boys.55 Hawkins also had a reputation for touching the girls’ legs, to which they joked to one another that he was “in heat.”56

Such concerns about the dancers aside, the greater challenge facing the organization in the first months of 1935 was an increasingly acrimonious feud between Balanchine and his erstwhile partner and champion Vladimir Dimitriev, a conflict in which Kirstein and Warburg of necessity became embroiled as well. Martin Duberman writes that this “discord among the four principals” was somewhat old hat, and that the “arguments and accusations among them had by this point become repetitive.”57 Although the conflict erupted in earnest in January 1935, the troubles had indeed been brewing over the previous year. On the surface the conflict appears to be a petty turf war fomented by Dimitriev—the lowest in stature of the four partners, neither as famous as Balanchine nor as rich as Kirstein, much less Warburg—and was no doubt exacerbated by the amateurism that characterized the young Americans’ leadership of the school and company. Kirstein’s diaries suggest that Dimitriev’s ultimate motivation in fomenting dissent was indeed a desire for a more prominent role in the enterprise, and his various statements should thus not be taken entirely at face value. Whatever his motive or desired endgame, Dimitriev’s complaints centered on three ongoing issues with Balanchine: his artistic leadership, pedagogical practices, and choreographic aesthetics. Lending credence

54 LK Diaries, December 2, 1934.
55 LK Diaries, January 13, 1935.
56 Ibid.
to Dimitriev’s observations is the fact that they resonate with contemporary accounts and critical assessments of Balanchine’s work in the studio and on stage (discussed in the subsequent sections of this chapter).

At its most basic and petty level, the conflict originated from Dimitriev’s discontent at his lack of public recognition. He had been continually omitted from press reports on the American Ballet enterprise as early as March 1934, when a Harper’s Bazaar article mentioned only Kirstein and Dorothie Littlefield by name.58 More recently, press coverage from Hartford, including a World-Telegram article on “Young Warburg’s Ballet” and a report in Time had both failed to credit his role in the enterprise.59 On a more substantive level, however, Dimitriev’s frustrations centered first and foremost on Balanchine’s lackadaisical artistic leadership. During the run-up to Hartford he had lamented that Balanchine “has no boss” and “no painter to jump on him, nor any Diaghilev in control.”60 Balanchine “didn’t want to compose, or work at the School or do anything” and instead “wanted to be only like Boris Kochno”—the librettist of previous ballets by Balanchine and Diaghilev’s assistant—“artistic collaborator who could command or not, as he wishes.”61 Soon after in discussions with artist Ben Shahn over new work for the company, Kirstein noted the challenge of proposing any new project given “Dimitriev’s antagonism and Balanchine’s apathy.”62

In response to these perceived slights and more genuine concerns, Dimitriev proposed a new leadership structure in which Balanchine would not have exclusive

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58 LK Diaries, March 3, 1934.
59 LK Diaries, December 11–12, 14, 1934.
60 LK Diaries, October 23, 1934
61 Ibid.
62 LK Diaries, November 8, 1934.
purview over artistic decisions, not that he had enjoyed anything close to free rein to begin with, since Warburg exercised ultimate control through the power of the purse.\textsuperscript{63} Dimitriev held that a separate “artistic director” was necessary to help Balanchine and “stop him from making mistakes as in the costumes and décor for Serenade,” which had been mismanaged in the preparations for Hartford. By Dimitriev’s assessment, Balanchine “refused to believe he could do any wrong” and “only gave excuses for his errors,” and further held that while he may be “a genius in choreography in music and painting he was nothing,” criticism that the choreographer took personally.\textsuperscript{64} Kirstein for his part maintained that the issue was much larger, since the company’s artistic planning had been heretofore “entirely accidental” and “based haphazardly on the Diaghilev formula,” and they instead should formulate a more deliberate plan for their future endeavors.\textsuperscript{65} Balanchine only stiffened in response and said “he could not be nailed down with any definite plan” and “would not have anyone over him” and additionally that “only Massine could work like that,” Which was hardly an apt description of his relationship with either Diaghilev or de Basil.\textsuperscript{66} Dimitriev noted in response that, “for ten years [Balanchine] had always someone over him.”\textsuperscript{67}

Also at issue was the School’s pedagogical agenda. A week after the Hartford engagement, Dimitriev held forth in a long conversation (not including Balanchine) about “how fatuous it is to study the classic ballet for Balanchine’s work” and instead they should teach only “solfeggio, music, plastic, and pantomime” (all elements of

\textsuperscript{63} LK Diaries, January 2, 1935.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
eurhythmics and modern dance training) in accord with the modernist estimations of Balanchine’s style cited above. Warburg demurred that “a little of everything would be nice,” while Kirstein (taking the side of the *Modern Music* critics) stressed the continued importance of the *danse d’école*, maintaining that, “Balanchine had invented and developed classical style without which one could not dance *Mozartiana* or *Serenade* or *Transcendence*.”

Two days later, in another discussion, this time with Balanchine present, Dimitriev pursued a different tack—perhaps in an attempt to bait the choreographer—announcing that more traditional ballet fare should be the primary focus of theatrical performances. To this end, he pitched the idea of “choosing the best pieces out of the memories of Kyra Blanc, Balanchine, Vladimirov, and Doubrovska, have them rehearsed in the purity of their classic style by Vladimirov and arranged in a sequence theatrically by Balanchine.” Balanchine balked at the suggestion, saying the scores by Ludwig Minkus (composer of among other ballets *La Bayadère*), Cesare Pugni (*The Daughter of the Pharaoh*), and Adolphe Adam (*Giselle*) were all “terrible” and “all the ballets were boring.”

These sort of debates carried over into the classroom, with several sources suggesting that Balanchine’s modernist disposition did not confine itself to his stage works from this time. Dancer Annabelle Lyon recalls Balanchine’s classes as more unconventional compared to those taught by Vladimirov, whose exercises “were to be expected. There was nothing unusual in them. They were beautifully put together and the

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68 LK Diaries, December 19, 1934.
69 Ibid.
70 LK Diaries, December 21, 1934.
71 Ibid.
movement flowed. And they felt right for the body to do."72 By contrast, Balanchine’s classes were distinct owing to their “rhythm” and “change of direction”:

Balanchine would come in and his classes would get a little trickier as far as the music was concerned. More rhythmical. And he would give more small movement; more small footwork. And the center work would be maybe unusual. A little more creative in kind of tricky ways.73

Lyon also notes that the dancers received considerably more instruction from Vladimirov than Balanchine, who at this point in his career was generally uninterested in teaching.74 Kirstein’s diaries characterize Balanchine’s classes in similar terms, describing one morning session in October 1934 as “very hard” and “tricky in time,” and that he “would repeat each exercise until they had finally got it.”75 In late January Kirstein had a similar impression of Balanchine’s class, describing it as “too difficult musically” and “all too fanciful in the exercises.”76 It was again evident that Balanchine “doesn’t like to teach” and instead “wants to compose all the time, even in class.”77

In a monograph written ten years after the School of American Ballet first opened, dance critic and historian Ann Barzel similarly characterizes Vladimirov and Balanchine in these dichotomous terms.78 The different dispositions of the two men were evident in their instruction, with the work of Vladimirov seen as “classical, very perfect and in the manner of the grande école,” while Balanchine’s was by contrast “highly stylized,

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72 Annabelle Lyon Interview, 64.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 LK Diaries, October 19, 1934.
76 LK Diaries, January 23, 1935.
77 Ibid.
imaginative, stimulating.” Balanchine’s contribution to this renovation and refinement of ballet technique was more specific, however, and parallels the modernist and experimental discourse evident in critical sources from the 1930s:

Balanchine’s imaginative use of new poses and movements in his ballets led teachers to try all sorts of innovations in class. New arm positions were used for turns, more jumps and grande batterie were taught, and at the School of American Ballet even girls did air turns.

So different was Balanchine’s style by the 1940s, Barzel notes further, that it necessitated a change in the students’ attire: “The general use of all over tights as the most popular classroom costume for boys and girls was more than a matter of fashion. It went with the cleaner technique and purer line.” In this respect the origins of Balanchine’s now-famous “leotard ballets”—whose minimalist attire is one iconic element of his later neoclassical style—are in fact to be found in his experimental modernism. Once again, however, the influence of Massine must be noted as well, since it was in ballets from Ode (1928) to Rouge et Noir (1938) that “all over tights” were first put to use on stage on a consistent basis.

In addition to questions of leadership and technique, Dimitriev at several points over the previous year had expressed concerns about Balanchine’s choreography. He saw Balanchine’s new work trending unfavorably in an experimental direction or otherwise lacking a clear vision. When Alma Mater had been in rehearsal in June, Dimitriev dismissed it as “too much like an old movie,” which would be acceptable if it were being consciously created as such, but in fact Balanchine was merely repeating “the same tricks

79 Ibid., 98.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
again and again.”82 In his memoirs, Edward Warburg recalled with bemused indifference that for this purportedly “American” work, Balanchine recycled movements from his work for Diaghilev, specifically that he “merely reshaped the standard sight gags used in ballets such as Boutique Fantastique [sic] to get a laugh.”83 One such trick was the comic pratfall, of which Dimitriev claimed during one rehearsal to have counted twenty-one in only seventeen minutes of the ballet.84 As the program for Hartford was coming together with the addition of the Lisztian Transcendence, Dimitriev again expressed his displeasure, complaining “that there was no dancing in our repertory only plastique and mime and now this Hungarian thing, which he had counted on for dances” but which “would also be ultimately foolishness and merde.”85

To Dimitriev’s additional frustration, Balanchine was unwilling do any substantial revision of his work and demonstrated a general apathy about his duties. A month after the Woodlands performances, Dimitriev complained to Kirstein that Balanchine “never changed anything in the new ballets; that solo parts in Serenade, Dreams, and Touch Down [Alma Mater] must be revised and that Balanchine was insufferable and would listen to no criticism.”86 By September Balanchine and Dimitriev were locked in a now routine antagonism, and Kirstein was beginning to share the same concerns. “Balanchine, as usual, was verbally difficult with Dimitriev,” Kirstein records, with the choreographer elaborating that “it was odd, but lately he’s only been interested in films, and had thought

82 LK Diaries, June 18, 1934.
83 Warburg, As I Recall, 54.
84 LK Diaries, June 20, 1934.
85 LK Diaries, October 11, 1934.
86 LK Diaries, July 6, 1934.
of nothing else.”87 In response Dimitriev advised him “not to think at all; when he thought, he was inclined to create things like Dreams; when he acted instinctively, Serenade.”88 If Balanchine’s problem was to a certain degree overthinking his work, Dimitriev (and now Kirstein) increasingly saw another underlying issue as a lack of interest or commitment:

Dimitriev finally told him he was merely lazy; he gave correct lessons but without a trace of enthusiasm. But this was always the way, even during the “1933” season, he seemed to have no interest in the work. This I have noticed all along and it worries me. I keep feeling he’s fretting, frustratedly. I ply him, or try to, with little ideas of one sort or another, which he quickly forgets, indeed if he pays any attention at all.89

As explained in the previous chapter, although the school and company had been organized as separate corporate entities, all four players owned stock in both, despite the fact that in practice Warburg and Balanchine took a more active role in the company while Kirstein and Dimitriev oversaw the school. Although the entities were understood to work as complementary adjuncts of one other, the conflict between Balanchine and Dimitriev threatened to upset this delicate balance of power, and Kirstein began to worry about a “further” separation of the company and school.90 Soon after Hartford, Kirstein had a conversation with Warburg and his newly engaged business manager George “Jack” Birse about Dimitriev, during which they made it clear that “they intend to run the company alone.”91 In fact, by late December, this institutional drift was already a fait
accomplished, with Kirstein noting that “Warburg has no interest in the school at all” and would much rather just “go ahead and put on Ballets Balanchine.”

It was thus perhaps in a bid to force a resolution of these lingering issues that Dimitriev in the first week of the new year suddenly declared that he felt “morally entirely separated from Balanchine” and moving forward would maintain only nominal involvement with the company in his capacity as a stockholder. Echoing concerns already voiced by the critics—and anticipating the reception of the company’s New York debut—Dimitriev declared that everything presented thus far was “not the American Ballet we had dreamed of but the Ballets 1935 of George Balanchine.” Completely free from any obligation to Balanchine, Dimitriev would instead put his energies into the School with the goal of forming a second producing company, “which would really be American. Choreographers, music, décor everything.” Despite the hard line he was taking, Dimitriev maintained that “he has no jealousy or bitterness and that everything is happening for the best.”

The discord would continue for the next two months without a definitive resolution, with Kirstein, Warburg, and the students often caught in the middle. In early January Kirstein heard a “disagreeable story” of a rehearsal of Serenade, during which Balanchine had “got into one of those repetitious sadistic things he sometimes can’t pull himself out of,” making the dancers “repeat the same step for an hour” and saying that “if

92 LK Diaries, December 27, 1934.
93 LK Diaries, January 2, 4, 1935.
94 LK Diaries, January 4, 1935.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
they were tired they c[oul]d go home,” whereupon he himself abruptly walked out.  

Echoing Annabelle Lyon’s recollections, Charles Laskey complained to Kirstein that Balanchine’s classes “were lax, had no snap, were too involved, not enough technique in them,” and was told by Kirstein to report the news to Dimitriev as “more corroboration.”  

Dimitriev confided in Kirstein in mid-February that it was “private war between the two of them” and that “Bal[anchine] can die 5 times a day for all of him and he w[oul]dn’t care.”  

By this time the separation of the school and company was evidently regarded to be official enough that Kirstein informed John Martin of the new division of responsibilities at a lunch meeting.  

Martin would in turn report this restructuring in a preview article on the Adelphi engagement, noting that, “there has been a reorganization which separates the producing company from the school, though they are of course still closely associated.”

Although sympathetic to Dimitriev’s criticisms, Kirstein generally played the role of peacemaker during the crisis and continued to consult with Balanchine and Warburg about matters related to the company before, during, and after the Adelphi performances. To Kirstein’s dismay, Warburg did not seem to appreciate the damage that would result from a formal breach between the two entities. In the end, the company’s New York debut in March 1935 would bring an end to the worst of the hostilities, with everyone coming together of necessity, although many elements of the conflict would remain unresolved.

97 LK Diaries, January 5, 1935.  
98 LK Diaries, January 18, 1935.  
99 LK Diaries, February 12, 1935  
100 LK Diaries, February 11, 1935.  
3. Towards a New York Debut—Preview at Bryn Mawr

Amid this ongoing discord, work continued towards an official company debut in New York. For this engagement a repertory of six ballets would be presented in various combinations. Four of these were drawn from the ballets that had already been performed at Woodlands and in Hartford: Serenade, Dreams, Alma Mater, and Transcendence. The final two ballets were a mix of old and new. Again reaching back into the repertory of Les Ballets 1933, the company remounted Errante (set to Schubert’s “Wanderer” fantasy), in part owing to the presence in New York of its designer, Pavel Tchelitchev, and the availability of Tamara Geva (at the time still Balanchine’s legal wife if not actual companion) to star in the ballet. Rounding out the program was Reminiscence, a showpiece of classical technique newly created by Balanchine to music by Benjamin Godard that would feature the popular American dancer Paul Haakon as a guest artist. (Although Mozartiana was not performed at the Adelphi, it remained on the table during the planning phases; it was included in the souvenir program and is mentioned in several preview notices.102)

As noted previously, Errante is recorded in Kirstein’s diary as the first ballet rehearsed by the students of the newly opened School in January 1934, but the work is mentioned only sporadically in subsequent months and did not apparently receive any sustained attention during the enterprise’s first year.103 In March Kirstein noted that Balanchine was “doing new things” to the ballet and mentions several subsequent

103 LK Diaries, January 6, 1934.
rehearsals in April.\textsuperscript{104} The ballet had been under discussion as a possible addition to the repertory during preparations for Hartford over the summer,\textsuperscript{105} and in the absence of Kay Swift’s completed score for \textit{Alma Mater} it received additional attention around that time.\textsuperscript{106} But ultimately the consensus was that the work would be both “terribly expensive” to mount and “very tough” to dance.\textsuperscript{107} The small scale of the theater in Hartford was perhaps also a concern, given Kirstein’s brainstorm the summer before of mounting the ballet on the expansive stage of Radio City Music Hall. Both Balanchine and Tchelitchev had expressed dissatisfaction with the ballet, moreover, with Balanchine calling the ballet “already dead” during one of his July 1933 conferences with Kirstein.\textsuperscript{108} Tchelitchev in November 1934 told Kirstein that the ballet “was nothing, purely sentimental; flung together to confound the [Christian] Bérard côté, because both Balanchine and he were hopelessly in love, and this was an exteriorization of private grief. Not to be repeated.”\textsuperscript{109} Instead, Tchelitchev was eager to create a new work treating the Medea story, a project he would vigorously pitch to Kirstein on numerous occasions over the next year.

A week before Hartford, Warburg, Balanchine, and Kirstein met over lunch to discuss future plans, and decided to put on \textit{Errante} “with or without Tchelitchev” and starring Geva.\textsuperscript{110} The week after Hartford, rehearsals of the ballet began in earnest “with large company and changes,” but there remained doubts about whether Geva could be

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{104}LK Diaries, March 14, April 13, 16, 1934.
  \item \textsuperscript{105}LK Diaries, June 14, 1934.
  \item \textsuperscript{106}LK Diaries, June 22, 1934.
  \item \textsuperscript{107}LK Diaries, September 19, 1934.
  \item \textsuperscript{108}LK Diaries, July 16, 1933.
  \item \textsuperscript{109}LK Diaries, November 22, 1934.
  \item \textsuperscript{110}LK Diaries, November 30, 1934.
\end{itemize}
engaged, since “she might go off to Hollywood at the drop of a hat.” Rehearsals of the ballet were suspended a week later, when the issue of obtaining permission from Edward James presented itself. Within a month, however, James had granted permission to present the work, but Kirstein now worried whether Warburg would put up the money for it. Balanchine subsequently “insisted” that the ballet be included on their New York programs since it was “[j]ust the thing we need for the second program.” Kirstein agreed but said that it was “[a]s usual a question of cash.” Happily in a meeting the following day Warburg was in “an expansive mood” and said that they should “shoot the works in the season” and decided to move forward with Errante starring Geva, in lieu of Mozartiana. The ballet did not get an official green light until two weeks later, however, when Kirstein recorded that Warburg and Balanchine over dinner “got drunk and ate hugely and as a result decided to do Errante which is how these things are accomplished,” and the very next day Geva was officially signed on and in rehearsal. Although Geva’s first rehearsals boded well, Tchelitchev continued to discount the ballet, calling it a “revue fantastique pour les gens riches” and said that “perhaps it w[oul]d have success here because it was so neurotic.” The ballet was “subjective and of no value, a passing phase in the love life of Bal[anchine] and he, 2 y[ea]rs ago,” unlike his new and more weighty Medea project.

111 LK Diaries, December 12, 1934.
112 LK Diaries, December 19, 1934.
113 LK Diaries, January 19, 1935.
114 LK Diaries, January 27, 1935.
115 Ibid.
116 LK Diaries, January 28, 1935.
117 LK Diaries, February 12, 13 1935.
118 LK Diaries, February 14, 1935.
119 Ibid.

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The new ballet, *Reminiscence*, a showcase of Petersburg classicism, had perhaps its earliest origins on, ironically, the 4th of July 1934—an occurrence that might in fact be regarded as entirely predictable given the organization’s Europhile inclinations. On a walk with Kirstein at Ashfield, his family’s country estate, Balanchine pitched a ballet called *Pas Classique* to be set to music by eighteenth-century English composer William Boyce to be arranged by Constant Lambert.\(^{120}\) No immediate action was taken toward realizing the work, and in the meantime Kirstein was occupied with several other projects, including *Tom*, a treatment of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Kirstein later tried to sell Balanchine on another new ballet, *Le Bon Guerre*, “both divertissement but something without *L’Amour* as the subject-matter.”\(^{121}\) “*L’homme est une insecte sexuelle*; everything is sex,” Balanchine replied, to which Kirstein said he “was tired of ‘*L’amour sexuelle fantastique*.’”\(^{122}\) Balanchine clarified that “the act of love itself was nothing; it was the imagination and perversity clothing it that was exciting.”\(^{123}\) This dictum provides a new perspective on the elusive or otherwise inaccessible women that inhabit so many of Balanchine’s ballets throughout his career: the destructive Siren of *The Prodigal Son* (1929); the fleet-footed sleepwalker of *Night Shadow* (1946, later renamed *La Sonnambula*); or the woman whose feet are not allowed to touch the ground in the “Unanswered Question” movement of *Ivesiana* (1954). Despite Kirstein’s misgivings, this theme of a man (often an artist) in pursuit of an elusive woman remained an *idée fixe* for Balanchine, present in not just two works in the American Ballet’s Adelphi repertoire—*Transcendence* and *Errante*—but also in numerous forthcoming

\(^{120}\) LK Diaries, July 4, 1934.  
\(^{121}\) LK Diaries, November 13, 1934.  
\(^{122}\) Ibid.  
\(^{123}\) Ibid.
projects in 1936: *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *The Bat* (discussed in Chapter 5) as well as the *Princess Zenobia* and *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* ballets in the musical comedy *On Your Toes* (discussed in Chapter 6).

Shortly before New Year’s, the question of adding a new work to the repertoire became a more pressing matter, at which point Balanchine agreed to a new classical ballet, but only “with the music he wants,” that is, Boyce orchestrated by Lambert.\(^{124}\) Whether anyone had officially requested the work from Lambert is unclear, but in any case the music was not forthcoming, and instead Kirstein hit on the compromise of using music by Benjamin Godard, which they had been saving for *Le Bon Guerre*.\(^{125}\) The second day of the New Year found Kirstein dutifully tracking down Godard scores at midtown music libraries and soliciting recommendations for orchestrators.\(^{126}\) (While the Adelphi run was well under way Balanchine would discover “superb” orchestrations by Godard himself at Schirmer’s, better than the ones they had commissioned from composer Henry Brand.\(^{127}\)) Soon after, they settled on Sergei Soudeikine as the designer for the ballet “as he understands the epoch of the Maryinsky Theatre etc,” and even though Kirstein and Warburg both felt it “a pity he’s not American,” they rationalized the choice on the grounds that “this whole thing is transitional.”\(^{128}\) Balanchine already had the ballet fully mapped out, having selected a “concerto with piano pieces inserted” with a number planned for each dancer.\(^{129}\) Kirstein evidently added the role of “major domo” for Eugene Loring, who had been left out of the scheme, but noted that otherwise

\(^{124}\) LK Diaries, December 27, 1934.
\(^{125}\) LK Diaries, December 29, 1934.
\(^{126}\) LK Diaries, January 2, 1935.
\(^{127}\) LK Diaries, March 12, 1935.
\(^{128}\) LK Diaries, January 10, 1935.
\(^{129}\) Ibid.
everyone was “well taken care of.” Rehearsals began soon after, with Balanchine composing variations for Holly Howard, “whom he took out last night,” according to Kirstein, and another “brilliant” dance for Dorothie Littlefield, which was “full of Petipa tricks.” By the end of January the title Reminiscence had been proposed, prompting a soul-searching comment in Kirstein’s diary that he was “upset from the Marxian angle” about the names of the company’s ballets: “Dreams, Serenade, The Wanderer, Transcendence, Reminiscence – but I hope it’s the dancing that counts.” The title was not definitively settled upon at this time however, and some advance press on the Adelphi engagement would refer to the ballet as “Variation.”

In the midst of these preparations, the American Ballet would have another opportunity to try out some of their already completed work outside of New York at performances on February 7 and 8 at Bryn Mawr, the private women’s college on Philadelphia’s upscale Main Line. An advertisement in the Herald-Tribune touted the performances as the “Premiere Philadelphia Performances Prior to New York Opening.” According to Kirstein’s diaries, Warburg and Birse traveled down on January 19 to “look over the theatre” on campus where the troupe would be performing. The engagement had been arranged by Warburg, who had briefly taught at the college, and was part of larger festivities celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, with the

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130 Ibid.
131 LK Diaries, January 12, 1935.
132 LK Diaries, January 28, 1935.
134 Advertisement, NYHT, February 3, 1935.
135 LK Diaries, January 19, 1935.
proceeds from the shows benefiting a special fund.\textsuperscript{136} Although not announced or reviewed by Martin, the event was mentioned among society notices in the \textit{New York Times}, in the context of a dinner before the first Thursday night performance.\textsuperscript{137}

The company left for the engagement the day before on February 6, and in accordance with the new division of duties, Dimitriev, Kirstein, and also Erick Hawkins, from whom Kirstein had been taking ballet lessons since the start of the year, remained behind in New York to mind the School. Anticipating some mishaps, Kirstein wrote in his diary the day before that he hoped the bus wouldn’t crash on the way down.\textsuperscript{138} And indeed the next day, Kirstein and Hawkins were at the School when they received a desperate message relayed by Dimitriev that they must travel down to Philadelphia at once. Joe Lane had a high fever and was out of commission and thus Hawkins was needed to fill in. Agnes de Mille made the journey down with Kirstein and Hawkins, who brought along with them several pairs of pointe shoes that had not been ready when the troupe had left the day before. When they arrived later that day they found Balanchine and Jean Lurçat (the costume designer for \textit{Serenade}) asleep at the home of Gertrude Ely, “a nice middle aged sensible lively woman,” who frequently housed visiting artists in her home and returned from wintering in Palm Beach after her ballet guests had arrived.

Had Warburg and Birse done an honest and competent assessment in January, they might have canceled the engagement or at least insisted on another venue, since Goodhart Hall proved uncongenial for ballet, conditions exacerbated by the general lack

\textsuperscript{137} “Notes of Social Activities in New York and Elsewhere,” \textit{NYT}, February 1, 1935.  
\textsuperscript{138} LK Diaries, February 5–6, 1935.
of organization. Even the inexperienced Kirstein immediately grasped that the hall was “pure gothic and couldn’t have been maliciously contrived worse for any sort of spectacle.”\textsuperscript{139} The company’s program, consisting of \textit{Serenade}, \textit{Alma Mater}, and \textit{Transcendence} was less than well executed in its first Thursday night performance (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{140} According to Kirstein, who sat with de Mille in the audience, the performance was “even worse than I feared,” owing to an array of challenges.\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Serenade} apparently fell apart owing to the last-minute withdrawal of Dorothie Littlefield from the ballet, after her mother had placed an angry phone call to Warburg insisting that her daughter not be made to dance in the corps.\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Alma Mater} fared better, while \textit{Transcendence} “could hardly be seen on account of no spot lights.”\textsuperscript{143} Even the usually reliable William Dollar performed poorly, and “Lucia Davidova and Tamara Geva looked like avenging Harpies.” In the face of such adversity, Balanchine remained, according to Kirstein “wholly calm and without interest.” The next evening’s performance was not much improved, plagued by bleeding toes and unexpected falls.\textsuperscript{144} In a less detached moment, Balanchine poured oil on the fire, informing Heidi Vosseler at the last moment that she was too fat to dance in \textit{Serenade}, which so distracted her that she could barely make it through the ballet.\textsuperscript{145}

The troupe nevertheless received several generous notices for both performances. “Considering the short time they have been together,” one reviewer noted, “the work of

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{139}] LK Diaries, February 7, 1935.
\item[\textsuperscript{140}] Program, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
\item[\textsuperscript{141}] LK Diaries, February 7, 1935.
\item[\textsuperscript{142}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{143}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{144}] LK Diaries, February 8, 1935.
\item[\textsuperscript{145}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
the company was quite impressive” and that “the work of a number of individuals in the performances last night was indicative of promising material.” Like the company’s Woodlands and Hartford engagements, both performances drew a “large and distinguished audience,” lured by both the gala occasion and the chance to see the new ballet troupe before its New York debut, and were pleased by the “vitality artistic and entertaining quality of the ballet.” Of the ballets, one review dismissed *Alma Mater* as “a rather juvenile representation of American College life easily susceptible to more subtle treatment” while another said the ballet had represented the troupe’s “best, though not its most serious, efforts.” Opinions on *Serenade* were even more mixed, with one reviewer quite underwhelmed, calling it “an uneven composition falling frequently into mere drill figures and resembling at its best some of the weaker items of the repertoire of the Ballet Russe.” Another was complimentary of the choreography even though the score was not “first class,” calling the ballet a truthful interpretation of the music “into three dimensional space.” For this same reviewer, *Transcendence* was the hit of the evening: “It had movement and variety, and although uneven as a composition reached exciting climaxes” and “introduced effective tableaux and group movements.” And if *Serenade* had been unfavorably compared with the repertoire of the de Basil company,
Transcendence “achieved occasionally the sweeping force of the Monte Carlo Ballet’s Les Présages, which it rather resembles.”\textsuperscript{152}

Similarly measured in praise was a notable audience member for one of the Bryn Mawr performances, the Chicago-based dancer and choreographer and Pavlova company alumna Ruth Page, who had been in New York and reported her impressions of the performance in a letter to her mother.\textsuperscript{153} Page was unimpressed by Alma Mater, in part because she saw it as a subpar knock-off of her 1926 duet The Flapper and the Quarterback, which had also featured costumes by John Held, Jr.,\textsuperscript{154} and was pessimistic about its reception in the big city despite its positive reception at Bryn Mawr:

They did a whole ballet using the idea of my Flapper and Quarterback—it was such old stuff to me that I was rather bored though the audience seemed to find it hilarious. Don’t think N.Y. will like it at all! It isn’t as good as my Flapper—at least it isn’t nearly as American or so delicately done.\textsuperscript{155}

Page enjoyed the “beautiful ‘modern classical’ dancing” of Serenade but found it lacking in “idea.”\textsuperscript{156} She said that Transcendence similarly had “some marvelous moments in it but is not very clear as to idea,” but praised Elise Reiman’s dancing in the lead role.\textsuperscript{157} Of the troupe as a whole she was positive but frank—“I think someday it will amount to something although it is still pretty raw now”—and noted that “Balanchine’s

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Ruth Page to Marian Heinly Page, February 11, 1935, Ruth Page Collection, (S) *MGZMD 16, Correspondence, Folder 35C1, JRDD–NYPL.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
choreography is extremely difficult to dance and I thought the dancers all did extremely well all things considered.”

Upon the company’s return to New York, work continued on the program, with Balanchine seeming “to be troubled only ab[ou]t Reminiscence.” In addition to Tamara Geva, Paul Haakon was another star attraction for the Adelphi engagement and was appearing at Radio City Music Hall during the time that the program was in preparation. In addition to a role in Dreams, he was to perform in Reminiscence in hoop dance, a divertissement from The Nutcracker that Balanchine had danced at his graduation performance in Petrograd and later included in his version of the work for New York City Ballet. Balanchine had taken sick again by this time, however, with Kirstein noting that Haakon’s variation was choreographed with Balanchine “sweating in three jackets.” The addition of the hoop made the dance “very difficult,” and Kirstein’s sister Mina predicted that, “the sicker he gets the more difficult his choreography will be.” Haakon never quite mastered the hoop routine, getting caught in it on in numerous performances. At least one photo survives of Haakon with the troublesome prop, depicting the dancer in discussion with Balanchine.

Balanchine had already been showing signs of illness a week before this particular incident, with Kirstein noting that he was running a temperature and feeling sick, either

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158 Ibid.
159 LK Diaries, February 15, 1935.
160 LK Diaries, February 17, 1935.
161 LK Diaries, February 18, 1935.
162 Ibid.
163 LK Diaries, March 1, 3, 1935.
164 GB Clippings, Folder 1 “1926–64,” uncredited photo from Delineator, September 1935.
due to “T.B. again or only a courant d’air which he constantly complains ab[ou]t.” Kirstein privately noted that he would not “be a bit surprised if Bal[anchine] had presently another nervous attack,” and although the fever abated the next day he stayed home in bed.” After a visit to the doctor the next day, however, it was determined that he was “fuller of T.B. bacilli than last y[ea]r at this time” and that he could probably work for two or three more weeks, but after that should take a long rest. Further tests would later contradict the initial diagnosis of tuberculosis, but the doctors still urged that Balanchine take it easy. “I think that will more or less permanently remove him from the school for this year,” Kirstein concluded, and Dimitriev, resigned to the choreographer’s modernist inclinations, accordingly was planning “next y[ea]r merely to give him classes specially for himself. Danse moderne.” This sort of instruction devoted solely to “composition” had been mentioned by Balanchine to Kirstein during their initial conversations in July and August 1933 (see discussion in Chapter 1).

Warburg told Kirstein he would “send Bal[anchine] south after the opening of the ballet” and further agreed to cover his medical bills. Neither was particularly concerned about Balanchine’s potential absence from the school, since operations would be “stable enough without Bal[anchine] if we have Vladimirov.” Kirstein would soon after speak with Agnes de Mille, who was set to head west to California, about some day teaching at the school, which she responded to favorably, despite professing a low opinion of both

165 LK Diaries, February 12, 1935.
166 LK Diaries, February 12–13, 1935.
167 LK Diaries, February 14, 1935.
168 LK Diaries, February 20, 1935
169 LK Diaries, February 20, 1935
170 Ibid.
171 Ibid.
Warburg and Vladimirov. Balanchine’s unreliability also led to the recruitment of Muriel Stuart and Erick Hawkins to the school’s faculty. Hawkins taught at the school only briefly and ended his affiliation after two seasons with Ballet Caravan (see Chapter 7), making his career with Martha Graham. The English-born Stuart, who had first danced in America on the tours of Anna Pavlova, would remain a stalwart at the school for the rest of her career.

A preview article in the *Herald-Tribune* corroborates that Balanchine was indeed not in the best of health in advance of the Adelphi engagement:

Mr. Balanchine appeared very frail in a huge brown velour overcoat which he wore draped about his shoulders. He habitually wears it indoors while teaching in spite of an adequate heating arrangement for the practice room and in contrast to the young men and women of the troupe who go about in tulle and cheesecloth with great areas of their bodies exposed. Underneath the overcoat was a gray suit and underneath the suit was a sweater. Brown suede shoes were upon his feet.

As a cover story for this behavior, Balanchine in the column held forth about his long-standing aversion to being cold, owing to incidents from his youth in which he and his compatriots were forced to perform outdoors in frigid temperatures. Although as Elizabeth Kendall’s recent research on Balanchine’s youth has demonstrated, he and his fellow students (along with millions of other individuals) did indeed endure a lack of heat for many years in the aftermath of the Revolution, Kirstein’s diaries suggest more immediate medical causes for his choice of attire. What is clear is that the preparations

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172 LK Diaries, February 20.
for the Adelphi had been very wearing on Balanchine, and contrary to Kirstein’s earlier worries about a correlation between his illness and a lack of creative opportunity, the heavy rehearsal schedule was taking a toll.

The general turmoil did not go unnoticed by the young dancers, and Balanchine’s illness made life difficult not just for Paul Haakon and his hoop. During a rehearsal of Errante the week after he fell ill, Balanchine became frustrated and began disparaging his leading dancers, chastising “Elise Reiman for hypnotizing herself in the mirror” and “Holly Howard for dancing like a dog.” He groused that in Paris “there were only six dancers, not twelve but they were real fire, here they are dead.” Additionally, William Dollar was “sulking” because Errante had been scheduled for opening night instead of Transcendence. Erick Hawkins confided to Kirstein that the dancers had come to understand that it was not Warburg but Kirstein who was “the bulwark of the idea,” while “all Eddie wants to get is his money back.” Moreover Hawkins confirmed that “the importation of Tamara Geva” as guest star had been bad for morale, since it evidently “broke the idea of the school’s importance in relation to the company.”

4. The Adelphi Theater, March 1935

Later renamed the George Abbott Theater and famous as the home of the Bernstein-Robbins musical comedy On the Town, the Adelphi Theatre on 54th Street just

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177 LK Diaries, February 19, 1935.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
180 LK Diaries, February 23, 1935.
181 Ibid.
east of Seventh Avenue was demolished in 1970.\textsuperscript{182} When the American Ballet performed there in March 1935 it was among the newer theaters on Broadway, touted in an advertisement in the \textit{Billboard Theatrical Index} as “one of New York’s finest and most modern theatres” with an “unusually large stage,” 39 feet deep and 75 feet wide, a far cry from the modest scale of the venues at Woodlands and Hartford.\textsuperscript{183} While most Broadway theaters at the time could seat about 1,000 spectators, the Adelphi had an above average capacity of 1,434, a large house that the American Ballet would not come close to filling for many of its performances.\textsuperscript{184} That the enterprise had not rid itself of its amateurism is evidenced by how indefinite the dates for Adelphi engagement remained in the month beforehand. Kirstein records in his diary that the Adelphi was signed for on February 4, less than a month before opening night and only days before the troupe would leave for its official tryout engagement at Bryn Mawr.\textsuperscript{185} A week before, John Martin’s column had reported “the possibility of a week or so of performances by the new American Ballet on February 25,”\textsuperscript{186} but by February 10 the dates had shifted, with the papers announcing a series of five performances beginning February 28.\textsuperscript{187} A week later the eventual opening night had been settled upon, with both newspaper reports and advertisements touting an initial run of five performances to begin on March 1.\textsuperscript{188} Like

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\textsuperscript{183} Advertisement, \textit{The Billboard Theatrical Index}, 1933–34, 19.
\textsuperscript{185} LK Diaries, February 4, 1935.
\textsuperscript{188} Advertisement, \textit{NYHT}, February 17, 1935; “American Ballet Opens Here March 1 at Adelphi Theater,” \textit{NYHT}, February 17, 1935.
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the dates, the repertory for the engagement remained in flux until shortly before, and the final title for *Reminiscence* was decided on at a very late date. On February 17 the *Herald-Tribune* reported that the company’s programs were “as yet not definitively chosen” and would be selected from among *Mozartiana, Alma Mater, Transcendence, Serenade, Variation [Reminiscence], Dreams, and Errante.* This same day John Martin’s column announced the news that guest stars Paul Haakon and Tamara Geva would “definitely be with the American Ballet Company in its forthcoming season” at the Adelphi. Soon after it was reported that instead of the five shows over four days first announced, the company would present a full week of performances, with two complete programs, the first of which would comprise *Serenade, Alma Mater,* and *Errante* and the second *Reminiscence, Dreams, Transcendence,* and *Mozartiana.*

A review by John Martin indicates that a second extension lengthened the run to March 10, and a third and final extension to March 17, an unwise fiscal decision when all was said and done. Unconcerned about the actual dates and enthusiastic about the ever-expanding calendar of performances, Balanchine was “very happy” about finally having a New York premiere and was philosophical about the question of whether they were prematurely making a debut, remarking that, “it’s all very well to wait until we are ‘ready’ but then in 2 or 3 y[ea]rs where w[oul]d our troupe be.”

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189 “American Ballet Opens Here March 1 at Adelphi Theater,” *NYHT,* February 17, 1935
192 John Martin, “The Dance: The Ballet,” *NYT,* March 10, 1935; “Ballet Adds Week to Run,” *NYT,* March 8, 1935. Martin’s Sunday March 10 column evidently went to press before the third extension had been finalized, even though the third extension was announced in the paper two days prior.
The Sunday before opening night, the American Ballet’s debut received generous preview coverage, by Martin in his *Times* column and in a full-page story in the *Herald-Tribune* complete with photographs. Setting aside the concerns voiced in his open letter following the Hartford engagement for the time being, Martin struck an even-handed tone, reporting on the repertoire and casting and reproducing verbatim several paragraphs from the organization’s earliest press releases from 1933. These quotes recounted the many ambitious goals formulated by Kirstein, among them to “produce in consecutive seasons throughout the country ballets conceived and executed by Americans, defining perhaps for the first time on a scale worthy of its subject, what is most lyric, indigenous and essential in the American legend.”

“It is, of course,” Martin noted in a brief riposte, “too much to expect that all this has been accomplished in the company’s first season, but is perhaps interesting”—in retrospect a set up for his forthcoming critique—“to approach these first performances with the ultimate intention in mind.”

Expanding upon his previous comments about the athleticism of American girls, Balanchine in the *Herald-Tribune* preview expatiated upon how this same disposition made it possible for Americans, both men and women, to begin learning ballet at a more advanced age, which was also aided by their innate rhythmic sensibility:

“The reason it is possible to take American boys and girls at a greater age than nine and make dancers out of them, a thing which was never attempted in St. Petersburg or Moscow, is because of the athletic life led by Americans,” explained Mr. Balanchine, tossing the pendant lock of hair out of his eyes. “Besides that you are a musical people now and a naturally rhythmic people. Why, I see Americans in restaurants—they seem to eat with rhythm. (Mr. Balanchine illustrated with an imaginary fork.) They even smoke cigarettes with rhythm (illustrating with an actual cigarette), so the learning of rhythm is nothing new for them. They are very light on

195 Ibid.
their feet and are able to attain good altitude with very little coaching. I can see no reason why Russian ballet cannot be implanted here.”

In what appears to be a compliment to Americans’ physiognomy, these comments in fact ascribe some of Balanchine’s primitivist imaginings—which in other contexts would more exclusively describe black dancers—onto American dancers as a whole. More to the immediate concerns of the organization, however, these remarks, like his tales of the cold environment of his youth, were a cover story to rationalize the demographics of the students of School of American Ballet, which had been training almost exclusively teenagers with previous ballet training. Writing in the mid-1940s on the fundamentals of ballet technique in an essay for *Dance Index*, Balanchine would maintain that children should ideally begin ballet instruction at the age of eight or nine. Adhering to such a plan would have severely curtailed the performance capabilities of the Company for many years, however, and Balanchine had in fact, according to Kirstein’s first letter to Chick Austin, initially proposed starting with students around sixteen years old, perhaps further indication of his intention to start public performances early on. Kirstein’s subsequent correspondence to Austin, by contrast, called for starting with “8 or 10 small kids who could be trained from the ground up,” a plan that would not materialize until many years after the School had been in operation.

Coming too late to provide copy for these two articles was a February 25 “cocktail party rehearsal” held at the Adelphi, attended by a distinguished if motley

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197 George Balanchine, “Notes on Choreography,” *Dance Index* 4, nos. 2–3 (February–March 1945), 23.
198 Letter reprinted in *I Remember Balanchine*.
crowd, including Feodor Chaliapin, Cecil Beaton, Mrs. Vanderbilt, A. Conger Goodyear, Morris Gest, and Aaron Copland “and his boy friend, whom I don’t like,” Kirstein noted, “either the music or the boy friend.” Warburg evidently refrained from “saying a few words,” as Kirstein put it, “which was in itself, a triumph,” and they learned that $1,000 in advance ticket sales had come in, “which they say is good.” The next day Kirstein went to correct the final proofs of the souvenir program, and by the time he had made his way back to the Adelphi in a blizzard, rehearsals had already concluded. The first orchestral rehearsal on February 27 did not bode well for a successful opening night. In their first time playing together the ensemble “sounded like hell,” as Kirstein recalled, not helped by the fact that conductor Sandor Harmati’s dog had eaten seven pages of the Transcendence score. Antheil’s orchestration of Serenade was also not proving congenial, “so full of Antheilism, it can’t be used,” though it would be performed. Later in the day, Kirstein noted “an “atmosphere of tight edges but not necessarily dismal.” Paul Haakon’s hoop dance was not being helped by the fact that the orchestral

200 LK Diaries, February 25, 1935.
201 Ibid.
202 LK Diaries, February 26, 1935.
203 LK Diaries, February 27, 1935.
204 Ibid. Antheil’s orchestration of Serenade is widely considered not to be extant, and is listed as such in Linda Whitesitt, The Life and Music of George Antheil, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983, 140, 249. Although Antheil discusses his work with Balanchine in his memoirs, he does not mention Serenade by name, discussing only Dreams. Antheil, Bad Boy of Music, 270–1, 276–77. Per Laurel Fay of G. Schirmer, Inc., the score could be located among uncatalogued Antheil holdings at the Curtis Institute or the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. When the Antheil estate was acquired by Schirmer in 1995, the Serenade orchestration was not among the items received, though documentation at the time alluded to other Balanchine-related materials which “may be rotting somewhere in an ABT warehouse.” The Antheil orchestration of Serenade and these other unidentified materials still await discovery. Personal correspondence with Laurel Fay, February 20, 2013.
205 Ibid.
parts for his variation were not yet prepared, while Tchelitchev was “furious because they won’t put down a white floor cloth for Errante.” The final dress rehearsal the next day was “a shambles, half in costumes, half in pajamas or practice clothes,” Tamara Geva was “furious at everyone,” but William Dollar’s solid dancing was a bright spot.

Kirstein found the Godard orchestrations by Henry Brand were “worse than the orchestra,” while his mother was “sore” about having had to pay $85 for tickets for the family. Rehearsal stopped at seven and then resumed at 11:30 pm until “early morning.” “Warburg started to apologize ‘to his stock holder,’” Kirstein also recalled, “for having run it all so badly. I didn’t stop him.”

Aside from soliciting press coverage, the Company had created its own publicity materials, including a two-page fold over flier to promote the engagement and a special souvenir program. Although it is impossible to know how widely such items were distributed, both are key documents in the ongoing discourse produced by the enterprise. And despite the fact that Kirstein’s name is nowhere on them, his authorial hand is in apparent in both, despite the fact that he was officially not part of the company’s management. First to the flier, a tri-fold item featuring black and white photos and orange highlights that included glowing testimonials from Stravinsky, Gershwin, and Antheil, as well as a three-paragraph introduction to the company and its repertoire. (Figure 5)

Acknowledging that America has been dancing for some twenty-five years “ever since Isadora Duncan and the Russian Ballet showed the way,” the copy posits the American

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206 Ibid.
207 LK Diaries, February 28, 1935.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
210 Ibid.
211 American Ballet Adelphi Flier, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
Ballet as something new and distinct: “[N]ever before has a permanent organization undertaken to carry the art of the dance to its complete culmination in genuine Ballet, in the sense that Europe has had Ballet for centuries.”²¹² The Company boldly claims a thoroughly American identity while embracing its European (specifically Diaghilevian) heritage and leadership:

With its group of twenty-six young American dancers from the School of the American Ballet, and with American musicians, painters and authors collaborating in the creation of its repertory, the American Ballet Company honestly fulfills its title. It makes no excuses for inviting to its chief creative post George Balanchine, Diaghilev’s last maitre de ballet and the greatest living choreographer. In the same way that the Russian Ballet was inspired by French and Italian maitres de ballet and reinspired by Isadora Duncan, without losing its distinctively Russian character.²¹³

It might seem odd that it is Duncan, and not Michel Fokine who is credited in this brief genealogy with the “reinspiration” of ballet alongside Diaghilev, but less surprising given the fact that Fokine was at the time a competitor, running a school of dance out of his Riverside Drive apartment—from which the School of American Ballet would poach several students, notably Annabelle Lyon—and presenting periodic, if uninspiring, performances in the New York area.²¹⁴ That Duncan is recruited as an artistic forebear is a testament not only to her status in both ballet and modern dance circles but also the strategic rhetorical alliances that Kirstein was willing to enter into to make his case. Duncan’s status as an American allowed the company to claim a native artist in their lineage, a small example of how the Americanization of the history of modern dance was

²¹² Ibid.
²¹³ Ibid.
²¹⁴ While the Adelphi program was in preparation, Kirstein saw a Fokine performance at the Brooklyn Armory. LK Diaries, February 16, 1935.
in part driven by the discourse surrounding ballet as well.\textsuperscript{215} The copy also notably does not mention Anna Pavlova, who much more than Duncan had fostered more sustained American interest in ballet.

Despite the claim of making “no excuses,” the flier’s text concludes with if not an apology than perhaps an apologia for the character of its current artistic offerings:

Furthermore, while the repertory of the American Ballet Company will in time become more characteristically American, it must be remembered that the art of the Ballet is international and its musical and subject content is universal. Therefore alongside realistic, lyric and fantastic American scenes and subjects, there will always be, as there are in the repertory which inaugurates this institution, numbers reflecting the pure and abstract spirit of the classic dance; while famous international artists will continue to collaborate with American musicians, painters and the youthful dancers of the company in creating and maintaining an organization of importance in the cultural life of this nation.\textsuperscript{216}

This attempt to temper expectations of an explicitly and exclusively “American” program would ultimately prove futile, as would be the effort to classify Balanchine’s modernist offerings under the new “pure dance” rubric newly-embraced by Massine.

These talking points resonate closely with the cover of the souvenir program prepared for the Adelphi performances, a full-color and large format item comparable to the deluxe publications of the Ballets Russes and the de Basil company.\textsuperscript{217} (Figure 6) Drawn by artist and illustrator and artist Louis Bouché, the program’s cover depicts a trio

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\item \textsuperscript{215} See Manning, \textit{Ecstasy and the Demon}.
\item \textsuperscript{216} American Ballet Adelphi Flier, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
\item \textsuperscript{217} American Ballet Program 1935a, Patterson–Dollar Papers, Box 1, Folder 2. This program will be designated “1935a” to distinguish it from a second program, which will be referred to as “1935b” (located in this same folder) which was prepared in advance of the American Ballet’s 1935 tour, discussed in the following chapter. Although both programs contain similar contents, “1935b” does not have the Louis Bouché cover and is evidently later since it discusses the company’s New York debut and an advertisement for the School of American Ballet on its inside back cover mentions Muriel Stuart and Anatole Vilzac, both of whom did not join the faculty until after the Adelphi engagement.
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of ballerinas representing the three major national centers of ballet—Italy, France, and Russia—arranged around a fourth American dancer. The cover resonates with Kirstein’s own numerous writings on the history of ballet. “The skeletal structure of classical ballet dancing was developed in France and Italy throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century,” he wrote in a 1931 article in *Hound & Horn*, and subsequently migrated to Russia where it was codified into the more strictly defined vocabulary of Petipa, later to be reimagined under the auspices of Diaghilev.\(^ {218}\) “Its national origin is Italian,” Kirstein subsequently wrote “In Defense of the Ballet” in *Modern Music*, and “its direction soon turned towards France, and for the last twenty-five years the ballet has meant the Russian Ballet.”\(^ {219}\)

That Bouché’s cover dovetails so neatly with his summaries—which are, to be sure, not unique among ballet histories—is no accident, since Kirstein conceived of the design himself and reports on meeting personally with the artist, who “got the idea of what I wanted at once,” he recalled, and agreed to draw the cover for $250, which Kirstein surmised could be paid for by his “ballet dividends.”\(^ {220}\) A week later, Kirstein reviewed an initial sketch and noted that Bouché had “understood perfectly” his concept, and the draft had “a natural healthy robustness which is softer and more fluent than Ben Shahn,” whom he had initially approached about the job.\(^ {221}\) Bouché delivered a draft two days later, which apparently included a “sickle and hammer on the Russian ballerina’s


\(^ {220}\) LK Diaries, February 12–13, 1935.

\(^ {221}\) LK Diaries, February 17, 1935.
dress,” which Jack Birse objected to and was removed.222 Balanchine was not pleased by the fact that the Russian ballerina was wearing a kerchief, saying “it looked too much like the Chauve Souris, that she sh[oul]d be wearing a […] tiara thing and her eyebrows sh[oul]d be in one piece,” a correction that was not incorporated in the final version.223 If the American Ballet would not deliver on its previously stated goals, the organization, or at least Kirstein, presented in their own materials a clearly articulated ideology for their enterprise.

As had been the case in Hartford, on opening night the Adelphi welcomed “a brilliant audience which came in late, both at first and from the intermissions,” as Kirstein recalled.224 One review corroborates this observation, saying of Serenade that it “was unfair to criticize either the production or the dancing, since so much of it was blotted from sight by the tail-coats and ermine wraps flowing down the Adelphi aisles.”225 Kirstein had a clear enough view of the ballet to note that it was “danced well enough,” but found that “the lights and the costumes were a terrible strain” and it had “no atmosphere of mystery.”226 Alma Mater was “OK but very tedious” and elicited “factitious applause,” and on two subsequent evenings, Kirstein would use the ballet as a chance to slip out and attend to other matters.227 Errante fared better, and was “a powerful sexual experience,” though some people laughed in the middle and “there was hissing at the end mingled with the cheers.” Despite Tamara Geva’s having not danced

222 LK Diaries, February 19, 1935.
223 LK Diaries, February 19, 1935.
224 LK Diaries, March 1, 1935.
226 LK Diaries, March 1, 1935.
227 LK Diaries, March 2, 1935, “Pitney, his Princeton friend Ross and I had a drink during Alma Mater”; March 5, 1935, “Talked during Alma Mater further to Warburg.”
well, it was a “great success” and Tchelitchev “was in all his states.” Reminiscence was “very good” despite its “lousy” décor and the fact that “Haakon got caught in his hoop.” It was William Dollar, however, who had “danced divinely” and was the “g[rea]t success of the evening,” and had looked “marvelous in a white Nijinsky-like costume.” When the final curtain came down at 11:30, Kirstein went backstage and kissed everyone he saw, and reports that Erick Hawkins was beside himself with joy, and gave credit where he believed it was due: “It’s all you, Lincoln, it’s all you.” An “unshaved and unslept” Balanchine had been backstage all evening, praising the dancers and cursing Harmati the conductor for “taking Serenade so slow.” Kirstein’s sister Mina threw a party afterward, attended by Agnes de Mille, Virgil Thomson, and Helen and Chick Austin. In the festive atmosphere, Kirstein privately worried about John Martin’s forthcoming review.

Soon after opening night, Warburg’s lack of managerial competence again came to light, and it became clear that the many individuals he had hired to assist him were taking him for all they could get. The decision to extend the run through March 17 was one of many poor choices made by Warburg at the urging of his management, who were neither competent nor concerned about managing the organization’s finances to maximum efficiency. An increasingly large cast of characters had become involved with the company over the course of 1935, including Alexander Merovitch, whose Musical Arts Management corporation was contracted with running the Company. There was also the previously mentioned George “Jack” Birse, described in one source as a “Scotsman born in Russia” and reported to have acted as an interpreter for Balanchine on at least one occasion.²²⁸ Birse’s boyfriend and “high pressure art promoter” Oliver Saylor had been

given the job of publicity, which Kirstein repeatedly regarded as inadequate.²²⁹ Although Warburg’s general inattention and lax managerial sensibility had long been a concern, several days into the Adelphi run Dimitriev informed Kirstein of a more specific issue, namely the fact that Birse was “supervising the books of the Adelphi Theatre alone, without an accountant,” having refused help from the Company’s official accountant Ms. Reinfeld. Warburg’s secretary—like Kirstein’s also named Miss Levine—also smelled a rat, saying “it was dreadful the way things were being run around here.”²³⁰ When Kirstein confronted Warburg about this situation, he replied that “he had perfect confidence in the people who are working with him and he was not going to destroy the ‘morale’ by exterior supervision.” Dimitriev remained suspicious and said that, “il faut jeter Birse tout suite.”²³¹ The next day the discussions continued, with Dimitriev suggesting that Birse “be supervised in taking tickets,” and Ms. Reinfeld again offering her help, and Miss Levine expressing her distaste for Birse and lamenting that her boss was “being gypped all the time.”²³² Kirstein “felt angry at the waste” and had another talk with Warburg, who only threw up his hands and let the unscrupulous behavior continue.

The crowd for the original closing night of March 7 had a “very poor house” with “300 seats given away,” and the decision to extend the engagement was soon revealed as fiscal folly, though Warburg was unaffected, claiming that it was “not his money now being lost but Merovitch.”²³³ The first evening of the extension the “house at the theatre was the worst yet, $300” and Kirstein was now sure that they should have closed on the

²²⁹ Kirstein complains about the failure of Saylor to produce adequate publicity in diary entries on February 15, 16, 23 and March 5, 1935.
²³⁰ LK Diaries, March 4, 1935.
²³¹ Ibid.
²³² LK Diaries, March 5, 1935.
²³³ Ibid.
original date.²³⁴ Balanchine remained optimistic, however, predicting that, “more and more will come.”²³⁵ The audiences did not materialize, and Kirstein on March 12 suspected that tickets had been given away in large amounts, commenting on “a largish (papered?) but cold audience.”²³⁶ Indeed, that same morning Merovitch had been in a panic since they had evidently taken in only $150 the night before.²³⁷ Warburg would remain cheerful in the face of such bad news, even after agreeing to cover half of the week’s losses with Merovitch, contrary to what he had previously understood regarding his financial exposure for the extended run.²³⁸

With one week remaining in the engagement, on Sunday March 10 Warburg summoned Balanchine, Kirstein, and Birse to Woodlands for a conference about the Company’s future.²³⁹ In the course of the meeting Warburg invited Kirstein to become co-director of the Company, an offer that was declined. Kirstein recalled feeling uneasy during the meeting in part owing to Dimitriev’s exclusion from the proceedings and what he regarded as the unwelcome eyes and ears of Birse. “I felt myself in a continually precarious position,” he recalled, “without Dimitriev to bolster me up, not having the facts at my disposal.” Kirstein did make clear, however, that his primary concern was “the school’s security,” because he did not think the company would last for very long. During the drive back to the city, Kirstein and Balanchine had a discussion “about satisfaction”:

²³⁴ LK Diaries, March 8, 1935.
²³⁵ Ibid.
²³⁶ LK Diaries, March 12, 1935.
²³⁷ Ibid.
²³⁸ LK Diaries, March 13, 1935.
²³⁹ LK Diaries, March 10, 1935.
[Balanchine] said he had it when he saw our pupils dance well. When he realized, however but it was something had been achieved, that last y[ea]r there was nothing and now we have had quand meme a success. He said he imagined I must feel satisfaction too. I said I did. Tamara Geva asked him why she felt no pleasure in anything, took no happiness from her work. George said to her that the reason was she thought only of herself – nothing of others.

Thus despite his outward disinterest in the daily grind of training and somewhat aloof demeanor at times, Balanchine did care about the success of his new dancers and the larger venture. That evening’s performance, though not one of the troupe’s best, did boast several VIPs in the audience, including the actors Leslie Howard, Claudette Colbert, and Tallulah Bankhead.240 Also on hand was Stravinsky, passing through New York on a busy U.S. tour with violinist Samuel Dushkin and set to return to Europe a month later.241 Kirstein recalls him as a “strange little ratlike man” who was “sweet with Bal[anchine],” and although he deemed the orchestration of Errante “dreadful,” everything else he pronounced “très gentil.”242

Before the end of the run, Warburg shared his future plans for the Company with Kirstein over lunch. Alma Mater should be reworked and there should also be “one wholly new American Ballet by an American.”243 Reminiscence should be replaced by Giselle, moreover, and only Errante and Transcendence retained as they were.244 Kirstein had retained a role in the Company’s affairs throughout the internal feud, but by the close of the Adelphi run, Dimitriev had managed to reassert himself in its operation, having evidently taken it upon himself to intervene not necessarily with Warburg’s consent. The

240 LK Diaries, March 10, 1935.
242 LK Diaries, March 10, 1935.
243 LK Diaries, March 10, 1935.
244 Ibid.
question of the Adelphi box office aside, he spoke directly with Jack Birse to clarify “how the school c[oul]d be used by the ballet,” and did not stop there. As Kirstein put it, Dimitriev suddenly seemed “to have reestablished himself in the councils of the Co[mpany]” and “blasted with dynamite” a new contract with Merovitch that Warburg had proudly announced only days before.

The final performance on March 17 was uneven and brought with it mixed emotions. Kirstein noted a “good” performance of *Transcendence* and was relieved to be seeing the *Errante* for what he surmised would be the last time, dismissing it as “pretty thin.” In *Reminiscence*, however, “Holly Howard fell flat on her tail at the start of her variation” but “brought the house down by sticking it out,” which in light of some of the critiques that were to come might be regarded as an apt metaphor for the American Ballet’s Adelphi debut and subsequent trials. The final performance was also the occasion for a notable meeting of the minds:

> Massine came on the stage and there was a rapprochement between him and Bal[anchine]. It was like Washington meeting Cornwallis. Massine, slight and very attractive looked tired and drawn after his nation wide [sic] tour. He said he admired the corps de ballet and was glad Bal[anchine] was starting such an important thing.

Who was the victor and who the vanquished Kirstein does not specify, nor is not clear at what point in the evening the encounter took place. Regardless, the rapprochement of the two choreographers was not enough to allay a general feeling of melancholy. “Most of us stayed aimlessly on the stage, not wanting to leave,” noted Kirstein, who apparently looked so distraught that dancer Kathryn Mullowny asked him whether he had bad news

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245 LK Diaries, March 14, 1935.
246 LK Diaries, March 16, 1935.
247 LK Diaries, March 17, 1935 for this and all details in this paragraph.
to report. Kirsten replied that he was only sad that the engagement was over, whereupon she chimed in optimistically that “it was just the beginning.”

5. Balanchine’s Modernism and the Critical Reception of the Adelphi Debut

Press on the performances was extensive and somewhat positive. As had been the case in Hartford, Alma Mater was a well-received crowd-pleaser. According to one review, the ballet “more than deserved the ovation it received” with “Kay Swift’s lilting music” and “boasting the colorful, comical costumes of John, Held, Jr.” Others praised it as “light, quick, humorous” and “witty” and “a rollicking good ballet, poking good natured fun at Yale.” The ballet’s “lampooning is broad and the pictorial incidents well invented,” noted the Christian Science Monitor, and added that, “the Radio City Music Hall management is probably trying to book it already.” The ballet was the only offering by the American Ballet mentioned in a Los Angeles Times survey of theatrical events in New York, in which it was noted that Warburg and Swift had “danced a new meaning into football.”

Less obvious in its message was “something listed as Errante,” as a reviewer for the New York Post described the ballet, which he hypothesized was “evidently a big symbolic number, the clue for which could perhaps be found in the words of Schubert’s

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song,” which were included in the souvenir program. If the content of the ballet was somewhat inscrutable, it was nevertheless a compelling spectacle:

Miss Geva, garbed in a green evening gown and dragging the longest train in the history of that ornament, rushed out upon a white stage, exhibiting every evidence of the utmost consternation. At times gentlemen in tights appeared and performed subtle rites with her snaky appurtenance. From what I could gather, Miss Geva longed for domestic happiness. But, unfortunately, the male or males she clung to frantically were always snatched from her by various ruthless processions of dancers.\textsuperscript{253}

Despite his own consternation, however, this same reviewer notes that after \textit{Errante}, “the curtain came down to the most frenzied applause I have heard in a theater this season.”\textsuperscript{254}

Photographs taken of Geva from the front of the house attest to the dramatic scale of her gown’s train, and the eagerness with which she greeted her ovations (Figure 7).\textsuperscript{255}

Another review similarly noted that, “the most enthusiastic applause of the night was aroused by \textit{Errante}.”\textsuperscript{256} Yet another, however, suspected the presence of a claque, observing that, “last night’s premiere ‘Bravo-o-o-os’ sounded suspiciously professional.”\textsuperscript{257}

Confirming Tchelitchev’s characterization of the ballet as an indulgent fantasy, one review called the ballet the “caviar course” of the opening night program, and said that although Geva deserved her ovations, otherwise “there were incidental elements altogether too arty for any audience not composed largely of the dance elect.”\textsuperscript{258}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{255} Patterson–Dollar Papers, uncredited photo of Tamara Geva, William Dollar, and Charles Laskey.
\end{flushright}
*Herald-Tribune* noted more details of the impressive spectacle of *Errante*, and how it evoked both awe and guffaws:

Panels of what seemed to be the material of which white modern lampshades are made provided the background for a series of plastic compositions which gave the sustained atmosphere of phantasmagoria. [...] There were some rather stagy effects, as when Miss Geva utilized the body of her dead lover as the stretcher on which she was almost carried off by a funeral cortège; a finale in which the hero, in a silhouette behind the panel, climbed a rope ladder, and a remarkable moment when ribbons wove serpentine patterns across the stage. So startling were some of the effects that there were bursts of poorly suppressed laughter, quickly shushed by the more rapt members of the audience.  

*Serenade* and especially *Reminiscence* prompted more outright and untroubled appreciation. The two ballets “made direct use of the classic ballet elements,” and in them Balanchine “found means of bringing each of the more talented performers into focus with brief solo interludes and revealed a lively inventiveness in his arrangement of duos, trios and other groups that gave fresh aspect to traditional maneuvers.”  

The *Post* reviewer, bewildered by *Errante*, enjoyed *Reminiscence* most of all, “because I did not have to understand anything” and instead could simply enjoy “some good old-fashioned toe-dancing.” Its numbers “were put on with an ease and grace which brought almost constant applause,” and Paul Haakon seemed to have “brought to life” the Prometheus statue at Rockefeller Center in his turn as Saturn, presumably in a passage without his hoop. When all was said and done, opening night generated enough positive notices to

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fill a sizeable “success ad,” as Kirstein described the advertisement (Figure X), though he registered some “surprise” at the “excellence of its editing.”

More specialized voices, however, were similarly critical of the Adelphi programs. Writing in *Modern Music*, Lehman Engel—a composer of music for several modern dance choreographers—was unimpressed by the company’s program, finding fault with both its repertorial logic and execution in a review of “Les Ballets Américains.” “Of the four ballets shown in one week,” Engel notes, “four were set to inferior arrangements and bad orchestrations of European music.”

In *Errante*, “we writhed at the things that happened to Schubert’s *Wanderer*” and “the potpourri of Godard in *Reminiscence*, Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade*, and the sentimental Liszt to be found in *Transcendence* represent the kind of music that I, for one, can no longer hear with any feeling of rapport.” Engel was more forgiving of *Dreams*, if only because Antheil’s assignment to compose music for an already-created ballet “was an unfair task to assign to anyone,” while Swift’s *Alma Mater*, on the other hand, “can be dismissed after a bit of cutting as a very superior number in anyone’s revue.” And although *Alma Mater* was “hardly to be regarded as a ballet” (as had been noted in Hartford), by virtue of the work the company had at least “proved it had been born and reared at home.” (The same could not be said, according to Engel, of Massine’s recent “American” ballet *Union Pacific*, which “failed in every department” though it “might have succeeded in

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265 Ibid.
266 Ibid.
267 Ibid., 140, 141.
France.” But it still remained to be seen whether the American Ballet would live up to its name:

If it will, it can depart from the weak, the unhealthy, the unassimilative. Then let it seek here for its materials, from American artists. The American Ballet will become an extremely interesting institution to the native composers, if it follows the path that it must follow for its own survival.

“The outstanding characteristic displayed by the American Ballet,” a review in *The American Dancer* noted in a backhanded compliment, “was its complete kinship to the Russian ballet and to the classic ballet modes” and that in its present form “the American Ballet is a European ballet in the United States.” But questions of national identity aside, “for the ballets themselves no great enthusiasm can be worked up,” and were not thoroughly grounded in classicism, however, as Balanchine’s Petersburg training and subsequent association with Diaghilev “seems to have brought about in him a cross-breed spirit.” A review in *Dance Observer* of a performance near the end of the Adelphi run—consisting of Serenade, Dreams, and Reminiscence—was even more pointed. “It was bad; all of it,” wrote Henry Gilfond for the journal of record for modern dance, “and if it was American, it was because it was certainly not Russian, nor French,” a three-pronged rebuke of the company’s hybridizing claims. “As a people, certainly we are not kinesthetically sentimental,” he elaborated, “with serenades of a flowing pre-war sweetness, and dreams of a corrupt naïveté, knaves and princes and pages and a fairy

268 Ibid., 141.
269 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
queen.”

The company’s offerings were “a vapid gesture of no understandable significance” with “too much of the vaudevillian applause for clinical developments on the toes to warrant other than a lean and smug following for the so-called, and pretentiously so, American Ballet.” In similar terms, John Martin regarded audience enthusiasm—whether uncritically “vaudevillian” or snobbishly “smug”—as a dubious measure of the company’s success. The audience interested in the “chic and outré,” that is, the ermine and tail-coat crowd, “shifts its bravos from fashionable fad to fashionable fad, but its dollars are good while they last and its applause is deafening for the same period of time.”

(Another reviewer noted that the opening night audience, which “appeared to be recruited almost entirely from Mayfair” was “willing—nay eager—to burst into applause at the execution of every arabesque.”) Combined with the community of émigré Europeans, mostly Russian, “who are honestly homesick for the kind of dancing they used to know at home” and the vaudevillian masses “who are subject to indiscriminate rapture over anything in the nature of ‘toe dancing,’” as Martin put it, the American Ballet had indeed shown that it could draw a crowd, but at what cost to their mission?

In addition to his preview coverage, John Martin devoted three separate reviews to the American Ballet’s programs, the first after opening night and two others later in the

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273 Ibid.
274 Ibid.
275 Lynn Garafola has argued that the mixed reception of the American Ballet’s season was a product of both conflicting views of American identity and, crucially, issues of class, with the Company’s programming geared to the elite audience represented by Kirstein, Warburg and their peers. See Garafola, “George Antheil and the Dance,” 264–5.
run to encompass the all of the company’s repertoire. The discussion that follows arguably runs the same risk as Balanchine’s biographers and NYCB historians by positing Martin’s opinions as more conclusive and consequential than the many others in circulation at the time. Martin’s critiques are worth examining at length and in conclusion not just owing the importance of his position as America’s only full-time dance critic. More to the point of the larger argument of this chapter, Martin’s critiques quite astutely diagnose and summarize the underlying organizational and aesthetic issues revealed in the other contemporary evidence cited above, whether from Kirstein, Dimitriev, or other critics and observers. Simply put, Martin’s sometimes harsh evaluations of the American Ballet’s debut were more than justified (at least at this particular moment) and were not simply born of an irrational nationalism, uncritical allegiance to modern dance, or an underlying antipathy to Balanchine’s work as a whole.

Of the four ballets from the opening program, Martin deemed only two “worthy of serious consideration as dance works while the others could be essentially written off.” Errante fell “into the same class of cosmic nonsense as the Monte Carlo Ballet’s Les Présages,” of which Martin was no fan and “which up to now has held the record for choreographic silliness.” The ballet was “exactly the sort of thing the American Ballet must not do if it is to assume the place in the dance world to which it is entitled,” despite its enthusiastic reception by the “platinum and diamond audience.” And while Alma Mater was “a thoroughly amusing little burlesque of college life as it is lived in the minds of the fiction writers,” it was “really a revue sketch rather than a ballet.” Serenade was a

280 Ibid.
281 Ibid.
“serviceable rather than an inspired work,” although Martin was sympathetic that Balanchine no doubt “had his problems in devising choreography for an inexperienced company,” nevertheless the ballet seemed to lack spontaneity. The closing number Reminiscence was the “real delight of the evening” in part because of its embrace of classicism, unexpected grounds for praise from a purported modern dance partisan. Though the ballet did not elicit the enthusiasm Martin held for Balanchine’s La Concurrence and Cotillon (noted above), it was at least something that was appropriate for the company in its present state. “Here Mr. Balanchine has taken actual dances from his memories of the Russian ballet and adapted them to his own uses,” so that “the real abilities of the company get their first showing, and it is a decidedly impressive showing.”

In his second review, Martin’s opinions did not change significantly, having not been altered by the experience of Dreams and Transcendence. Dreams was “scarcely worth the labor that has been spent on it, for it is trivial in subject matter and utterly unsuited to the style to the young dancers who make up the company.”²⁸² He did not care for Antheil’s music either, and remarked that, “the abandonment of the Milhaud score was of doubtful wisdom.” Transcendence was slightly better and had “the quality of phantasmagoria and some of its incidents are of distinct power,” but nevertheless, “whether because of its straining for choreographic novelty or because again of its complete unsuitability to the talents of the company, it remains largely incomprehensible.” By the time he wrote his third review, Martin still found only Reminiscence worthy of explicit praise, though again not on its own merits, but because it

offered the only evidence of the organization’s fulfillment of its previously stated agenda, in his words, “to nurture during its period of growth a group of dancers trained in the fundamentals of the classic ballet.”

“Of the six ballets which constituted the present season,” Martin elaborated, only Reminiscence “gave signs of being useful in building towards this ultimate goal.” The “aggregation of divertissements in the classic manner” was indeed “not calculated to cause any sort of sensation, but it is exactly the sort of thing that one would expect to find in the repertoire of what is at present actually an apprentice group with guest artists.” Regarding the remaining repertoire, Martin validated Dimitriev’s concerns about Balanchine’s overly modernist inclinations, observing that “it seems a colossal waste of time and energy to train dancers in the strict routine of the classic dance” when most of the company’s ballets—Dreams, Errante, Serenade, and Transcendence—“belong to another style,” evidence not of the vitality of the danse d’école but rather “of the decadence of the classic tradition as it is found in certain European environments,” or more dismissively put, “Riviera aesthetics.” Martin exempted Alma Mater from these charges, but was less optimistic than Engel about its symbolic value. Despite its native theme the “college ballet” does not serve the stated goal of the organization, since it “departs so slightly from the type of dancing that has been done for years in revues that it is of little consequence and leads nowhere.” Martin summed up the situation as follows, perhaps asking the question more pointedly since he had in effect already posed it on several occasions in more polite and generous terms:

The problem resolves itself into one fundamental decision: is the organization to attempt the fulfillment of its original policy of developing an American ballet, or is it to follow the direction of its present season and go on being merely “Les Ballets Americains?”

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In the midst of these larger critiques, however, reviewers including Martin were quick to praise the talents of the dancers, and seemed sympathetic about their undertaking choreography that was incompatible with their talents and abilities. Engel’s review noted that “the outstanding feature of this exhibition is the dancers themselves,” and although all were to be praised, William Dollar had been a clear standout.\textsuperscript{284} Another review noted, amid remarks about \textit{Reminiscence}, that it “was gratifying to note how far these young dancers have proceeded along the traditional road of the ballet.”\textsuperscript{285} “For the essential training of the young company,” Martin similarly noted, “there is nothing but praise,” even if they were somewhat wet behind the ears:

\begin{quote}
Their technique is clean and simple and has the dignity and purity of the classic style at its best. There is nothing overly pretty about it, no flopping hands or marshmallow softness. It is not always perfect in practice, for the dancers are young and inexperienced in the discipline of a ballet organization. There are many evidences of coltishness that only time will remove. But, on the whole, it is a good group of hard-working youngsters, far too good indeed to be forced, like square pegs into round holes, into choreography that does not and never will belong to them.\textsuperscript{286}
\end{quote}

With respect to Martin and his working relationship with Kirstein, the Adelphi engagement did mark a significant turning point. Of Martin’s first review Kirstein did not record an opinion himself, but noted that “Bal[anchine] agreed with Martin that \textit{Errante} was silly,” albeit for a different reason, insisting that “it means nothing, it is entirely simple like a dream,” and he questioned why Americans “always have to see meaning in everything.”\textsuperscript{287} After Martin’s second review appeared, Kirstein noted that, “Dimitriev

\begin{footnotes}
\item[287] LK Diaries, March 2, 1935.
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agreed with me that John Martin’s review was perfectly just,” similar to how he had greeted the constructive criticism of the critic’s open letter after the Hartford performances. Having obtained an advance copy of Martin’s third Adelphi review of March 10, Kirstein described the critic’s remarks as “censorious” but “OK by me,” although with a new suspicion: “I suspect he is not as careful a student as I imagined. He has only seen each ballet once. Maybe he’s at [Martha] Graham’s rehearsals.”

(Kirstein’s elsewhere notes that Martin attended a rehearsal on February 28 at which he would have had the chance to see all of the four ballets presented on opening night.)

By the end of the Adelphi run, however, Kirstein had all but written off the critic as an ally:

John Martin wrote an article mentioning Balanchine and [Laurent] Novikoff’s name as new maitre de ballet at the NY Met Opera and saying “No No We must have an American.” I now consider his interest in ballet as superficial, that he is such a chauvinist and as far as I’m concerned an enemy that I cannot make use of.

Soon enough Kirstein would find cause to take these private grievances public as the American Ballet lobbied to become the resident ballet company of the Metropolitan Opera, with Balanchine as maitre de ballet, over Martin’s ongoing objections (discussed in the following chapter). Only a few years later, however, Kirstein would validate the critic’s opinions on the Adelphi debut (and by extension Dimitriev’s ongoing critiques and observations), writing in Blast at Ballet that the performances “pleased many people

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288 LK Diaries, March 6, 1935.
289 LK Diaries, March 10, 1935.
290 LK Diaries, February 28, 1935.
292 LK Diaries, March 16, 1935.
and disappointed others,” and that “I think it was John Martin who called it Les Ballets 1935, and with some reason.”

6. Postscript: Serenade Then and Now

One final set of impressions from the Adelphi engagement merits noting to close this chapter of the history of the American Ballet. Notably not just Alma Mater—and, however unintentional, Errante—elicited laughter from the audience at the Adelphi opening night performance. According to several accounts one of the most famous moments in the first movement of Serenade struck an unexpected chord, understood by the opening night audience as a comic event and accordingly greeted with “fragile laughter”:

Serenade [...] contained laughter at the expense of the Imperial Russian ballet. It was more surprising because the evening’s choreographer, George Balanchine, is a product of that school and the last choreographer of the Diaghilev troupe. Mr. Balanchine permitted one of his dancers, after steps of unerring grace, to lose her place in the ballet and dash about to regain it. Hearty applause greeted her success.

This critic does not necessarily include himself among those who found the incident humorous, but he evidently found it somewhat shocking—a surprising departure from the classical tradition that Balanchine was supposed to be transplanting in America. Another critic similarly detected in Serenade an intentionally humorous agenda, noting that, “certain details were well calculated to stir the risibilities of observant spectators.” When these expressions of humor and shock are added to the already noted indifference

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293 Kirstein, Blast at Ballet, 28.
to Balanchine’s choreography, disdain for the ballet’s score, and the quite modern design of its original costumes, a very different picture of Serenade emerges from its present reputation as an evergreen crowd-pleaser or latter-day Les Sylphides.

Indeed, it is striking how incongruous such observations are today given the enormous symbolic authority invested in Serenade as an emblem of Balanchine’s commitment to classicism at the start of his American career. As this discussion has shown, however, Balanchine did not leave his modernism behind when he crossed the Atlantic, and his interest in the bizarre and experimental did not cease with his work for Les Ballets 1933. Balanchine’s now classically iconic “first ballet in America” did not mark an especially dramatic turn in his style but was rather very much of a piece with its Europhile reportorial siblings. And like the other debut offerings of the American Ballet, Serenade elicited mostly lukewarm responses that must be acknowledged, however sacrilegious it might seem with respect to the present form and reputation of the ballet. Arlene Croce has noted the “disconcerting” quality of photographs of Serenade from the 1930s, but we must now add to the ballet’s early history the arcane modernist ethos of which it was but one example. (Figure 8) These now strange and remote qualities of Serenade serve to remind us of what was novel and surprising about Balanchine’s choreography more generally, and how far his style had to develop toward the re-imagination of the danse d’école for which he is celebrated today. Acknowledging these

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296 For four such accounts of Serenade, all of which attend mostly to the ballet’s first presentation in 1934 at Woodlands, see Taper, Balanchine: A Biography, 155–60; Gottlieb, George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker, 77–80; Teachout, All In the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine, 62–6; and more recently, Homans, Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet, 515–19.
differences between the modernist *Serenade* of then and the classical *Serenade* of now, Croce observes that had the ballet “not been kept in repertory, it might have had to be wholly re-created”:

Changing its shape now subtly, now radically, *Serenade* has over the years maintained its place and its essence: it has always been recognizably *Serenade*. The hope of perpetuation and continuity lies in repertory; so does the expectancy of permissible change. \(^{298}\)

The same might apply to Balanchine’s choreographic style as a whole. Had his career as a serious ballet choreographer ended in the 1930s—due to organizational duress or his own ongoing health problems—Balanchine would likely be regarded along the same lines as Massine, one of many distinguished but ultimately short-lived participants in the tumultuous institutional and aesthetic aftermath of the era of Diaghilev. And *Serenade* might be no more beloved than *Les Présages*, one of many curious experiments in the now obsolete idiom of symphonic ballet.

\(^{298}\) Ibid.
Figure 4: Cover page of American Ballet program, Bryn Mawr, February 7, 1935, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 5: Cover of American Ballet flier, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 6: Cover of American Ballet program by Louis Bouché, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 7: Uncredited photograph, Charles Laskey, Tamara Geva, and William Dollar (l to r) in *Errante*, Adelphi Theater, New York (no date given), Patterson–Dollar Papers, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 8: Uncredited photos of *Serenade*, Adelphi Theater Souvenir Program, Patterson–Dollar Papers, JRDD–NYPL.
Chapter 4

On the Road to the Metropolitan Opera, 1935

Histories of NYCB and Balanchine’s biographies do not make much of the period between the March 1935 debut of the American Ballet at the Adelphi Theater and the beginning of its duties as resident dance ensemble at the Metropolitan Opera in December that same year. Indeed, most draw a direct line from the Adelphi to the Metropolitan, with the decision by the opera to take on the American Ballet construed as an unexpected and providential offer from its new director Edward Johnson that occurred in the wake of the company’s debut.¹ “The invitation was so unsuspected,” Kirstein wrote in Blast at Ballet, “the opportunity so wonderful, there was scarcely a thought of

¹ “After the first Stadium performance, when the company had just begun rehearsals for an ambitious tour booked by Merovitch to begin in the middle of October, Edward Johnson, the newly appointed general manager of the Metropolitan Opera House, invited the American Ballet to become the resident company of the Metropolitan Opera.” Chujoy, The New York City Ballet, 52; “That summer, just before the tour began, there had occurred what seemed at the time the greatest piece of good fortune imaginable: the Metropolitan Opera had invited the American Ballet to become the Met’s resident ballet company, with Balanchine as ballet master.” Bernard Taper, Balanchine: A Biography; “The excursion of the young dancers from the School on Madison Avenue into the harsh realities of performance on Broadway had an unexpected result. Edward Johnson, a former tenor and the new general manager of the Metropolitan Opera House, asked Balanchine to renovate the dance passages in their operas.” Buckle with Taras, George Balanchine, Ballet Master, 94; “To everyone’s astonishment, in August the Metropolitan Opera House had extended an invitation to the American Ballet to become its resident dance company.” Gottlieb, George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker, 82; “Critical response was mixed, but the public was impressed, and Edward Johnson, the new general manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company, invited Balanchine and his dancers, now called the American Ballet, to supply ballets for the Met’s productions.” Teachout, All In the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine, 68.
refusal.”Although it is true that the Adelphi performances did help bring the company to the attention of Johnson, the company’s engagement by the opera was not an act of his doing alone.

This chapter will show how the process unfolded over the better part of 1935 and was a product not of the American Ballet’s artistic success or enthusiasm of Johnson. The engagement of the American Ballet and Balanchine was in fact occasioned by general institutional turmoil at the Metropolitan Opera, an organization at which the Warburg family suddenly found themselves with considerable leverage in early 1935 owing to their association with the Juilliard Music Foundation, explained in sections one and two. Section three discusses the discourse that surrounded the announcement of the American Ballet’s new post, most notably the debates regarding whether the opera ought to employ an American ballet master or an artist with ties to modern dance. Sections four and five examine the reception of performances by the American Ballet that took place during the nine-month period between the company’s March New York debut and first appearances at the Metropolitan: summertime shows in New York and Philadelphia, a September benefit performance in Westchester county, and an ambitious nationwide tour in October abruptly canceled after less than two weeks. These performances and tour were intended to raise the institutional profile of the American Ballet and were touted as evidence of their ability to compete with their biggest competitors, the de Basil company. The uneven quality of their performances and the institutional mismanagement that resulted in the collapse of their tour would instead call into question the company’s readiness to assume such a prominent post at the Metropolitan.

1. The Metropolitan Opera, the Juilliard Foundation, and the Warburg Family

Ballet was not the biggest issue facing the Metropolitan Opera in early 1935, with the house in the midst of a period of organizational instability in part due to the impending end of the directorship of Giulio Gatti-Casazza. The dynamic impresario’s twenty-five-year tenure had witnessed some of the Metropolitan’s greatest artistic accomplishments, with over five thousand performances of nearly 200 operas, among them many featuring conductor Arturo Toscanini and tenor Enrico Caruso. Gatti-Casazza’s final years had been less auspicious, however, with the organization profoundly unsettled by financial woes brought upon by the Great Depression. Departing along with Gatti-Casazza, moreover, was his wife Rosina Galli, a dancer trained at La Scala who had first come to the Metropolitan as a soloist in 1914, and remained the company’s female star until her retirement from the stage after her marriage in 1930. In 1919 Galli assumed the additional role of ballet mistress, and with the exception of a two-year absence from the stage due to illness from 1925 to 1927 was a continual presence at

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the Metropolitan and carried on the Italian ballet tradition that had been established at the company and its affiliated school from its earliest years.\(^5\)

The already fateful question of who would succeed Gatti-Casazza was complicated by the involvement of the Juilliard Music Foundation in helping the Metropolitan stay afloat. The Foundation, created upon the death of textile merchant Augustus D. Juilliard in April 1919, was not originally created to support the school that today bears its benefactor’s name. Juilliard’s will instead stipulated that his funds should support a range of musical endeavors: to aid in the instruction and education of “worthy students of music,” to present concerts and recitals “of a character appropriate for the education and instruction of the general public,” and to support the operations of the Metropolitan Opera although in a way that ensured that “such gifts shall in no wise inure to its monetary profit.”\(^6\) This lack of clarity as to Juilliard’s philanthropic intentions led to many years of wrangling over the proper use of his gift.\(^7\) When the opera began experiencing financial difficulties in the 1930s, a lawyer representing several singers began a campaign to secure Juilliard funding for the Metropolitan based upon this overlooked provision of the will, arguing that the general public should not be asked to prop up the house with a $300,000 fundraising drive when Foundation funds might be used instead.\(^8\) Foundation president John Erskine eventually agreed and authorized gifts of $50,000 in 1933 and $40,000 in 1934, despite the protests of Metropolitan fundraising

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\(^5\) Ibid.


\(^8\) Ibid., 126–7.
organizers soprano Lucrezia Bori and board member Cornelius Bliss that such largesse
would undermine their own efforts. Erskine added an additional interpretation of his
own to the language of the Juilliard will, however, and stipulated that the Foundation’s
support be used “to assist in the production of operas which otherwise might not get a
hearing at the Metropolitan—operas of historic interest to students and operas written by
American composers.” This served to advance the interests of Juilliard students as well
as Erskine himself, a polymath scholar who promoted the production of new and non-
standard operas while President of Juilliard and a collaborator on several operas mounted
at the school.

The Juilliard gifts of 1933 and 1934 were not sufficient to set the opera’s finances
in order, however, and by early 1935 the organization found itself once again in dire
straits. In the meantime, the issue arose of who would succeed Gatti-Casazza in the
leadership role. Despite a broad field of aspirants, consensus coalesced around the
candidacy of Herbert Witherspoon, a Metropolitan singer who had also been an instructor
at Juilliard. In the end the Foundation again came to the rescue of the Metropolitan with a
gift of $150,000 in 1935, but with many strings attached. The opera had to raise
subscription prices and pledge to operate with a balanced budget, as well as—in a further
development of Erskine’s reinterpretation of the Juilliard will—offer a new spring season
of English-language opera at “popular prices,” that is, comparable to the rates at

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 127.
11 On John Erskine’s background, interest in opera, and initiatives to promote opera at
12 “Juilliard Foundation Agrees To Cover Metropolitan Deficit,” BS, March 4, 1935;
“Juilliard Foundation Takes Leading Role at Metropolitan,” CSM, March 7, 1935;
“Juilliard Plan To Aid Opera Is Accepted by Metropolitan,” NYHT, March 7, 1935;
“Opera Accepts Juilliard Terms; Witherspoon to Succeed Gatti,” NYT, March 7, 1935.
(The Met spring season will be discussed further in the following chapter.) To ensure proper oversight of these plans, three Juilliard trustees were to be appointed to the Metropolitan board, and it was also understood that the Foundation’s preferred candidate, Witherspoon, would be appointed as Gatti-Casazza’s successor.14

The resolution of this financial crisis and the appointment of Witherspoon were announced on March 7, 1935—that is, in the middle of the American Ballet’s Adelphi engagement—and met with general approval in the press. The Christian Science Monitor extended “warm wishes” to Witherspoon and his colleagues, who “deserve the cordial support of all who hold an affectionate regard for New York’s opera company.”15 “Mr. Witherspoon has expressed certain views and intentions which are decidedly heartening,” noted the Herald-Tribune, which praised his plans to revitalize the artistic offerings of the house, in particular through the new spring season, “an admirable project, regarded not only as a valuable laboratory experiment for testing various theories, but as a promising source of gratification for an immense number of opera lovers.”16 The Metropolitan “Will Seek Audiences in Telephone Book Rather than Social Register,” a headline in the Chicago Tribune proclaimed.17 Such outreach would be the special goal of the spring season, which would also offer an opportunity to showcase lesser known works and also up-and-coming (i.e. less expensive) singers, including promising students from Juilliard.18 “It is to be seen,” critic Olin Downes noted in the New York Times with some skepticism, “whether by these measures the Metropolitan can retain its proper measure of

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
17 Edward Moore, “Metropolitan Opera to Go ‘Democratic,’” CT, March 24, 1935.
independence in operation, and whether the Juilliard Foundation will be willing to forego any special advantages that its students might derive from the Metropolitan openings, and confine the promotion of Juilliard applicants to those who beyond dispute prove their merits."

Responsibility for management of the spring season had been handed over to Witherspoon’s primary rival for the director position, another singer-turned-impresario, Edward Johnson. Born in Guelph, Ontario, Johnson had gone to Italy to study and begin his career and had sung for five seasons at La Scala under the stage name Eduardo di Giovanni and had married the daughter of a Portuguese nobleman. To the Metropolitan’s management he would bring not only this cosmopolitan biography but also good looks and a knack for navigating the byzantine social networks that underpinned the organization. Only two months after his appointment, however—and only two weeks after Gatti-Casazza had sailed back to Europe in a tearful sendoff—Witherspoon suddenly died of a heart attack in his office. Although various other candidates were again considered, within a week the opera board opted for the expedient solution of promoting Johnson into the director role, a position he would ultimately hold until 1950.

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19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
It is within this complex field of institutional negotiation and realignment that George Balanchine would eventually succeed Rosina Galli as the ballet master of the Metropolitan Opera and bring with him the American Ballet as its resident dance company. Much more than the enthusiasm of Edward Johnson, it was the Metropolitan’s institutional instability and influence of the Juilliard Foundation at the opera that helped bring about this opportunity for the American Ballet. The Company’s road to the opera was paved not by their artistic achievement or even their youthful allure and enthusiasm—much less the nationality of their artistic leader—but rather was aided considerably by the familial and business connections that the Warburg family had to both Juilliard and the Metropolitan.

The Warburg family had long enjoyed considerable entrée to the Metropolitan through their affiliation with the financial firm Kuhn, Loeb, of which the previous opera chairman, Otto Kahn, had been a partner. When Juilliard began to take an active role in the management of the Metropolitan in the 1930s, however, their access was significantly enhanced, since the Warburgs had deep ties to the Foundation. Edward Warburg’s great-uncle James Loeb had been the founding benefactor of the original Institute of Musical Art created by Frank Damrosch in 1905, which after considerable negotiation merged with the troubled Juilliard Music Foundation in 1925 (creating the Juilliard organization

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25 Lincoln Kirstein’s history of NYCB mentions this prior relationship, but otherwise does not attribute the Metropolitan offer to Warburg connections: “Warburg’s father was from olden times an associate of Otto H. Kahn, who with Puccini, Caruso, and Gatti-Casazza before the First World War had let the Met to surpass La Scala as the prime opera house of the world.” Kirstein, *Thirty Years*, 52.
that is still in operation today). Both Edward Warburg’s uncle Paul and father Felix had served on the board of the Institute and were subsequently named trustees of the newly combined organization. When Juilliard bailed out the Metropolitan in March 1935, it had requested three seats on the opera board, but a few days before Witherspoon’s death in May it was announced that the Foundation would in fact receive four seats, with the newly acquired seat to be occupied by Felix Warburg. As a result Edward Warburg and by extension, the American Ballet, would have immediate access to the highest levels of decision-making at the opera in the months to come. No other American dance company, regardless of its artistic orientation, stood so close to the corridors of power at the Met.

2. The American Ballet’s Bid for the Metropolitan

While Dimitriev and Balanchine were beginning to cross swords in January 1935, Kirstein got wind from several sources about the Metropolitan’s plans to engage a new ballet master to succeed Rosina Galli. From Glenway Wescott he learned that the Metropolitan “was determined to have a ballet next year” and among the many potential candidates for the position were Alexandre Gavrilov, a student of Fokine’s and Ballets Russes and later de Basil star. Through Monroe Wheeler he was told that Vienna State opera ballet master Margarete Wallman was being pushed by another board member “in a big way.” Kirstein resolved that the Company ought to “get in there for guest

27 Ibid., 83.
28 “Juilliard Group of 4 Named to Opera’s Board,” *NYHT*, May 9, 1935.
29 LK Diaries, January 10, 1935.
30 LK Diaries, February 1, 1935.
performances,” in order to make sure they were in the public eye.\footnote{LK Diaries, January 10, 1935.} One of Kirstein’s brainstorms occurred at a performance of Richard Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier, which to his chagrin he “dozed through amiably enough.”\footnote{Ibid.} He was awake long enough to observe that, “the opera house looked pretty goddamned swell and I would love to have the ballet perform there next year.”\footnote{Ibid.} George Antheil had a different take, saying that “nothing had been settled definitely about anyone,” and regarded the possible candidacy of Edward Johnson as evidence of larger organizational disarray, noting that “they were at their wits end as to what to do.”\footnote{Ibid. Antheil’s memoirs, Bad Boy of Music, do not discuss the American Ballet’s Metropolitan affiliation.}

By the time the American Ballet’s Adelphi engagement began, Herbert Witherspoon was only a week away from being officially installed in his new position, and Edward Johnson similarly was slated to assume his second-in-command role in charge of the popular price spring season. If the opera’s larger leadership was close to being settled, the question of a new ballet master was still somewhat open, but some evidence suggests that Witherspoon had already made a tentative agreement with the dancer and choreographer Ruth Page for the role. In addition to her work in opera ballet in her native Chicago—where Witherspoon had both performed and worked in administrative roles at the opera\footnote{Mayer, The Met, 202.}—Page had several years earlier made a well-received choreographic debut at the Metropolitan with dances for a 1927 production of Smetana’s The Bartered Bride, and had performed solo numbers in Mignon and Aida in 1927 and 1928, in addition to a notable career as a soloist and choreographer elsewhere. Page’s
correspondence with her mother suggests that she and Fisher had been in discussions with the Metropolitan in general and Witherspoon in particular. In February 1935 Page wrote that she and her husband Tom Fisher would be staying with “Mr. Cravath” while in New York, possibly referring to Paul Cravath, chairman of the Metropolitan board.\textsuperscript{36} By early April, Page indicates that some official meetings had already taken place in New York and that she had been in contact with Witherspoon. In a letter postmarked April 2 from Chicago, Page wrote that her professional life was in limbo. “It is so hard to do anything when our plans are so terribly uncertain,” she confided in her mother, and was “waiting to hear from Witherspoon and I will probably have to go to N.Y. to see him again.”\textsuperscript{37}

Several days into the Adelphi performances, Tom Fisher made contact with Kirstein to strategize about the Metropolitan situation. A year before while in Chicago to review an exhibition for \textit{Hound & Horn}, Kirstein had been introduced to Page and Fisher through Fisher’s younger brother Howard, who had been a classmate of Kirstein’s at Harvard.\textsuperscript{38} Fisher and Kirstein had immediately bonded over their similar interests and demeanors, in particular Fisher’s first-hand knowledge of Diaghilev’s troubled commission of Chicago composer John Alden Carpenter’s score for \textit{Skyscrapers}.\textsuperscript{39} Reconnecting with Kirstein in March 1935, Fisher pitched to him the idea of installing Page as ballet master, who would in turn invite Balanchine, Martha Graham, and Doris

\textsuperscript{36} Ruth Page to Marian Heinly Page, undated letter, postmarked February 11, 1935, Ruth Page Collection, NYPL–JRDD, Correspondence, Folder 35C1.
\textsuperscript{38} Martin, \textit{Ruth Page, An Intimate Biography}, 86.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
Humphrey and Charles Weidman in as additional contributing artists. These sorts of native talents were among those being touted around the same time by John Martin, who was lobbying strongly for an American to assume the post—among others Humphrey and Agnes de Mille—on the principle that it was time for America not to be dependent upon foreign expertise to produce its art. Martin was dismayed at rumors that Balanchine and another Russian dancer, Laurent Novikoff, were front-runners for the position, an opinion that had, as noted earlier, marked the beginning of Kirstein’s changed opinion about the critic.

While Witherspoon had been in discussions with Page and Fisher, Edward Johnson had paid a visit to the School of American Ballet. Kirstein reports that Johnson—still a month away from receiving his sudden and unexpected promotion—came to observe classes, and the two talked so much that the rehearsal pianist shushed them, to Kirstein’s mortification. Johnson also spoke with Warburg about the spring season, and perhaps also about the engagement of the company as resident ensemble, saying “he would let us know later about the ballet.” Johnson further informed them that “the whole thing depended upon Erskine for us,” suggesting the decision-making at the Metropolitan was strongly influenced by the organization’s Juilliard benefactors. Kirstein lamented that, “I’m pretty much afraid that George Antheil has ruined us there” thinking that the poor critical reception of Dreams might sway Erskine against them. Kirstein did not fully grasp that through Warburg the American Ballet had more

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40 LK Diaries, March 5, 1935.
42 Ibid.
43 LK Diaries, April 11, 1935.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
significant channels to the Foundation than the “bad boy” composer, whose recent opera
_Helen Retires_ (based on a best-selling novel about Helen of Troy written by Erskine) had
been poorly received as well.\textsuperscript{46}

The sudden death of Witherspoon and promotion of Johnson in early May altered
the ballet situation at the Metropolitan. Less than a week after Johnson had assumed his
new post, Kirstein and Warburg were angling for a meeting with him to ask “to do one
evening a week of ballet if we can.”\textsuperscript{47} Tom Fisher for his part was lobbying again for a
Collaborative plan of action and claimed to Kirstein that Page had not only secured the
job before Witherspoon’s death but was also still the front-runner:

> Witherspoon, Gatti-Casazza’s successor who died promptly had fixed it up
> pretty much with Ruth Page and [Laurent] Novikoff for the ballet at the
> Met. Now the situation was entirely changed and Ruth was still in the
> running but Novikoff was out. He proposed a combination of Ruth Page
> and our Ballet co with Bal[anchine] the dangers of entrusting the house to
> any one name the first y[ea]r. […] Ruth and Bal[anchine] after all know
> opera, can fill that lousy stage. We were in perfect accord, so I told him to
> phone Warburg that he was passing through and was breakfasting with
> him.\textsuperscript{48}

Fisher was unable to reach Warburg, who called Kirstein later that night to report that he
had received “a very odd telegram from Tom Fisher.”\textsuperscript{49} Kirstein tried to coach Warburg
“as to what he sh[oul]d say tomorrow morning ab[ou]t cooperating with Ruth Page and
our Ballet Co,” thinking that Fisher’s plan was the best strategy for the American
Ballet.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{46} Olmstead, _Juilliard: A History_, 125.
\textsuperscript{47} LK Diaries, May 20, 1935.
\textsuperscript{48} LK Diaries, May 22, 1935.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
If Warburg had more often than not demonstrated a general incompetence regarding the American Ballet’s management, in this instance he would redeem his past managerial misdeeds. Whether by instinct or due to insider information or both, he correctly surmised that Fisher’s suggestion was a scheme not to help Balanchine or the American Ballet but rather to salvage the candidacy of Page, whose chances for the post had died along with Witherspoon. Before their meeting with Johnson Warburg told Kirstein that “Tom Fisher protests too much” and that he didn’t think “we have to play with Ruth Page at all.” Warburg turned out to be correct, as Johnson made clear during their meeting, saying that “under no circumstances did he want Tom Fisher on their necks” and that “he couldn’t bear [Page’s] ambition,” and if anyone were to collaborate with Balanchine he preferred Agnes de Mille. Johnson asked if they could “manage the opera ballets” and also Sunday night performances devoted solely to ballet. Kirstein chimed in “at the right moment and sang Balanchine’s praises of the fine work he’d done at the opera in Monte Carlo and Covent Garden.” But despite Johnson’s enthusiasm, Kirstein still had doubts as to their chances, since there was the issue of the “governing board of Bliss, Hardwell, and John Erskine who does not love Balanchine,” again not realizing that Warburg had the connections to win over these influential men to their side. But he nevertheless admitted that his instincts had been wrong and “complimented Eddie on his Acumen re Tom Fisher and Ruth Page. Tom had completely

51 LK Diaries, May 24, 1935.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
fooled me about the absolute necessity of having his wife. I now feel both betrayed and betayer.\[56\]

Although the job was now evidently the company’s to lose, it was not ultimately settled for several months, in part because it was unclear how the American Ballet could fulfill (and finance) obligations to the Metropolitan and pursue its own performance engagements elsewhere, including a planned three-month cross-country tour to begin in the fall. Soon after this first meeting, Warburg again met with Johnson and reported to Kirstein that “something could probably be arranged even if we had to have 2 companies,” a dual-company strategy that would allow the American Ballet to tour and perform elsewhere while also providing ballet for the opera.\[57\] Dimitriev gave his blessing to the two-company scheme, but warned Warburg not to let the division of resources compromise the artistic offerings:

[H]e should make up his mind to do the Opera job and let the Tour go but very necessary to make it brilliant. That’s how Diaghilev started after the war by taking over the lousy Italian opera and ballet at Monte Carlo and here a bigger job which Balanchine can do very well.”\[58\]

The deal was still under negotiation in June, however, and in response to Warburg’s vacillation, Kirstein was ready to take advantage of the separation of the Company from the School, and thought that “if he didn’t want to take the Metropolitan Opera job, the school under Balanchine could take it,” although Dimitriev said that the School “as yet wasn’t ready to.”\[59\]

\[56\] Ibid.
\[57\] LK Diaries, May 28, 1935.
\[58\] LK Diaries, May 31, 1935.
\[59\] LK Diaries, June 12, 1935.
The deliberations continued into July. Over breakfast with Warburg, Kirstein discussed the opera deal and Johnson’s suggestion to recruit Agnes de Mille to be an assistant choreographer, something Balanchine opposed since he did not want her to dance herself. But by August 6, all was settled, and Kirstein for once had to give Warburg his due. Warburg showed his hand to Kirstein regarding the connections that had evidently helped him strike the deal and chided his partner on his leftist idealism:

Warburg called up to say he had just clinched the deal with the Metropolitan Opera and Balanchine is maitre de ballet, with the company, which is swell, and I only hope to god nothing will break this run of luck. [...] Warburg says is all very well for me to make fun of his Harvard connections and capitalist entrée but that’s what pulled it off.  

“I hope we can make use of what we’ve got as long as we can,” Kirstein noted with his habitual worry, but for the time being he “was too relieved to want to anything but flatter [the] hell out of Eddie.”

3. The Metropolitan Opera’s American Ballet

In his remarks on August 7, 1935 announcing the engagement of the American Ballet, Edward Johnson hailed Balanchine’s previous experience under Diaghilev in Paris and Monte Carlo as his chief credentials, in addition to “the keen interest awakened by the then newly organized American Ballet’s first public program in New York last season.” The Dancing Times reported approvingly that Balanchine’s selection “will reinstate the dance as a feature of its season’s productions this winter for the first time in almost a decade” and “constitutes one of the most exciting plans yet revealed for

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60 LK Diaries, July 24, 1935.  
61 LK Diaries, August 6, 1935.  
62 Ibid.  
63 “New Ballet Corps Engaged for the Metropolitan,” NYT, August 8, 1935.
augmenting the Opera’s audiences and popularity.”

Less enthusiastic were the editorial writers of *Dance Observer*, who termed the decision a “logical choice for the new management” of the opera. Although they allowed that American Ballet was “somewhat of an improvement on the old Galli troupe which was long overdue,” their opinion was one of bemused resignation:

Balanchine is in America acceptably the outstanding choreographer of the fustian ballet school, and for such opera as is generally presented in the Metropolitan, his work, which can scarcely detract from the much-dated opera, will probably be sufficient. […] It is well that an American Ballet, which exhibits only bad taste and poor judgment when it attacks the American scene (Football ballet and the proposed Uncle Tom’s Cabin) is chosen for the elaborate lace of the diamond horse-shoe.

Moreover, they saw a silver lining in the failure of a modern dance choreographer to secure the post, arguing that, “it is well for the modern dancer to steer his course through the 1930s, his art the product and the understanding of his contemporaries, time and temper.”

Less sanguine, John Martin provided a strong rebuttal opinion of the appointment, opening his weekly column with criticism of the Metropolitan for passing over American candidates for “a high artistic post for which at least half a dozen of them are eminently fitted” and lamenting that “the old tradition has not yet been eradicated that we are a crude pioneer people and must import our culture from the European fountainhead.”

Martin’s disapproval of the American Ballet’s appointment to the Metropolitan (like his critiques following the Adelphi season) has been cited as further evidence of his irrational

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
nationalism, stubborn allegiance to modern dance, and antipathy to Balanchine.\textsuperscript{69} 

Martin’s actual concerns were more nuanced, however, and centered first on the readiness of the young and inexperienced company to assume such a prominent artistic post. Additionally, he regarded the American Ballet’s alliance with one of the most conservative and establishment performing arts organizations as a definitive disavowal of the organization’s earlier articulated goals of establishing an innovative new tradition of ballet in the United States.

In a column earlier that summer, Martin had articulated what he regarded as the different standards to which American and foreign artists were held in the New York dance scene. Whereas “European importations” drew acclaim “rather through the charm of the exotic than purely on merit,” American dancers, “devoid of this marketable quality, must make their way on other grounds.”\textsuperscript{70} Such empty allure had not been the sole criterion for Balanchine’s selection for the Metropolitan post, and Martin acknowledged him as “a gifted artist beyond the shadow of a doubt, and not merely the latest Russian to arrive.”\textsuperscript{71} Moreover, he praised Balanchine’s modernist sensibility, noting that he is “unusually inventive in his choreography, and all his work is stamped with the highly personal mark of a creative individual.”\textsuperscript{72} About the American Ballet itself, however, Martin was less complimentary, and based on their recently completed performances in New York at Lewisohn Stadium (discussed below) he argued that “it was difficult to

\textsuperscript{69} “…John Martin took a dim view of the new appointment and spared neither vitriol nor space to make his view public.” and “What an ogre John Martin seemed to the ballet world that summer!” Chujoy, \textit{The New York City Ballet}, 52, 55; “The first voice to be raised in opposition was John Martin’s.” Richard Buckle with John Taras, \textit{George Balanchine, Ballet Master}, 95.


\textsuperscript{71} John Martin, “The Dance: At the Opera,” \textit{NYT}, August 18, 1935.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
picture them as representatives of what has sometimes been termed the world’s leading lyric theatre” since the young organization was “still an apprentice group rather than a company of artists.” Martin concluded that if the American Ballet as a company brought anything to the Metropolitan it was much-needed institutional stability, since it was “financially well backed, its school is well equipped and staffed, and no doubt a considerable burden can thus be taken off the shoulders of the opera guarantors.”

Martin went further, however, to impute to the American Ballet’s alliance with the Metropolitan an implicit abandonment of the previously articulated mission of the enterprise, namely “the creation of a type of theatrical dance that should develop the full flavor of American life and culture, starting with the technical tradition of the academic ballet as nothing more than a framework.” Echoing the concerns of his December 1934 and March 1935 columns, he lamented that the company had missed an opportunity to cultivate a new audience and a new kind of ballet, and had instead repurposed Balanchine’s earlier work for the same “audience of social position and wealth” to which he had been beholden in Europe. “With the throwing of the whole organization now into the very lap of this audience, which so largely dominates the opera house,” Martin pessimistically predicted, “any hope of recovering the original purpose of the enterprise appears to have been extinguished.” He cited as further evidence of the change in institutional priorities the apparent withdrawal from the enterprise of Kirstein, who “is no longer a director of the producing company but confines himself entirely to the operation of the Metropolitan.”

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73 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
of the school,” news that he had reported prior to the Adelphi engagement. For lack of evidence, Martin is careful not to lay the blame for the premature public appearances of the company at Balanchine’s feet—of this fact “the records do not reveal” (even though as the previous chapters have shown, Balanchine was in fact one of the driving forces behind these decisions).

Although prior to the Adelphi performances Kirstein had greeted Martin’s critiques as justified and constructive, by this point he had had enough, and a letter to the editor from Kirstein appeared a week later in the Sunday August 25 newspaper. Dated August 20, Kirstein’s letter in fact represented a collective response hashed out during a lengthy meeting at the Russian Tea Room on the evening of August 19 that included Balanchine, Warburg, and Merovitch. Although management of the school and company had indeed undergone a gradual separation over the last year—information that Martin had been given by Kirstein himself —Kirstein articulates a unified leadership front for the two organizations, maintaining that he, Warburg, Balanchine, and Dimitriev all still serve as the four directors of both. Having thus corrected these more superficial “errors of fact,” Kirstein goes on to take issue with he regards as Martin’s “chauvinistic construction” of the word “American” and how it might apply to ballet. In his response, Kirstein is not afraid to allude to the increasingly perilous political situation in Europe and impute dubious views to Martin and associate the critic with the increasingly controversial figure of choreographer Mary Wigman:

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
80 LK Diaries, August 19, 1935.
82 Ibid.
American ballet is not tap-dancing, though it may use it. It is not the Virginia reel, though country dances can be added to its context. Nor is it the hypnotized idiosyncrasies of a small group of concert dancers who happen to have been born in America, and who draw their ideas from Central Europe. Ballet in America is a form of dance expression no more indigenous than American violin or piano playing. Mr. Martin feels Russians are unsuitable to transmit this 400-year-old medium of Italian, French, German, Scandinavian and Slav origin and collaboration to fit the capacities of native Americans without corrupting them by foreign tricks. That is his opinion and he has a right to it. We should perhaps be grateful in these times of aggressive nationalism that he does not limit his definition of American to Anglo-Saxons alone.83

Kirstein had long had an antipathy to the Ausdruckstanz movement espoused by Wigman (implied by the reference to “Central Europe”) and at the time of this exchange with Martin geopolitical realities were happily aligning with his own taste. Beginning in August 1935 Wigman had become the subject of a very public and acrimonious debate about her collaboration with the Nazi regime, a controversy that also embroiled Hanya Holm, the head of the New York branch of her school.84 Although Martin was not a central player in this particular debate (which was carried out most prominently in the modern dance-oriented journals New Theatre and Dance Observer), he had been a longtime advocate of Wigman, and Kirstein thus eagerly seized the opportunity to impute questionable politics to the critic in defense of his own enterprise.

Other news outlets in New York were less critical, instead merely reporting on the news, including a Herald-Tribune article that included several talking points from Johnson and Balanchine about plans for the opera’s ballet. According to Johnson’s

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83 Ibid.
statement at the announcement, Balanchine intended to retain from the existing Metropolitan troupe “the best-looking ones, the best dancers and those with the best extremities.”

(The Dancing Times also noted that looks would play a role in the selection process for the new troupe: “It is expected that the best qualified (and best looking) members of the Metropolitan’s ensemble will be combined with the American Ballet.”)

“We have done here in a short time, a year and a half, more than could be done in a much longer time in Europe,” Balanchine maintained, in part because American dancers were “very quick to learn, very musical,” and their “physique and build he found well suited for dancing.”

Of his dances for the operas themselves, he announced his agenda as follows:

I am anxious that our dances should be of the same epoch and of the same style as the opera and the music. A modernistic dance would be out of place in Carmen or Rigoletto. In the regular operas the dances are to remain much the same as before, at least in costumes and general plan, although, naturally, there will be different movements or steps, so that as far as the actual dancing is concerned, these dances will be new productions.

Such comments are typically glossed as evidence of Balanchine’s principled aesthetic independence, or desire to shake up the staid conventions of dancing at the house, and he would rearticulate them later in defense of his sometimes controversial and unpopular work at the Metropolitan. Balanchine had not invented such impulses out of whole cloth however, since a historical realism had been one of the founding principles of the “new

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87 “Opera Signs American Ballet,” NYHT, August 8, 1935.
88 Ibid.
ballet” of Michel Fokine, though it would remain to be seen how much actual research would go into Balanchine’s allegedly historicist interventions. And of course any such innovations would be limited to choreography, since for the majority of the operas existing scenery and costumes would be used. Happily Balanchine “professed an affection for some of the old scenery, which he found ‘very nice.’”

Outside of New York, the opera’s announcement was met with generally positive coverage and benefited from the additional synergy of the upcoming cross-country tour of the American Ballet slated to begin in October. A brief notice announced the news of the appointment in the music column of the Los Angeles Times, and in the Washington Post carefully excerpted quotations from Martin’s column misrepresented the critic’s opinion as “generally approbative” under the headline “Reaction Favorable to Met’s Selection for Ballet Master.” Reports in Chicago and Baltimore drew from an identical set of talking points (perhaps from a wire service) that read as a rebuttal to Martin’s critiques, expounding on Balanchine’s ideas and plans for ballet at the Metropolitan and in America more generally. If the tone and quality of writing suggests that these statements were for the most part ghostwritten (likely by Kirstein), the underlying ideas appear to have their origins in Balanchine’s experience and sensibility.

89 Lynn Garafola has summarized the underlying impulse of Fokine’s realism as follows, tenets that find a striking echo in Balanchine’s statements in defense of his opera choreography decades later: “From the start of [Fokine’s] choreographic career, an acute historical sense informed his work. He believed that theme, period, and style in ballet must conform to the time and place of the scenic action; that empirical observation and research must accompany the act of creation; that expressiveness stemmed directly from the fidelity of a representation to nature. Under the aegis of history, Fokine mounted his attack on ballet convention.” Garafola, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, 10.
Balanchine declares in these reports that dance in America “is regaining the glamorous estate attained by history making ballets of the past” and “because of the definite similarities in aesthetic pursuits which prevail in Russia and this country, the dance will flourish here.” 93 If American companies were not yet in a position to mount the “captivating spectacles” of 250 plus dancers then possible in Leningrad and Moscow, “in a few years productions exceeding such programs will be realities.” 94 This would be possible in part because of the “definite similarities in aesthetic pursuits which prevail in Russia and this country,” as well as the fact that America has a “love of bigness that is so important in the ballet” and its “skyscrapers, vast fields, gigantic machines—all make for thrilling spectacles.” 95 “Every phase of the national character here,” he elaborated further, “its vastness, imagination, resources and curiosity, plus a healthy interest in the arts, makes me hopeful that we can equal and perhaps surpass the creations and technical skill of the great companies of the past.” 96 To this end, American themes and influences would be central to the company’s aesthetic program, and Balanchine declared that such subjects “occupy a prominent part of our repertoire and have tempered our technique so that already there are distinctly American variations of the classic form.” 97 At the same time, Balanchine maintains a commitment to a certain level of abstraction, while disavowing implicitly if not explicitly the aesthetics of Massine’s more programmatic

94 “Ballet Director Sees U.S. As Fertile Field,” Baltimore Sun, August 18, 1935.
96 “Ballet Director Sees U.S. As Fertile Field,” Baltimore Sun, August 18, 1935.
“symphonic ballets.” Although “modern influences have striven to make the dance a medium solely for the expression of ideas,” Balanchine instead “insists that the ballet is purely a spectacle”:

It is pictorial, but it is more than that, he asserts. It expresses movement, it appeals to the eye and to the ear, it is a synthesis of color, movement and music. “No other art form accomplishes this as purely and as simply as the ballet,” he declares. “If ideas emanate from the dance, they are implications only. The primary appeal is to the senses,” he added. “In my opinion that is all the dance should strive for.”

Two weeks after the announcement, open auditions were announced for the opera ensemble, with applications invited not to the opera but rather to the School’s studios on Madison Avenue. The results of these sessions were not particularly fruitful, however, with only three students invited to return for follow-up consultations. Existing members of the Metropolitan’s ballet ensemble had not fared much better, having had to audition to remain in the group. According to an interview in early September, Balanchine had retained only five girls and two boys in his auditions thus far. Although the tryouts were ongoing, he made no promises about how many dancers would be kept and suggested that the existing troupe had considerable dead weight: “It is very sad, but I have no place for the old spear carriers. It cannot be helped.”

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100 “Metropolitan’s Ballet Director Tries Out Fifty,” NYHT, August 25, 1935.
4. Summer 1935 Performances of the American Ballet

On the heels of the official announcement on Wednesday, August 7, of their engagement by the Metropolitan, the American Ballet had several opportunities to show the public what they would be bringing to the house, with two large-scale public engagements in New York and Philadelphia. They in fact took advantage of an expansion of summertime dance activities, at least in the view of John Martin, who in his weekly column in early July noted that “[n]ever before has there been such an extensive program for the vacation period as that which has already begun to get under way this summer.”

Foremost among the summer offerings were the seasons of two major outdoor venues, the Lewisohn Stadium in upper Manhattan, and the Robin Hood Dell in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park, both of which would host the American Ballet for performances in August.

Named in honor of its benefactor, Adolph Lewisohn (uncle of dance philanthropists Audrey and Irene), the sizeable pseudo-Grecian amphitheatre on the City College campus could accommodate upwards of fifteen to twenty thousand spectators. Operatic offerings of the Stadium’s 1935 summer season included *La Traviata* and *Tosca* while the classical repertoire ran the gamut from Beethoven’s “Emperor” piano concerto

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103 Anatole Chujoy mentions both the Lewisohn and Robin Hood Dell performances in *The New York City Ballet*, 51–2. He states that the Lewisohn engagement had originally been scheduled for August 5 and was rained out, but neither press reports nor Kirstein’s diaries corroborate this.


“good, healthy appreciation.”110 One of these same critics went so far as to say that the three ballets gave the impression of having been “almost re-made” in light of the troupe’s more advanced training.111 If the dancers had been somewhat green at their Adelphi debut, the intervening months had allowed Balanchine to “mold them into the finished article,” and the company’s “earnest and serious study […] is all beginning to show with a vengeance.”112 A review of the performances in the Dancing Times, on the contrary, concurred with Martin’s opinion that the Company was still somewhat green. Although its March New York debut had “showed that the company had youth and spirit on its side and a technical groundwork that was excellent,” it was the general opinion of New York dance critics that “they were exposed to public view too soon.”113 Given his experience with Diaghilev, the column continued, Balanchine must surely be aware “that ballerinas cannot be created in a twelve-month and that coryphées must go through a stern and lengthy apprenticeship before being revealed.”114

A summer thunderstorm rained out the next day’s performance and also a rescheduled Wednesday night show.115 However inauspicious, this delay could be credited with the much larger crowd of ten thousand that turned out for the rescheduled performance the following Monday, August 19, perhaps drawn by the positive press

112 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
coverage following the first performance.\textsuperscript{116} It is impossible to know exactly how many had previously seen the company in March, but the fifteen thousand spectators who saw the company at the Stadium was likely equal to if not greater than the gross audience for the entire run of their Adelphi performances.

Reviews of the Stadium performances reveal the way that critics comprehended the reportorial logic of the three ballets presented. One review praised \textit{Serenade} as “beautifully carried out, with distinct dramatic outlines and logical dance design, and a most effective ensemble.”\textsuperscript{117} Another critic went even farther to describe the ballet as evincing “continuity, style, smoothness and precision” and that “sincerity was written all over it.”\textsuperscript{118} Yet another had a more mixed opinion, finding “some arresting choreography in the first two episodes,” and deeming the final “Elegy” “somewhat too sentimental for modern taste.”\textsuperscript{119} It was not \textit{Serenade} but \textit{Reminiscence} that allowed the troupe “to prove they could do something in the classic spirit.”\textsuperscript{120} Another critic also saw the two ballets as contrasting works, with \textit{Serenade} posited as “a modernized version of the classic ballet” while \textit{Reminiscence} represented “the classic ballet itself.”\textsuperscript{121} Similarly, the \textit{Dancing Times} reported that while \textit{Reminiscence} gave the company “a chance to show what it can do with classic ballet routine” the choreography for \textit{Serenade} was “one of M. Balanchine’s most interesting patterns that employs the entire ensemble

\textsuperscript{116}“American Ballet in Final Program,” \textit{NYT}, August 20, 1935.
\textsuperscript{118}“Ballet is Seen at the Stadium,” unidentified clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
\textsuperscript{119}“Stadium Crowd Sees American Ballet Program,” unidentified clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
\textsuperscript{120}Henriette Weber, “Ballet Scores at Stadium,” unidentified clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
\textsuperscript{121}Danton Walker, “American Ballet Wins Plaudits at Stadium,” unidentified clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
picturesquely.”122 As had been the case in previous engagements, *Alma Mater* did its
service of providing a contemporary and crowd-pleasing spectacle, although its reception
would continue to be mixed. A music critic for the *Daily Mirror* declared it the most
interesting of the three ballets,123 and another critic reported that the audience “went
hook, line and sinker—as the saying goes—for *Alma Mater*, which, if nothing else,
proves that despite intellectual trends audiences still laugh at slapstick comedy.”124 For
another the music and décor were the chief highlights, while yet another said the ballet
“seemed slightly less entertaining than on first viewing.”125 All agreed, however, that the
ballet’s undisputed highlight was William Dollar’s reprise of his role as the Villain.126

Kirstein’s diaries attest to the attendance of numerous VIPs at the first Stadium
performance and also to the apparent generosity of the press in praising the company’s
technical improvements. Edward Warburg was content owing to the presence of Edward
Johnson and also several younger members of the Roosevelt family, in addition to his
mother and father.127 Michel Fokine and Carl Van Vechten were also on hand, the latter
declaring to Kirstein that “Dollar was in his opinion a great dancer, or finally that he was
crazy if he didn’t get better.”128 “Lousy stage but the kids looked sweet” was Kirstein’s
only personal observation, and of the individual dancers he singled out only Kathryn
Mullowny for explicit praise.129 Kirstein’s close friend Muriel Draper, recently returned

124 “Ballet is Seen at the Stadium,” unidentified clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
at Stadium,” unidentified clippings, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
126 Ibid.
127 LK Diaries, August 12, 1935.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
from an extended trip to the Soviet Union, was also in attendance and was “sweet and sympathetic” about the company’s offerings. The week before he had brought Draper to see a rehearsal of Reminiscence, and though she had been “very sweet with Bal[anchine],” Kirstein admitted to being “acutely self-conscious of the way the kids danced, how badly in comparison to the Russians she’d been telling me ab[ou]t.”

Draper had been forthright in response, saying that, “perhaps this first crop w[oul]d be sacrificed and w[oul]d have to be plowed under” since “the Slavonic material still is the best dancing stock,” as Massine had said to her. Such observations suggest that Martin and other critics were not entirely off base in their critiques of the apparent inexperience of the troupe. Of the second rescheduled performance Kirstein noted only that it was “not good” but that “a lot more people came.”

Between the two Monday performances at the Stadium, the company went down to Philadelphia for performances at the Robin Hood Dell in Fairmount Park, touted as the “young and brilliant organization which made its Philadelphia debut at Bryn Mawr last winter.” The weather system that had rained out their Tuesday and Wednesday performances in New York also occasioned delays for their Thursday and Friday night appearances in Philadelphia. The skies eventually cleared, however, allowing the

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130 Ibid.
131 LK Diaries, August 6, 1935.
132 Ibid.
133 LK Diaries, August 19, 1935.
134 “American Ballet Listed at Dell Next Thursday,” unidentified clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
135 Anatole Chujoy claims that both the Thursday and Friday night shows were rained out and that the troupe performed on Saturday and Sunday nights. See Chujoy, The New York City Ballet, 51. One clipping mentions a rain delay, though it does not specify the specific day: “The performance scheduled for last night was rained out,” “Limbering up for the Dell,” Philadelphia Record, undated clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook. Philip
company to put on two performances and a “goodly crowd was on hand to welcome this intensely interesting troupe, lately appointed to take over the ballet section of the haughty Metropolitan Opera.” The music critic of the Daily News declared the group much improved since their Bryn Mawr performances six months earlier and said the company “has taken on a glittering charm that makes it praiseworthy.” He deemed the girls “well trained and capable” and described them as “the prettiest dancers that these eyes have ever seen.” Of the ballets, Serenade was “an avalanche of lovely settings and choreography” while Reminiscence was an “opportunity for the individual members to display their talents.” Alma Mater was not only “just as funny on being seen and heard for the second time” but was furthermore “the most entertaining ballet production in ten years.”

Although Kirstein did not make the trip with the troupe he recorded in his diary that they “had a great success in Philadelphia” despite the unfortunate incident of dancer Helen Leitch taking a spill “into the cymbals.”

If these summer engagements saw the company reaching out to wider audiences, they were still put to use for ermine-clad clientele. In late September the company took to the stage for a performance at the Westchester County Center in White Plains. (Figure 10) The Saturday September 28 performance was presented by the Westchester County

Klein’s review in the Daily News references two performances by the company but does not state which days they occurred on. The exact dates need to be corroborated by additional press from Philadelphia.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

LK Diaries, August 19, 1935.

Girl Scouts as a benefit for the fund for Rock Hill Camp, a fundraising effort that was evidently met with some success since the camp is still in operation today. Edward Warburg’s participation was evidently limited to providing the evening’s entertainment, but both his father Felix and brother Frederick are listed among the box holders for the benefit. Over 2,500 were expected to attend the performance, for which Mrs. V. Everit Macy, Jr. was chair of the box-holder committee and Mrs. Giles Whiting the head of the “patronesses committee.” The generously programmed evening included three ballets—Mozartiana, Alma Mater, and Reminiscence—as well as the overture to Die Fledermaus, Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, and an orchestrated version of Debussy’s Golliwogg’s Cake Walk. Since Kirstein’s involvement at the time continued to center on the School and not the Company, his diary is silent as to the planning of the event, but he did make the trip up to White Plains to see the performance, which was for him a distressing experience. Mozartiana, which had not been performed publicly since Hartford, was “…simply dreadful. Over rehearsed. Lights went wrong.” Annabelle Lyon apparently hurt her foot during the “Ave Verum,” Holly Howard was “awful” in the pas de deux, and during Reminiscence Gisella Caccialanza’s shoelaces came undone. Balanchine as was his wont was “imperturbable,” while Kirstein regarded the proceedings as “all too grisly” and after the performance “said nothing but left at once

143 Program, Patterson–Dollar Papers, Box 1, Folder 2.
144 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
147 LK Diaries, September 28, 1935.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
feeling dreadful.” Two days later he discussed the “lousy” performance with Warburg, who was as usual more sanguine, saying he disagreed and according to Kirstein “was very nice ab[ou]t my panic and hysteria.” Even if Kirstein’s concerns were perhaps a bit overblown, there was no question that the stakes for the company were about to become higher. Two very public engagements for the American Ballet were imminent: their debut as the resident company of the Metropolitan Opera but first an extensive U.S. tour, set to begin in a month.

5. The 1935–36 Tour of the American Ballet

Before its duties at the Metropolitan began in December, the American Ballet had a nationwide tour to attend to, set to run from mid-October 1935 to January 1936. If Balanchine was being selective in his auditions, he would have to accept some dancers sooner or later, since to accommodate the tour and obligations at the opera, it would be necessary to split the dancers into two units, one going on the road (the Company) and the other remaining in New York to perform at the opera (termed the American Ballet Ensemble). Balanchine intended to remain involved with both troupes, however, telling one reporter that “I will fly from one to the other,” with a headline announcing that he would “Direct Both by Phone During Season.” After the tour concluded in January the ensembles would once again be combined for a total of some sixty dancers. Such a strategy was similar to a trick from the playbook of the de Basil company, which in early 1934 contrived dual-company strategies in order to take advantage of touring

150 Ibid.
151 LK Diaries, September 30, 1935.
opportunities while still fulfilling contractual obligations for other engagements.\textsuperscript{153} If the American Ballet was attempting to match the de Basil troupe by making their own way across the country, they would once again fall short, lacking not just the personnel and resources but the organizational savvy of de Basil and his American agent, the enterprising impresario Sol Hurok.

The tour began auspiciously enough with a warm and festive sendoff from Rockefeller Plaza on Tuesday, October 15, documented news reports and in small snapshot photos in the collections of William Dollar and Yvonne Patterson, both members of the touring company.\textsuperscript{154} “What with the gay, young American dancers in their gay young American clothes,” the \textit{Herald-Tribune} reported, “the party suggested a theatrical school treat starting for a big afternoon of pink lemonade and buns somewhere up the Hudson.”\textsuperscript{155} Although Kirstein did not go on the road with the troupe—remaining behind to manage the School and also prepare the proofs and plates for his forthcoming \textit{Dance: A Short History of Theatrical Dancing}—he did go to see the dancers off, and recorded in his diary a scene of photos and goodbye kisses, and also his request to Eugene Loring to report back to him “at all occasions.”\textsuperscript{156} One observation by Kirstein on the day of departure augured that at the very least some gossip would be forthcoming: “Balanchine got in the bus and sat next to [Elise] Reiman. I signified they sh[oul]d

\textsuperscript{154} Uncredited photos, apparently taken from a small personal camera, from Patterson–Dollar Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.
\textsuperscript{156} LK Diaries, October 15, 1935.
screw.”¹⁵⁷ Any such shenanigans would have to be undertaken under the watchful eye of several ballet mother chaperones accompanying the entourage.¹⁵⁸

Balanchine was still taking extreme precautions about his health, as one report of the sendoff says he “was muffled up sufficiently to have stood a cruise to Vladivostok,” although “on his face among the wrappings a broad grin was visible.”¹⁵⁹ Balanchine was indeed in excellent spirits about the upcoming journey and charmed one reporter by playing the role of bemused and mystified foreigner: “‘I am much interested in our little experiment,’ said Mr. Balanchine brightly. ‘We are presenting ballet in many places which have never seen ballet, and in some quite small cities, too. St. Louis, I think is the littlest,’” evidently calculated to elicit a “faint cry” of protest from St. Louis-born William Dollar.¹⁶⁰ He also jokingly anticipated local reception of Alma Mater at their upcoming Ivy League venues: “You know in Princeton, I think there will be scandal, and at New Haven perhaps tomatoes will be thrown. In our Alma Mater we have a place where a Yale father has a Princeton son. I am told that is very shocking.”¹⁶¹

Jokes aside, even more than the Adelphi engagement this nationwide tour was the young troupe’s chance to prove itself the institutional equal of the de Basil troupe. Warburg posited the tour as the arrival of the American Ballet as a legitimate dance institution, and if he otherwise took little interest in the School, he was happy to use it and the two companies—the touring group and the American Ballet Ensemble at the Metropolitan—as evidence of the organization’s arrival:

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
¹⁶¹ Ibid.
“The American Ballet now can be said to be a complete institution,” Mr. Warburg said, brushing off several dancers with executive calm. “In the school we have a permanent reservoir of talent. In the ballet troupe and in the Metropolitan we have an outlet for it. And so I think we can say that classical dancing is on a sound basis in this country for the first time.” 162

Elsewhere in this preview the troupe was characterized in glowing terms as “sole American exponents of the classic dance” and “the only organization outside Russia even remotely comparable to the old Russian ballet.” 163 Though coverage touted upwards of thirty dancers and as many musicians traveling on two buses 164 the troupe was still at best only half the size of the de Basil troupe, in terms of personnel or repertory, and decidedly less seasoned in terms of training and organizational stability.

Their first day of touring took the specially chartered “American Ballet” buses a short 30-mile drive to Greenwich, Connecticut, where they gave an evening performance of Serenade, Alma Mater, Reminiscence in the high school auditorium, presented by the Wednesday Singing Club. 165 The next day took them another 30 miles to Bridgeport, where they danced Mozartiana, Alma Mater, and Reminiscence at the Central High School Auditorium, presented by the local Musical Research Club. 166 The program here was augmented by several musical selections of a non-native character, opening with the

162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
165 Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook; “American Ballet Starts Bus Tour,” NYT, October 16, 1935; “Tour Started By American Ballet Troupe,” NYHT, October 16, 1935. Anatole Chujoy’s The New York City Ballet gives October 14 as the start of the tour, a date that is contradicted by Kirstein’s diary, news reports, and a surviving program from Greenwich, see Chujoy, 58. Richard Buckle and John Taras’s biography of Balanchine also gives October 14 as the first day and says that two performances were given in Greenwich, see Buckle and Taras, 95.
overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* and with Emanuel Chabrier’s *España* and Gabriel Pierné’s *Pavane et Saltarello* between the ballets. (In late September Merovitch had issued a call for new American scores to be performed by the Company’s orchestra on the tour, but no such music would appear on the programs that took place.  

167) Of these performances Kirstein reports in his diary only that the “kids did well” in Greenwich and that Edna Breyman (stage name Annia) replaced Annabelle Lyon, who had been slated to appear in all three ballets.  

168 Thursday October 17 brought the troupe to a more official theatrical venue, New Haven’s Shubert Theatre (then as now a common out-of-town tryout venue for shows under development in New York), where they repeated the program from Bridgeport.  

169 A review of the performance noted that the troupe’s efforts “to ground Diaghilev’s art in the United States” met with a somewhat mixed but positive reception.  

170 “An audience somewhat awed of the more rigorously classical episodes was friendly to them”—i.e. *Mozartiana* and *Reminiscence*—“and enthusiastic at departures from them,” i.e. *Alma Mater*, which received “the most prolonged laudations of the evening.”  

171 *Alma Mater* is glowingly described as a “gracious passage in the livelier humors; danced last night with frolicsome vigor to Miss Kay Swift’s whimsical score.”  

172 The ballet had “utterly stylized grace,” “exquisite decorum of the graver moments,” and “even the laughter of lowlier

168 LK Diaries, October 16, 1935.
171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
pantomime.” This reviewer saw all three ballets as of a piece, moreover, and saw *Alma Mater* as a sincere statement on the part of Balanchine: “The choreography here as throughout is the devoted work of Mr. Balanchine; the spectacle we saw justified that gentleman’s faith in ballet for America.” Just how many people were at the Shubert is unclear, however, and Kirstein’s diary records the secondhand news—perhaps relayed by Warburg or Loring—that the New Haven audience was “not large,” but happily with no mention of tomatoes having been thrown.

From New Haven the company headed 200 miles south to Allentown, Pennsylvania, for a performance at the Lyric Theatre, with the overture to Glinka’s *Ruslan and Lyudmila* and *Serenade* replacing the *Figaro* overture and *Mozartiana*. A review praised the choice of “widely divergent” ballets for the tour’s programs, from *Serenade*, “poignantly effective in its tragic, poetic pantomime,” to the “hilariously satirical” *Alma Mater* to *Reminiscence*, “in the traditional classic form in which each dancer is given opportunity to display all the skill at his or her disposal.” The description of the energetic response of the audience, as well as its demographics, reads like a moment from Kirstein’s happiest daydreams, and echoes the legendary ovations received by the de Basil company:

Building of the dance audience of the future was evident in the enthusiasm of gallery and balcony, where young students of the dance were plentiful among the spectators, and theatre patrons were completely won to

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173 Ibid.
174 Ibid.
175 LK Diaries, October 18, 1935.
177 “American Ballet Acclaimed Here as Tour Begins,” *Allentown Morning Call*, unidentified clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
appreciation and enjoyable discernment of the beauty of serious dance as a theatrical art that can stand alone.”\textsuperscript{178}

By the end of the evening the audience, “demanded with insistent applause curtain-call after curtain-call” and the dancers for their part “responded with a genuine enthusiasm that matched their youth.”\textsuperscript{179}

From Allentown they went east to Princeton’s McCarter Theatre, where the program consisted of Mozartiana, Alma Mater, and Reminiscence, with the Figaro overture as opener.\textsuperscript{180} Kirstein would later find out that in Princeton Balanchine had renewed his manipulative emotional games with the women of the company, as had been the case at Bryn Mawr in February. Holly Howard’s mother Lois reported how Balanchine “had been dreadful to Holly after the Princeton show because she wanted to go out with some of the Princeton boys.”\textsuperscript{181} Upon returning from her night out, Howard was informed by Balanchine that Elise Reiman, his erstwhile seatmate on the bus, “dances much better than you.”\textsuperscript{182}

They then traveled to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, presenting the full orchestral and dance program given in Allentown.\textsuperscript{183} According to a review, the company “received a tremendous ovation at the Majestic Theater last night when it interpreted the art of Terpsichore in all its phases and color.”\textsuperscript{184} The setting and costumes of Serenade were

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\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{180} Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook; Programs, William Dollar, Joseph Levinoff, MGZB (Programs), JRDD–NYPL; “Ballet To Carry Out Metropolitan Plans,” \textit{NYT}, October 27, 1935.  \\
\textsuperscript{181} LK Diaries, October 23, 1935.  \\
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{183} Program, William Dollar, MGZB (Programs), JRDD–NYPL.  \\
\textsuperscript{184} “American Ballet Well Received,” \textit{Harrisburg Patriot}, undated clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
\end{flushright}
described as “modernistic in somber colors of gray, black, white and blue,” in accord with the “somber mood” of Tchaikovsky’s score. The ballet was “ excellently performed” by a company “beautifully trained in precision and in adaptation to the moods of music.” Alma Mater provided a “gay” mood in contrast, with its “hilarious farce of a college football game,” while the setting for the classical Reminiscence was described as “a majestic Roman court,” in which solo numbers “followed each other in rapid succession and many types and variations of the dance were displayed.”

Scranton, Pennsylvania, was the next and, as it would happen, the last stop on the American Ballet’s tour. Kirstein wrote later in Thirty Years of the cross-country journey simply that “the tour collapsed in Scranton, Pennsylvania,” as if of its own accord. Although this and other accounts of the tour imply a poetic ignominy to this geographic circumstance, it should be noted that Scranton was a routine one-night-stand for touring dance companies, and in previous decades hosted performances by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, Rolf de Maré’s Ballets Suédois, and more recently the de Basil company.

The question of location aside, the underlying cause of the tour’s demise will always remain somewhat obscure. It is likely that Edward Warburg’s poor oversight of his company manager, Alexander Merovitch, was ultimately responsible. As noted in the previous chapter Kirstein, Dimitriev, and others became aware of his managerial misdeeds during the March Adelphi engagement six months prior. These problems finally came home to roost and were exacerbated by (or the cause of) an apparent psychological

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185 Ibid.
186 “American Ballet Well Received,” Harrisburg Patriot, undated clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook.
187 Ibid.
188 Kirstein, Thirty Years, 51.
breakdown on the part of Merovitch, whose mental troubles were already manifest
several days before the company arrived in Scranton. On October 17 Kirstein received a
midnight phone call from Warburg, who reported from New Haven that Merovitch “had
been behaving outrageously, calling everyone names, screaming at the kids.” Warburg
was apparently rattled enough to return to New York the following day, with the troupe
continuing on to Allentown without him. At a meeting at his Beekman Place apartment,
Warburg was in “an acute state of panic over Merovitch’s behavior,” and Kirstein and
Dimitriev attempted to calm his nerves. Dimitriev was confident that Merovitch’s
behavior was all an act, that “the whole thing was done to terrorize Eddie, Bal[anchine]
and the troupe so that in a moment of weakness Eddie w[oul]d give him everything.”
Kirstein had surmised the same when Warburg called the day before, recalling that
Merovitch “owes a lot of money, and as a result is building up to an attempted suicide
since Eddie w[oul]dn’t lend him $12,000 3 w[ee]ks ago,” a request that had actually
occurred only two weeks before. At some point during the day, the troupe’s conductor
Sandor Harmati called up to say that “he c[oul]dn’t work at all” under such conditions.

Kirstein was not troubled enough to forgo his usual weekend retreat to Ashfield,
but upon his return to New York he immediately regrouped with Warburg about the
situation. The troupe was “now as yet unpaid in Scranton,” and Balanchine was “terribly
tired and worried,” but Kirstein felt “it will nevertheless go on.” The following day,
Kirstein and Warburg met with their lawyers at the Harvard Club to discuss how to

189 LK Diaries, October 17, 1935.
190 LK Diaries, October 18, 1935.
191 Ibid.
192 LK Diaries, October 7, 1935.
193 LK Diaries, October 18, 1935.
194 LK Diaries, October 19–21, 1935.
proceed now that it was apparent that Merovitch’s company had apparently gone out of business, with a “Sign on door telling of closure till further notice” and competitors like Sol Hurok already declaring the venture “a flop.” The question now was what to do with the stranded dancers and musicians and whether to try to salvage the rest of the tour. In the end, it was decided to forgo the remainder of the tour, and Kirstein accompanied Warburg and his lawyer Dave Somers to Hoboken, where they caught a train to Scranton. Upon arrival they discovered that the performance had taken place as scheduled, but they returned with the company to New York the following day. With everyone back in town Kirstein learned more details of Merovitch’s paranoid and delusional “madness,” which if an act had been a very convincing one: “He said he had guns, he would kill Bal and Warburg. He was everyone, everywhere. He would launch campaigns against the enemy. He would destroy all spies. He appointed [Kathryn] Mullowny his ‘adjutant’ etc.” The dancers had been so shaken by the incidents that they could “scarcely dance.” Kirstein also learned that in Scranton Balanchine “thought he was going to get sick again, his lungs,” but nevertheless had summoned the strength to address the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, of which Holly Howard and Mullowny were members.

Given how widely the tour had been touted in advance, news of its collapse, including the bizarre behavior of Merovitch, inevitably found its way into the press, which offered confusing and contradictory accounts of the incidents. The Times offered

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195 LK Diaries, October 22, 1935.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
198 LK Diaries, October 23, 1935.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
the most judicious coverage, and an unsigned notice reported statements from Warburg’s attorneys to the effect that the company “had contracted with the Musical Art Management, Inc., for the latter organization to manage the itinerary” of the tour.²⁰¹ At the seventh stop on the tour, in Scranton, “it was understood, the musicians refused to continue unless they were paid in full. The tour came to a halt when payment was not completed.”²⁰² Although the Times made no mention of Merovitch’s mental health problems, other news outlets eagerly played up this intriguing angle, based on observations of his behavior after his return to New York. “Mystery veiling the sudden collapse of the American Ballet’s 28-week tour,” reported the Daily Mirror, “was dispelled when its manager was discovered in the Park Central Hotel announcing that he hopes to ‘end all war.’”²⁰³ The report continues with details similar to the incidents described in Kirstein’s diaries, and gives Warburg credit for the company’s rescue:

It seems that an old idiosyncrasy hit Alexander Mirovich [sic], the manager, during the first week of the tour. He locked himself in his room, declined to see the troupe—and even declined to pay bills. But for the generosity of Edward Warburg, “angel” of the first American ballet, the dancers would be stranded now. But he has tided them over until the opening of the Metropolitan Opera Co., when they will be the official opera ballet.²⁰⁴

Another article reported on Merovitch’s erratic behavior during a return visit to his Rockefeller Plaza offices, where he angrily confronted his staff and blamed his deputy Jack Birse—also apparently suffering from mental woes—for the collapse of the tour, all within earshot of some witness:

²⁰¹ “Ballet To Carry Out Metropolitan Plans,” NYT, October 27, 1935.
²⁰² Ibid.
²⁰⁴ Ibid.
Distracted by the sudden and supposedly to him, mysterious turn of events, Mr. Merovitch strode up and down his office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in his shirt sleeves, berating those whom he felt had let him down and pleading with his lawyer, B. Meredith Langstaff, to make everything all right. The whole trouble, it seemed, lay with George Birse, road manager for Mr. Merovitch, who is reported to have returned from Scranton on Wednesday and then to have departed for an unidentified sanatorium, suffering from a nervous breakdown.  

Merovitch was further incensed, according to this same report, “when confronted with a news release” issued by one of his associates, Herbert Brodsky:

“I pay him money,” moaned Mr. Merovitch, “and he gives this out without showing me.” With that, he started to read or, rather, to roar, the statement sent out under Mr. Brodsky’s name as follows: “The American Ballet returned to New York today when organizational difficulties in the management which had undertaken responsibility for its nationwide tour made continued appearances incompatible with the best interests of the ballet company. In New York plans will be formulated in the near future for continued activities of the company.”

The article goes on to relate a statement of Warburg’s included in this same press release, which is apologetic to the company’s audiences and diplomatic toward Merovitch:

“I regret that the many people who had counted on seeing the ballet company in the next weeks will be disappointed. We hope that we shall offer them the opportunity later to see the performances of our company. We had no choice at the present moment save return. The breakdown of the managerial arrangements for which we contracted forced this decision upon us.”

The full scope of the planned tour gives a sense of how great the disappointment and embarrassment at its collapse must have been for all concerned, in contrast to the
reserved treatment that the events receive in most accounts.\textsuperscript{209} The next stop after Scranton was to have been Ithaca, New York, as Kirstein’s diary reports of Merovitch screaming that “if they had enough money to bring the troupe back, they had enough money to play Ithaca” and that someone from the town “called up all afternoon to find out whether or not there w[oul]d be a show tonight.”\textsuperscript{210} From Ithaca, they were to have made several stops—including Binghamton, Buffalo, and Cleveland\textsuperscript{211}—en route to Chicago. The Chicago performances at the Civic Opera House November 8–10 (including Saturday and Sunday matinees) are advertised in a surviving flier, hailing the company as a “Leading Dance Troupe of the Day” with repertoire including the “famous” \textit{Alma Mater}, a “Gay and Modern Fantasy of College Life.”\textsuperscript{212} (Figure 11) They were to have left their tour buses behind in Chicago to take to the rails, heading to the west coast for “week-long engagements in Los Angeles and San Francisco” as well as performances in Portland, Seattle, and as far north as Vancouver.\textsuperscript{213} On their way back to

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{209} “The tour got as far as Scranton, Pennsylvania, and then collapsed, when the company’s theatrical manager suffered a nervous breakdown and suddenly it was discovered that there were no funds to meet any of the expenses. It was a disillusioning experience, but those involved with the company did not despair.” Taper, \textit{Balanchine: A Biography}, 165; “The tour, which was supposed to cover sixty towns in ninety-eight days, opened on October 14 […] At Scranton, Merovitch’s road manager vanished.” Buckle with Taras, \textit{George Balanchine, Ballet Master}, 95; “On the basis of a modest success at the Adelphi, a tour was arranged that was supposed to last fourteen weeks and perform in sixty towns. It opened in October at the Greenwich, Connecticut, High School, and managed one-night stands in Princeton and Harrisburg before imploding in Scranton, the tour manager having made off with whatever takings there may have been.” Gottlieb, \textit{George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker}, 81–2.
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\textsuperscript{210} LK Diaries, October 23, 1935.
\textsuperscript{212} Flier for American Ballet, George Balanchine Archive, Houghton Library MS THR 411, Box 100, Folder 59.
\end{flushright}
the east coast they were to make stops in among other cities Omaha, Tulsa, Dallas, and, as already mentioned by Balanchine, St. Louis.\(^\text{214}\) As many as sixty total stops were planned for the 98-day tour, which would indeed have rivaled the coast-to-coast journeys of the de Basil troupe had it been completed.\(^\text{215}\) An article in the *Dancing Times* reported that the tour might even extend beyond continental North America to include engagements in Cuba and Bermuda after the Company returned to New York at the end of January.\(^\text{216}\)

The day the company returned from Scranton, Kirstein lunched with his father at the Harvard Club. Louis Kirstein was “in an excellent humor” and “thought the whole disaster was very comic,” suggesting his son did little to shield him from the painful details, which he could have read about in the newspapers anyway.\(^\text{217}\) And indeed, fallout from the tour was relatively modest. While Warburg had been mostly worried about “the publicity of failure”—and would soon leave for a month-long escape to Mexico—Kirstein again fixated on the possibility that “Balanchine w[oul]d have a breakdown.”\(^\text{218}\) The ever-practical Dimitriev, who had finally got his way about getting rid of Birse, remained focused on their contract with the opera, of which all the details had yet to be

\(^{214}\) Ibid.


\(^{217}\) LK Diaries, October 23, 1935.

\(^{218}\) LK Diaries, October 22, 1935.
ironed out, despite the fact that their engagement had already been announced: “Il faut sauver situation avec Metropolitain,” he noted during a crisis session at Warburg’s apartment.\(^\text{219}\)

A week later Kirstein wrote to his father reporting that the dust had settled considerably and that the deal with the Metropolitan had not in fact been endangered:

> Things are going quite well, considering. Everything is pretty well arranged with the Metropolitan. Eddie has put everything in the hands of his lawyers, and we anticipate no particular unpleasantness, although you never can tell. The School is going very well indeed, better than Dimitriev hoped. […] The kids are giving a Halloween party tomorrow night, which ought to be very amusing. They seem in remarkably good spirits in spite of events of the last two weeks.\(^\text{220}\)

Two weeks later, order had been further restored, and Warburg was set to leave for Mexico.\(^\text{221}\) “I am doing the best I can to give the impression that I am outraged, and accuse him wildly of all sorts of laziness and so on,” Kirstein reported to his father,” but says in fact that, “we are all delighted that he is going to be gone for a month.”\(^\text{222}\) Rehearsals for the opera were set to begin shortly, “and I really think that we will have a chance to redeem the last disaster.”\(^\text{223}\)

\(^{219}\) Ibid.
\(^{220}\) Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, October 30, 1935, LEK Collection.
\(^{221}\) Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, November 15, 1935, LEK Collection.
\(^{222}\) Ibid.
\(^{223}\) Ibid.
Figure 9: Cover of American Ballet Lewisohn Stadium Concerts Program, August 1935, American Ballet Programs, *MGZB JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 10: American Ballet Program, September 1935, Patterson–Dollar Papers, Box 1, Folder 2.
Figure 11: Flier for American Ballet, George Balanchine Archive, Houghton Library, MS THR 411, Box 100, Folder 59.
Chapter 5

The Balanchine-Tchelitchev *Orpheus and Eurydice*, 1936

On May 22, 1936 at the end of their first season at the Metropolitan Opera, George Balanchine and the American Ballet gave two performances of the first and last opera production over which they would have complete artistic control, a dance-intensive staging of Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Conceived in collaboration with artist Pavel Tchelitchev, the opera was performed with the singers and chorus in the orchestra pit and the dancers on stage portraying the action, with entirely new scenery, décor, and costumes. In Balanchine’s biographies and New York City Ballet history this production is regarded as a minor *succès de scandale* that offended the rear-guard sensibilities of the Metropolitan’s affluent patrons. But the Balanchine-Tchelitchev *Orpheus* was in fact presented not to the Metropolitan’s usual audience, who by that point in the year had mostly decamped to cooler climes; rather, it was mounted for the more economically diverse audience of the Met’s experimental “spring season,” which offered performances at “popular prices” comparable to Broadway fare, that is, not necessarily for audiences with pearls to clutch. Ironically, the American Ballet’s marquee contribution to the Met’s “popular season” would prove remarkably unpopular with both avant-garde elites and the vast majority of critics.

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1 The opera will be hereafter referred by the abbreviated title *Orpheus*, although the particular spelling in sources quoted will be preserved, e.g. *Orfée, Orféo ed Euridice*, or *Orphée*.
This chapter will offer a new perspective on the American Ballet’s *Orpheus*, showing how the opera’s dramaturgy—exemplary of the arcane modernist aesthetics for which Balanchine and the company had already come in for criticism—was almost comically ill-suited to the institutional context in which it would premiere, that is, an initiative to create opera with broad popular appeal. Section one situates the *Orpheus* production within the larger history of modernist engagement with Gluck’s opera as well as wider experimental trends in early twentieth-century opera production. Section two explains the origins of the Metropolitan Opera’s newly-inaugurated “popular” spring season of 1936 and the place of the *Orpheus* production in its programming, as well as the other offerings of the American Ballet: dances for a new English-language production of Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* and a new one-act ballet called *The Bat*, set to selections from *Die Fledermaus*. Section three details the dramaturgy and choreography of *Orpheus*, showing how the dance-intensive concept of the staging in and of itself did not doom the opera. Rather, the production suffered from an overly cumbersome design concept and insufficient period of rehearsal and preparation, both of which likely contributed more conclusively to its poor reception. Section four examines the overwhelmingly negative critical views of the opera, which provide further details regarding its staging and execution. In contrast, the positive reception of *The Bat* shows how the ballet was a popular foil for the ill-conceived *Orpheus*, while the lukewarm reviews of the *Bartered Bride* dances provide further evidence of the incompatibility of Balanchine’s experimental inclinations with American audiences and critics.
1. The Choreographic Lineage of *Orpheus and Eurydice*

In recent operatic practice, it has become common for the production and direction of Gluck’s operas, in particular *Orpheus and Eurydice*, to be handed over to choreographers, and the second half of the twentieth century has seen productions of this opera by Frederick Ashton (1953) and Pina Bausch (1975), and multiple versions by Mark Morris (1988, 1996, and 2007). Gluck’s *Orpheus* in fact boasts an even longer choreographic pedigree, and since the turn of the century the opera has served as an icon for modernist experimentation in music and dance, despite its original chronological remove from the era. This modernist lineage of *Orpheus* is of course not even the most remarkable turn in the opera’s tangled historiography. In its original form *Orpheus* was posited by Gluck and his librettist Ranieri de’Calzabigi as a polemical corrective to Metastasian opera seria, which itself had been an earlier endeavor of operatic purification. As the research of Bruce Alan Brown has demonstrated, moreover, it was Gluck’s collaboration with choreographer Gasparo Angiolini in the three years prior to the premiere of *Orpheus* that helped prepare him for his subsequent efforts to reform Italian opera seria with Calzabigi. On a musical level, Gluck’s previous ballet compositions greatly influenced the dance numbers that were ultimately included in *Orpheus*, and the larger dramaturgical structure of the opera, which eschewed the traditional division between recitative and aria, was in part modeled on the innovative

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3 Ibid., 282–357. “Gluck’s long collaboration with Angiolini prepared him for, and to a certain extent initiated, an equally fruitful collaboration with Ranieri de’Calzabigi on Italian serious opera. The integral role of dance in their first joint effort, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, and the structure of the opera as a whole, show the work to be a direct outgrowth of the dramas in pantomime and dance that had preceded it on the stage of the Burgtheater, no less than it was of Gluck’s experience in opéra comique” (351).
ballet pantomimes he had previously created with Angiolini, most notably Don Juan (1761).\textsuperscript{4} Orpheus was significantly revised and expanded by Gluck for subsequent performances in Paris—notably, to include even more passages of dance music in accordance with local taste—and was later reworked by Hector Berlioz.\textsuperscript{5} All of which makes Gluck’s Orpheus an intriguing aesthetic object: at once eminently canonical and forthright in its malleability, and marked from its earliest incarnations with significant choreographic potential.

By the time Orpheus was staged by the American Ballet in 1936, the opera had already received treatment by several major figures in modernist expression: Isadora Duncan, Vsevelod Meyerhold and Michel Fokine, and Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Adolphe Appia. It is not clear how or why Gluck and specifically Orpheus emerged as a touchstone for such a diverse and transnational cadre of artists around the same time, although the status of Orpheus as a foundational figure in classical aesthetic genealogies, and in the history of opera more specifically, certainly made the subject congenial in that respect. That the upcoming bicentennial of Gluck’s birth in 1914 was bringing renewed attention to the composer’s works may have also been a contributing factor.\textsuperscript{6} Although the question of why Gluck’s Orpheus became the object of such attention awaits further research, its historical import is already abundantly evident in the work of these three roughly contemporaneous modernist re-imaginings, all of which foregrounded dance.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 366–68.
Isadora Duncan writes of being “initiated” into Gluck’s music while developing her choreographic theories, and recalls how her mother, whose capable piano playing was a continual presence and aesthetic influence, “would repeat the entire score of Orpheus over and over until dawn appeared in the studio window.” Duncan was closely engaged with his operas for inspiration and musical and dramatic material over much of her career and she returned to Orpheus more than any other, presenting selections from the opera as well as several full-length performances between 1900 and 1915 in Europe and the United States.

The Orpheus production mounted by Vsevelod Meyerhold with Michel Fokine at the Maryinsky Theater made use of platforms and other divisions of the stage, suggesting it bore some resemblance to the Dalcroze/Appia production in its modernist conception. Its potential choreographic affinity with Duncan’s versions is also a distinct possibility as well, since as Simon Morrison and Lynn Garafola have shown, Duncan’s precedent and inspiration were more important for the development of Fokine’s “new ballet” than he led many to believe during his career, and could very well have informed his interest in and realization of the opera. The Meyerhold-Fokine Orpheus premiered at the Maryinsky on December 21, 1911 and was performed again that season on January 6, 1912, and

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8 On Duncan’s engagement with Gluck’s operas see Ann Daly, Done Into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 146–50.
received five additional performances in the 1912–13 season. At the age of twelve Balanchine danced in a 1916 revival of this *Orpheus*, playing one of several small cupids. One remarkable feature of the production was its blending of the opera chorus and corps de ballet, and Balanchine remembered the experience fondly in an interview later in life: “The idea was for the audience not to be able to tell where, onstage, the corps de ballet was and where the opera chorus was; one was supposed to blend into the other. It was very interesting, the production was received very well.”

But arguably the conclusive modernist refashioning of *Orpheus* was at the hands of eurhythmics founder Émile Jaques-Dalcroze at his school in Hellerau, near Dresden. Mounted in collaboration with theater reformer Adolphe Appia, in 1912 students at the Dalcroze institute performed the Act II “Underworld” scene from *Orpheus*, and the following summer the opera was mounted in full. The opera was staged in a rectangular hall with little separation between performers and audience to foster an integration, mirrored in the unified elements of music and movement, soloists and chorus, and scenery and lighting in the production itself. The 1913 *Orpheus* performances became the stuff of modernist legend, and among the some five thousand people from all over Europe who came to see it were George Bernard Shaw, Serge Diaghilev, Konstantin

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12 Kendall, *Balanchine and the Lost Muse*, 165.
Stanislavsky, and Paul Claudel.\(^{16}\) Although roughly contemporaneous with productions by Duncan and Fokine and Meyerhold, it was the Hellerau performances that more firmly established the modernist profile and choreographic pedigree that the opera enjoys today.

Aside from the more specific case of *Orpheus*, dance-intensive opera productions had a significant presence in Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, most notably the 1914 productions of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Le Coq d’Or* choreographed by Michel Fokine and Stravinsky’s *Le Rossignol* by Léonide Massine.\(^{17}\) In fact, one of Balanchine’s first assignments after joining the Ballets Russes in 1925 was to restage a one-act version of Stravinsky’s opera, *Le Chant du Rossignol*, thus perhaps giving him some familiarity with the earlier work. In both productions, dancers in whole or in part had supplanted the singers and chorus on the stage, and one of these productions, Fokine’s *Le Coq d’Or* was subsequently mounted by the Metropolitan in its 1917–18 season, starring Rosina Galli and Adolph Bolm (in his debut performance at the house).

These innovations of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes preceded and coincided with significant renegotiations of the aesthetic and sociological aims of opera in Weimar-era Germany. Anxious to throw off the constraints of Wagnerism and other conservative impulses in German musical life, composers and institutions in the young Republic sought ways to address the “crisis in opera” by expanding the repertoire of operas and reimagining canonical works through innovative and sometimes controversial dramaturgical concepts. A series of revivals of Handel’s operas begun in the early 1920s

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., 74.

sparked renewed interest in pre-nineteenth-century repertoire; and the compositions and writings of composer Ferrucio Busoni mounted a challenge to the then-dominant aesthetics of Wagner and other nineteenth-century masters.\(^\text{18}\) At the same time individuals including the influential music critic Paul Bekker called for opera to strive for greater social engagement and relevance for contemporary life, helping to inspire the \textit{Zeitopern} of Ernst Krenek, Kurt Weill, and Paul Hindemith.\(^\text{19}\) One especially critical institution for the development of this innovative tradition in opera production was Berlin’s Krolloper, opened in 1927 and directed by Otto Klemperer. Though only in operation until 1931 when it was closed owing to economic and political pressures, in its brief life the Krolloper was by turns praised and vilified for its revisionist productions of canonical operas including \textit{Fidelio}, \textit{Le Nozze di Figaro}, \textit{Der Freischütz}, and \textit{The Flying Dutchman}, and the revival of long-neglected works by Cimarosa, Auber, Charpentier, and Gluck.\(^\text{20}\)

2. \textit{Orpheus} and “Popular” Opera at the Metropolitan

It was thus with considerable modernist precedent—and a certain degree of personal experience with projects in operatic reform—that Balanchine, Tchelitchev, and the American Ballet proposed a new dance-intensive and unconventional production of Gluck’s opera in the spring of 1936 at the Metropolitan Opera. Fokine’s \textit{Le Coq d’Or} emerged as the example most frequently cited by critics in early press on the \textit{Orpheus} production. As early as January 1936 an anonymous opera gossip column announced that


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 1–3.
Orpheus was being considered for dance-intensive treatment on the model of Le Coq d’Or.21 “Presumably,” the column surmised, “the story would be enacted by dancers with chorus and solo singers in the background or offstage,” and averred that the opera “could benefit by such treatment.”22 Dance critic John Martin reported that the Orpheus production “will constitute a dance event as much as a musical” and for the opera “Mr. Balanchine is said to have created an entirely new choreographic setting.”23 Martin also noted that the Paris version of the opera was being used owing to “the additional opportunities it provides,” referring to the additional dance numbers that are part of the score.24 In a subsequent column, Martin noted that if before the dance-music elements had been understood to be on equal footing, it was now apparent that the opera “will be even more of a dance event than at first seemed likely” and the critic saw the foregrounding of the dancers over the singers as something to look forward to:

The entire stage will be given to the ballet, and the singers will be seated in the orchestra pit. This should be an interesting innovation, for it will obviate the usual necessity of watching an unmistakably feminine Orphéus, and will likewise preserve the singers from the customary unflattering comparison with the movement and the figures of the company of dancers which is on stage so much of the time.25

Although there would be “little scenery,” Pavel Tchelitchev would be responsible for the costumes and lighting, and the new choreography by Balanchine was said to be an “entirely novel approach to the work.”26

21 “Gossip of Opera and Concert,” NYT, January 12, 1936.
22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid. Martin did not review the actual performances of Orpheus, and these two columns constitute his only published remarks on the production.
Other preview coverage announced more details of the planned opera including its appearance on a double bill preceding Mascagni’s *Cavalleria Rusticana*. In remarks to the press, soprano Lucrezia Bori, recently retired from the stage and more fully devoted to administrative activities, explained that the production “will heighten the imaginative and illusory quality of music and story.” The “chief departure” would be “to give the stage over entirely to the principals and ensemble of the American Ballet troupe and to place the leading singers and chorus in the pit with the orchestra.” Bori elaborated that this production was to be understood as a response to criticisms that the Metropolitan was unwilling to try new things and understood the risk involved:

We do not know how the public will respond to this experiment. We hope that it will be sympathetic to the general direction. If there is disagreement on details of execution, that is to be expected in the theater. But we hope that there will be an appreciation of the production’s aims. For the Metropolitan, in order to continue with its desire to seek new ways of treating operas, must have the encouragement of the public.

If the Met with its new *Orpheus* sought to capture some of the revisionist aesthetic spirit of recent trends in experimental opera, the other innovative dimension of the production was its place within a broader institutional effort: a new “spring season” of opera at “popular prices” accessible to a wider public. Under the new leadership of General Manager Edward Johnson, the Metropolitan for its 1935–36 season decided to augment its short fourteen-week winter subscription season (which began in December and ended in March) with several weeks of performances in the spring. Johnson saw this spring season as a first step toward expanding the opera’s offerings to the eight-

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28 “Orfeo to be Given in Novel Manner,” *NYT*, May 20, 1936.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
month season that is standard for the organization today and thereby more firmly establishing the house as a civic institution. “There is no reason,” Johnson maintained, “why a city of the magnitude of New York should have only a short Winter opera season” and that the time would soon come when “the opera will be put on a permanent basis as a public institution” on par with the Metropolitan Museum and Museum of Natural History. Toward the goal of broadening the institution’s reach, these additional weeks of performances would be offered at “popular prices,” that is, prices comparable to Broadway fare, with the top ticket price set at $3 (in contrast to the usual $7), and 1,500 seats would be sold for as little as twenty-five cents to one dollar. Although “popular price” evenings had already been an occasional feature of the Met’s regular winter season, the spring season can be understood as a more permanent effort at such outreach and stands as a precedent for the later establishment of the New York City Center—and with it the New York City Opera and New York City Ballet—as well as the Met’s own radio and “Live in HD” cinema broadcast initiatives.

In this respect, the Met was responding to a wider mandate in Depression-era America to provide access to cultural resources to the wider citizenry and not just monied elites, a stated goal of the music, theater, dance, and literary programs of the Works Progress Administration. Such efforts were especially strong in New York City thanks to the civic ambitions of the progressive Republican mayor Fiorello La Guardia. From the start of his tenure as mayor in 1934, La Guardia pushed hard to make the city more livable through the expansion of public housing and social service agencies, a vastly

32 “Johnson Predicts 10 Months of Opera Here If the Public Supports New Spring Season,” April 16, 1936.
33 “Carmen Opens Opera’s Spring Season May 11,” NYHT, April 24, 1936.
enlarged park system, and other opportunities for physical and cultural recreation, all of which were financed in large part by generous financing from the Roosevelt administration and New Deal agencies, with which he formed strong working relationships.\textsuperscript{34} Himself a lover of classical music and opera, La Guardia saw the arts as not only a source of civic pride for the city at large but a means of providing spiritual uplift and moral edification for working-class New Yorkers.\textsuperscript{35}

In keeping with La Guardia’s democratizing goals and the progressive spirit of the times, Johnson was initially adamant that these additional performances not be understood merely as the “popular” or “supplementary” season separate from the house’s main offerings, but in the end the performances would be touted as the “Metropolitan Popular Season” in playbills. (Figure 12) But if the prices were lower and the audience less privileged, Johnson was quick to maintain that the season would not be done on the cheap. The performances “will be based on thoroughly professional standards,” and “the orchestra and chorus of the house will be available” to perform “opera of substance.”\textsuperscript{36} A newly-installed air-conditioning system would ensure that spring audiences would be able to enjoy the performances in the same comfort as the opera’s winter crowd. Despite these assurances of institutional contiguity, the season was administered through a separate corporate entity and overseen by a special board, chaired by Lucrezia Bori.\textsuperscript{37}

True to Johnson’s pledge not to skimp, between May 11 and June 6, the Met’s first spring season offered performances of ten different operas: revivals of existing productions of

\textsuperscript{34} Mason Williams, City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York (New York: Norton, 2013), 175–211.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 201–3.
\textsuperscript{36} “Opera Heads Study Plans for Spring,” NYT, January 8, 1936.
\textsuperscript{37} “Board Is Selected for Spring Opera,” NYT, January 16, 1936.
Carmen, Rigoletto, Lucia di Lammermoor, Cavalleria Rusticana, Aida, Pagliacci, La Traviata, and Madama Butterfly, all of which were sung in Italian, with the exception of Carmen, sung in French. Rounding out the repertoire would be a new production of The Bartered Bride (in English) as well as the American Ballet’s Orpheus, sung in Italian, despite using the Paris version of the work. In addition, the American Ballet would present the new one-act ballet The Bat as a kind of afterpiece for several opera performances.

Several smaller economies were put in place to make the lower ticket prices less fiscally problematic for the Met. Johnson negotiated with the stagehands’ union for a smaller backstage workforce (reduced to 35–40 from the usual 65–80), and accordingly the spring season productions would use only lighter and thus more easily manipulated sets. The other major cost-saving was the use of up-and-coming (and thus less expensive) singers, which had the additional benefit of giving newer artists in the Met’s ranks and competition winners a chance to try out major roles for the first time. The casting of Orpheus followed this particular mandate: Anna Kaskas, a winner of the Met’s most recent national competition, sang the title role, and Jean Pengelly (Eurydice) and Maxine Stellman (Amor) each made their Metropolitan debuts. All of these aspects of the spring season—the low prices, English-language opera, and up and coming singers—had been stipulated by the Juilliard Music Foundation when it had made the initiative a condition for its $150,000 bailout of the Met one year earlier (see chapter 4), and Juilliard

39 “Popular-Priced Opera Assured By Union Pact,” NYHT, April 9, 1936.
41 “Metropolitan Announces Two Winners in Auditions,” NYHT, March 30, 1936.
42 Ibid.
representatives accordingly occupied half of the seats on the spring season’s board.\textsuperscript{43} This had led to suspicion that Juilliard would use the season to showcase only its own talent, but in the end only a handful of students would have featured roles.\textsuperscript{44}

Kirstein was among those who feared that Juilliard President John Erskine, at the time the chair of the opera’s management committee, would exert undue influence over the spring season and that the official committee existed only for show.\textsuperscript{45} On March 4, a sizeable delegation consisting of Kirstein, Balanchine, Tchelitchev, and Nicholas Nabokov—who had succeeded Virgil Thomson as the would-be composer of \textit{Tom}—were invited to make a pitch for \textit{Orpheus} to the committee, of which Edward Warburg had been named a member, no doubt because of his family’s connections with Juilliard.

Warburg’s presence earned the American Ballet no special treatment, however, especially from Erskine, described by Kirstein as “the shit of all time” whose voluminous sideburns evoked the “big bad wolf.” In the course of the presentation Balanchine noted how the singers would not move, in response to which Erskine made a “nasty crack,” perhaps suggesting the ballet should do the same. At the conclusion of the pitch Erskine “smiled craftily” and noted with apparent condescension that the whole thing “reminded him of his student days in Paris,” in retrospect a canny diagnosis of the production’s complex themes.

By Kirstein’s own account, however, the presentation had invited Erskine’s pique.

It had opened with Nabokov making “a courteous and excellent speech” about the production concept that evidently offended Erskine by its abundance of “erudition.”

\textsuperscript{43} “Spring Opera Opens May 11 at $3 Top,” \textit{NYT}, March 18, 1936.
\textsuperscript{44} Francis Perkins, “The Spring Season,” \textit{NYHT}, June 7, 1936.
\textsuperscript{45} LK Diaries, March 4, 1936.
Nabokov’s comments included mention of the “historical precedent” of the concept, likely an allusion to some of the prior dance-intensive treatments of the opera noted above. Tchelitchev then took the reins, but despite having brought “superb drawings of the first and last scenes” faltered in his exposition, which he later attributed to being tired. In his comments Tchelitchev kept mentioning chicken wire and cheesecloth, two materials he planned to use in constructing the sets. The mention of such mundane materials had evidently raised a few eyebrows among the committee members present, including philanthropist Audrey Lewisohn. Nabokov noted after the meeting that, “every time he said chicken wire they heard cluck cluck and the wire they saw covered with cheeses.” Kirstein noted that Balanchine was as “angry as I’ve never seen him” during the meeting, whether because of Erskine’s sarcasm or the awkwardness of their presentation. Despite their stumbles and the question of Erskine’s ultimate authority aside, the committee approved the show for production, perhaps because Warburg pledged to assume responsibility for all production costs apart from the music. The committee did stipulate one notable compromise, however, requesting that the singers be somewhat visible and that they be lit while they were singing.

For much of March and April, however, both the Orpheus production and the American Ballet’s participation in the spring season were somewhat up in the air, and as a result the opera did not go into production in earnest until early May, only three weeks before its premiere on May 21. There were larger doubts as to whether the spring season would take place at all and also rumors that Edward Johnson was soon to be replaced.

46 “Board Is Selected for Spring Opera,” NYT, January 16, 1936.
perhaps at the behest of Erskine.\textsuperscript{47} Tchelitchev remained committed to the project and was “full of ideas how to do \textit{Orpheus} in spite of Erskine,” perhaps as part of a season of their own financed by the generosity of a cadre of rich old ladies.\textsuperscript{48} Several days later Tchelitchev and Nabokov announced their intention “to go ahead with the spring season of our own, raise $10,000 and do \textit{Tom} and \textit{Orpheus} with music not of Gluck but of Purcell.”\textsuperscript{49} The fate of \textit{Orpheus} aside, there were larger worries that the Met would drop the American Ballet for the spring season if not completely, specifically because choreographer Catherine Littlefield had made an offer to provide ballets for the opera for $1000 a week (Warburg was requesting $2,200).\textsuperscript{50} Kirstein tried to impress upon Warburg “the grave dangers of ever letting her get a foothold in the opera” since people “would be bound to make favorable comparisons,” likely meaning \textit{un}favorable comparisons between her more seasoned company and the still green American Ballet.\textsuperscript{51} Kirstein also took a resolutely agnostic view about the popular appeal of their company:

\begin{quote}
Tried to impress Warburg that we could not afford to be interested in whether or not the public wants us. We are doing what we want to do. We need the Met for another year. In that time we can build up publicity for a tour the year after. Very hard to sleep after this shock. The Met would sell us out in a second.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

On April 21 Balanchine began choreographing \textit{Bartered Bride}, but \textit{Orpheus} had still not gone into rehearsal. In fact, on April 23 the opera was suddenly “off” because of the difficulty of admitting Tchelitchev to the scenic designers’ union. The following day, however, it was back on, as Balanchine had resolutely refused to mount the production

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} LK Diaries, March 6, 1936.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{49} LK Dairies, March 9, 1936.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
without the artist, a decision supported by Lucrezia Bori. Work on the sets and costumes began in late April before the choreography was started, evidently, with Kirstein meeting with scene painter Joseph Novak—an experienced set designer and painter who would work as Tchelitchev’s proxy to circumvent the union rules—and also reviewing the “ravishing” costume designs. Kirstein would later describe the project as “a reckless manifesto designed, rehearsed, and produced within three weeks’ time,” a slight exaggeration as far as “designed” is concerned. But if the planning and conceptualizing of the opera had begun several months before production began, three weeks of rehearsals would be grossly insufficient given the scale of Tchelitchev and Balanchine’s creative vision for Orpheus.

3. The Dramaturgy of Balanchine and Tchelitchev’s Orpheus

The short playbill that accompanied the Orpheus performances included no formal statements from Tchelitchev, Balanchine, or Kirstein as to its underlying argument or aesthetic rationale. In other sources and publications, however, these and other individuals close to the production team articulated the many concepts that informed its creation and execution. These accounts suggest that the opera’s dramaturgical logic would have hardly been self-evident to even the most erudite spectator, or put another way, that Erskine had been quite justified in calling out the endeavor on a certain degree of youthful preciousness and pretension. It also makes clear that the production was no simple undertaking, and even with an abundance of rehearsal

53 Kirstein, Blast at Ballet, 32.
time under the most ideal circumstances it would have been a challenging project to pull off convincingly.

Kirstein’s account of the production in his 1938 pamphlet *Blast at Ballet*, as well as a subsequent 1944 *Dance Index* essay by Donald Windham on Tchelitchev’s stage works provide the closest contemporaneous published sources as to the dramaturgical rationale of the production.54 “We saw Hell as a concentration camp,” Kirstein explained in *Blast*, “with flying military slave drivers lashing forced labor; the Elysian Fields as an ether dream, a desiccated bone-dry limbo of suspended animation, and Paradise as the eternity we know from a Planetarium arrayed on the astronomical patterns of contemporary celestial science.”55 In even more expansive terms, Windham cited the precedents of *The Waste Land* and *Finnegan’s Wake* to justify its conceptual heterogeneity:

The unity of its vision was undoubtedly strange, for it attempted to present the parallel visual symbolisms of Christianity [sic], attic mythology, and other religions and cults in a single cosmological spectacle which used in its décor and movements pictorial images from Greek vases and Italian Renaissance Crucifixions and Pietas, and the legends pointed out in *The Golden Bough*.56

In an essay on Tchelitchev written later in life, Kirstein explained the production in similar terms, explaining that it “combined groups recalling Greek vases with animated

54 The novelist Donald Windham was a close associate of Kirstein, hired initially as an assistant for *Dance Index* and subsequently tapped to be the journal’s editor after Kirstein began his military service. Windham did not move to New York from Alabama until 1939, and thus it is unlikely that he saw *Orpheus* himself, and his account was probably based on notes or interviews from the collaborators or other spectators. For Windham’s obituary see William Grimes, “Donald Windham, Novelist and Memoirist, Dies at 89,” *NYT*, June 4, 2010.
55 Kirstein, *Blast at Ballet*, 33.
description of the Eleusinian mysteries, and tableaux from Christian legend and pagan ceremonial.\textsuperscript{57} Parker Tyler’s biography of Tchelitchev, in one of many passages that imaginatively ventriloquizes the artist, maintains that its conceptual promiscuity was quite deliberate and designed to frustrate audience expectations. A close associate of Tchelitchev and his partner Charles Henri Ford, Tyler captures the intellectual verve of the endeavor through unorthodox syntax:

\begin{quote}
Of course they do not know in the audience—how many could?—all the secrets, alchemical fire, the Aether, and so on. For them it is another fairy tale, some myth they hardly remember from schoolbooks. Otherwise they know only, as a rule, what they see at the Met. This is all spiritual, behind a veil like the old mysteries, each thing meaning something else: “More than what itself it is.”\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Windham’s account offers an additional, more straightforward conceit to knit these various ideas together, explaining that the four scenes represented “the world, hell, the Elysian Fields, and the Milky Way, and each played up its essential element, earth, fire, water, and air.”

In \textit{Blast at Ballet} Kirstein maintained that love and sex were also part of the production’s underlying logic, specifically the artist-and-muse plot that he had previously been trying to steer Balanchine and Tchelitchev away from (see the discussion of \textit{Errante} and the origins of \textit{Reminiscence} in chapter 3). Kirstein writes that the plot was construed “as the eternal domestic tragedy of an artist and his wife” and that Balanchine had accordingly wanted to cast Orpheus as a tenor (a substitution that “had long been


achieved in Russian theatres”) in order to make this aspect more literal.\textsuperscript{59} Despite the artistic dimension of the relationship, the love between Orpheus and Eurydice was not to be understood in abstract but rather carnal terms, an aspect that Kirstein claims contributed to the opera’s unenthusiastic reception: “Indeed, the audience, in several places had tittered because the human flesh of the dancers was designed to be seen in loving contact. \textit{Orpheus} is about love, and sex does enter it. We made a triumphal arch for love to enter, but the shy-eyed and weak-minded were very upset.”\textsuperscript{60} Kirstein’s diaries suggest that this aspect of the production originated in part with Balanchine, who had been pondering \textit{Orpheus} since arriving in the United States and perhaps even earlier. In early April 1934 Kirstein recorded that Balanchine was “playing over Gluck’s \textit{Orfeo} which he wants to do as an erotic ballet.”\textsuperscript{61} As far back as July 1933, when Kirstein was first planning the new ballet enterprise with Balanchine in London, the choreographer had mentioned amid other ideas his desire to do “a big erotic ballet,” albeit without specifying Gluck or \textit{Orpheus}.\textsuperscript{62}

By piecing together information from these textual accounts, surviving sketches and photographs, and the sounds of the musical score, it is possible to get a general sense of how each of the opera’s four scenes unfolded. A generous amount of visual evidence from the production survives, in the form of Tchelitchev’s sketches for the sets and costumes\textsuperscript{63} as well as a series of posed studio photographs by George Platt Lynes, and

\textsuperscript{59} Kirstein, \textit{Blast at Ballet}, 32.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{61} LK Diaries, April 8, 1934.
\textsuperscript{62} LK Diaries, July 16, 1933.
\textsuperscript{63} Sketches and designs are held by NYPL: costume sketches, *MGZA Tch P Orp 1 and 2; scene design for Elysian Fields, *MGZB Tch P Orp 1; scene design for act IV “Milky Way” *MGZB Tch P Orp 2.
many of these images have been reproduced in the published sources cited in this
discussion, as well as in numerous later books and souvenir programs of NYCB.
Previously unpublished and unexamined are numerous live performance photos of the
opera,\(^\text{64}\) which give a more direct sense of how the work was realized on the stage,
especially when put in dialogue with the observations of reviewers and the recollections
of dancers. And although there was no official narrative aid to interpret the action—and it
is unclear whether such a text would have made much of a difference toward
understanding the work—the textual accounts cited below offer a way to surmise both
what happened on stage and what the production team collectively understood each scene
to represent.

The first scene, representing the world, was labeled “At the Tomb of Eurydice” in
the program, and according to Windham depicted “a moon-cratered valley of lifeless dust
where Orpheus (Lew Christensen) and a few friends were symbolizing their grief for
Eurydice (Daphne Vane) in a monument made of her portrait, her drapes, and the broken
household utensils which remained from her domestic life with Orpheus.\(^\text{65}\) Performance
photos reveal that this makeshift effigy of Eurydice was the dominant visual feature of
the scene (Figure 13), and sketches show a ladder, broom, pitchfork, and draped fabric as
its main components, highlighting the “domestic” angle mentioned by Kirstein in *Blast.\(^\text{66}\)
The effigy’s central element—a large cloth with the image of Eurydice’s face—was
evidently one of the Christian allusions of the decor, insofar as it “joined the mourning

\(^{64}\) A mixture of the Platt Lynes studio photographs and live performance photos are held
by NYPL in *MGZEA Orpheus and Eurydice* (Balanchine) photographs and *MGZEB
\(^{66}\) Sketch reproduced in unnumbered plates in Tyler, *The Divine Comedy of Pavel
Tchelitchev*. 

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for Eurydice with Saint Veronica’s Veil,” according to a later account by Kirstein.67

Tyler’s biography suggests that the placement of this cloth was part of the action: “they climb up to put her face on a huge easel, and drape it . . . so . . . just so . . . The portrait is her soul, of course. Such a slowness, no retard or languor but time, dance time, stage time. Rightness.”68 Such action and mise-en-scène accords with the slow, ceremonial dirge sung by the chorus in the opening scene—interrupted repeatedly by Orpheus’s insistent cries of “Eurydice!”

The second Underworld scene, labeled in the program as the “Entrance to Hades,” featured the memorable “Dance of the Furies,” which had been a special focus of the Dalcroze/Appia performances, and is said to have helped launch the career of Mary Wigman, among other artists.69 Given the atmosphere in which it was staged, Balanchine’s choreography may have indeed borne some resemblance to the non-balletic vocabularies of which Kirstein was elsewhere a vociferous critic or was at least somewhat unclassical in character. A reviewer describes “a giant cage contraption which housed furies and scarlet demons,” a structure also depicted in Tchelitchev’s sketches.70 The stage showed “the red glow of hell, a sliced hornet’s nest filled with flames in which the souls of the damned were steamed and lashed by flying furies,” in Windham’s account,71 and Kirstein writes of the “white ghastly whips of the military Furies.”72 Tyler’s account describes some of the terror the scene was supposed to instill: “Think:

67 Kirstein, introductory essay to Pavel Tchelitchev, 37.
68 Tyler, The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchev, 386.
69 Manning, Ecstasy and the Demon, 73–6.
70 Sketch reproduced in Lincoln Kirstein, Tchelitchev (Santa Fe: Twelvetrees Press, 1994).
72 Kirstein, Blast at Ballet, 33.
going down to the Underworld, to Hell, where it is all prison, in one great cage. ‘I made masks of horses’ skulls for Furies, I guess, because I saw horse’s [sic] skeleton in the Crimea.’ Like Dante searching for the soul of his beloved.’’73 No performance photos show these horse skulls in action, though they do make an appearance in the studio work of Platt Lynes.

The third scene in the Elysian Fields might be regarded as the heart of the production, exemplifying Tchelitchev’s interest in the fusion of human performers and scenic elements, in particular through the use of translucent fabrics and lighting, all of which had been hallmarks of the American Ballet’s previous project with the artist, Errante (which the company had performed at the Met while Orpheus was under discussion). Tyler’s account evokes the scene thus:

It looked sublime. Super-sublime. Yes, he insisted whole leafless trees be brought down from Connecticut to show all with their roots underground, yet visible, like X-ray. For all is continuous. It is all space . . . and light . . . and man moving through it, in it, of it. What a stage to do it in: almost too big. The trees are human, suffering, like Dante, but freeing themselves like the souls in Purgatory, lifting off the veil. Ah, even the lightest veil is heavy when the time is a funeral.74

A. Hyatt Mayor, in a short comment on the production in Dance Index, conjures the scene’s delicate blend of lighting and scenery, recalling that a “shadowless pallor hazed the Elysian Fields where a few saplings, white and stripped like fishbones, drifted with roots in midair.”75 Windham writes of the scene as “a garden without gravity where everything drifted in an Umbrian dusk, slowly as objects floating under water.”76 This scene also stood out in the memory of Elliott Carter, whose recollections suggest that if

73 Tyler, The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchev, 386.
74 Ibid.
75 A. Hyatt Mayor, “Comment,” Dance Index 3, Nos. 1–2 (January–February 1944), 3.
the trees were not actually brought in from Connecticut, they were a convincing simulation: “In that production I remember one scene with what looked like actual trees with roots hanging down. The underworld was a whole forest of roots and trees. You could see the trunks of the trees halfway up the stage. It was extraordinary.” Survival sketches by Tchelitchev, performance photos, and the studio photographs of Platt Lynes all show how these various elements—sets, props, and dancers—combined to form a unique and striking spectacle. (Figures 14, 15) Several performance photo shows the women of the corps with hands joined together weaving a concentric spiral, in all likelihood a moment from the most iconic number of the scene, if not the whole opera, the “Dance of the Blessed Spirits,” danced in stylized Grecian tunics that would hardly have been out of place in a Duncan or Fokine production or other music and dance works set in antiquity in the early twentieth century. (Figures 16, 17)

The final scene in the “Gardens of the Temple of Love” makes it clear that the production did indeed employ the happy ending that is a distinguishing characteristic of the Paris version of Gluck’s opera, and employed a quite literal interpretation of its deus ex machina plot device. Kirstein later recalled the coup de théâtre by which Amor (William Dollar) reunited the lovers as either the worst or best element of the entire show:

Tchelitchev and Balanchine flew the rejoined lover on wires up to a sky sprayed with constellations and milky way. Tchelitchev wanted the wires

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78 In addition to the two figures included below, see Tchelitchev’s costume sketches, *MGZA Tch P Orp 2, JRDD–NYPL* and the studio photographs of George Platt Lynes included in *MGZEA Orpheus and Eurydice* (Balanchine), JRDD–NYPL.
painted a proud white, to state the mechanism as blatantly as possible. This was not done; there was enough trouble as it was.  

This final tableaux between Amor and the lovers is one of the few specific moments of the opera recalled by dancer Annabelle Lyon, evidently because of the troubles it caused:

[T]hey were using wires. William Dollar was hoisted up and down on one, and sometimes it didn’t work well. And I can remember one moment where he was supposed to touch earth in an arabesque position and his foot didn’t quite touch and he kept groping with his toe.  

By one critic’s account Tchelitchev’s wish that the wires be visible was fulfilled, although without mentioning whether they were painted white. (Figure 18 shows Dollar in mid-air.) If Tchelitchev wished to assert the obvious theatricality of this effect, it nevertheless was intended to convey a metaphysical truth, as Tyler relates:

In pagan times, of course, they did not have the Christian myth: only the gods lived up above. Except for the constellations—yes, everything is gathered together in the sky. Like [sic] he showed the Milky Way in the last scene: a star-stream, diagonal and geometric figures of the Zodiac all over, lines and dots, that is, jewels: sparkling.  

If this partially reconstructed narrative seems a seductive and congenial realization, descriptions of production’s décor and costumes show how its elaborate apparatus—both literal and intellectual—had the potential to overwhelm, and that as much time and effort (if not more) went into these aspects than into the staging and choreography itself. Lyon recalls that Tchelitchev was the real creative force behind the production, that it “was more his ballet than anybody’s” and that the costumes were a quite salient feature: “I remember that we, in the group, wore a lot of costumes made out

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79 Kirstein, introductory essay to Pavel Tchelitchev, 37.  
80 Annabelle Lyon Interview, 84.  
82 Tyler, The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchev, 386; Tchelitchev’s scene design for the Milky Way is found in *MGZB Tch P Orp 2, JRDD–NYPL.  

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of cellophane. [...] A lot of cellophane...”  

“...All of the characters, with the exception of Orpheus, were covered in grey greasepaint and translucent costumes to appear as mere shadows of life,” Windham explains. This was especially evident in the third scene, in which most of the dancers “were undistinguishable as human beings under their costumes of rocks, trees, and plants—shadows of all things which had lived upon the earth,” thanks in part to a special gray makeup concocted by one of the dancers. Kirstein and others recall with special fondness the crystal lyre carried by Orpheus, which almost became a character itself. Custom made, the cellulose prop had been a special bone of contention for Warburg, who had complained about its forty-five dollar price tag, but when the lyre was put into action it “looked like a million dollars,” according to Kirstein. Tyler writes of how the lyre contrasted starkly with the dark costume of Orpheus, and Windham how it served as a “visual manifestation of his poetic gift, which attracted and absorbed whatever light might be in the places he entered,” whether the red glow of Hades or the milder haze of the Elysian Fields.  

No film footage of the choreography of Orpheus is known to have survived, and since the opera was presented only twice (on a single day at that) and was in preparation for less than a month amid other new projects, it did not likely have a chance to linger for

83 Annabelle Lyon Interview, 84.  
86 Ibid.  
87 Tyler, The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchev, 386; Windham, “The Stage and Ballet Designs of Pavel Tchelitchew,” 18. This Orpheus lyre might thus be seen as an antecedent of the lyre designed by Isamu Noguchi for the 1948 Stravinsky-Balanchine ballet Orpheus. It was the image of Noguchi’s lyre that was subsequently adopted as an unofficial logo for Balanchine, appearing in among other places on the front page of the Catalogue of Works and on cards used by the New York City Ballet to acknowledge condolence messages received after the choreographer’s death in 1983.
too long in anyone’s memory. Recollections by dancers and others—some recorded many decades after the fact, to be sure—suggest that there would not have been much to preserve to begin with, as the choreography of *Orpheus* was rather diffuse in character. A less structured movement vocabulary was likely chosen as much by design, given the complex nature of the scenery and décor, as by necessity, given the limited rehearsal time. “The movement”—using a word that attested to its freer idiom, Kirstein wrote in *Blast*—“was danced and mimed in some of Balanchine’s most accomplished erotic patterns, touching and electric encounters, and noble plastic groups.”

Ruby Asquith, a dancer with the company who would later marry Lew Christensen’s brother Harold, recalled the choreography of *Orpheus* as grounded less in actual steps than a more idealized stage presence. She remembers that Christensen “walked”—not danced—“with such beauty and such dignity and carried himself with such poise that it was just arresting to watch.”

Kirstein’s diaries contain a slightly different recollection, noting that Christensen “looked well and moved OK but he was cold not so much as if he was scared or unsure but maybe he has no real fire behind his docility.”

Christensen’s demeanor or state of mind aside, there was a practical cause for his unsteady performance and the simplicity of some of his actions. According to Christensen’s recollections, the first section of the opera was apparently not completed in time, and as a result Balanchine had to coach him through the scene via whispered cues from the prompter’s box.

Annabelle Lyon, who danced in the corps and posed for several of the Platt Lynes

88 Kirstein, *Blast at Ballet*, 33.
90 Ibid.
91 LK Diaries, May 24, 1936.
photographs, recalled the dancing as “very vague and ambivalent” and remembers mostly “not knowing much about what we were doing.” In contrast to the highly technical choreography of *Chaconne* (created by Balanchine in 1976 to excerpts from *Orpheus and Eurydice*) the choreography was “more interpretive” and was danced in soft shoes.

Tyler’s biography describes several choreographic details that similarly suggest a freer movement style but also qualities that recall Balanchine’s penchant for acrobatic and modernist experimentation. Balanchine’s interpretation of Eurydice’s anger at Orpheus for not looking back was quite visceral and physical: “Eurydice running at Orphée from the back to make him look at her, jumping on him, hitting him with her knee. *Plonk!* like that. Sensational—but elegant.” Tyler also marvels at how William Dollar as Amor was able to actually dance with very large wings on his back: “‘And such wings: at least life-size. No one expected it—dancing with those wings on.’ Such things George thought up.” The theological standard by which wings should be considered “life size” aside, sketches and photos confirm that they were as long as the dancer was tall.

4. “Travesty on Gluck” – the Reception of *Orpheus*

In the end the Met’s spring season was regarded as an overall success, a bright spot of good publicity for the opera amid its struggles to maintain financial stability during the Depression. Despite no pre-sale to subscribers, the opening night performance

93 Annabelle Lyon Interview, 84–5.
94 Ibid.
95 Tyler, *The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchev*, 386.
96 Ibid.
97 In addition to Figure 18 cited above, a sketch of Dollar’s costume is reproduced in a clipping located in MGRZ Dance Clipping Files (*Orpheus and Eurydice*), JRDD–NYPL.
of *Carmen* on May 11 was sold out several days in advance, including standing room
tickets.  
Mayor La Guardia was in attendance that evening and telegraphed his
congratulations the next day: “You have rendered a splendid public service in bringing
fine opera within the reach of every one. This will do more than anything heretofore
accomplished for developing taste and appreciation of good music.”  
Although the
season did not break even, the deficit was in the end less than had been feared, and seven
or eight of the young singers who had made their debuts received official contracts with
the main ensemble.  
Most important, the season had demonstrated, as Johnson
explained, “that there is a public for opera at these prices, and that such opera can be
given well,” and accordingly plans were already announced for another similar season for
1937.  

The American Ballet offered two other premieres in the spring season apart from
*Orpheus*, a newly conceived one-act ballet called *The Bat*, comprised of selections from
*Die Fledermaus*, and several incidental dances for a new English-language production of
*The Bartered Bride*. Although each of these works deserves in-depth treatment that is
beyond the scope of the present discussion, a brief overview of each serves to provide a
sense of the wider critical reception of the American Ballet’s spring season offerings.
Briefly put, the cases of *The Bat* and *The Bartered Bride* show that Balanchine’s work
could be received both positively and negatively, depending upon the context in which it
was presented and the qualities of the dances themselves.

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98 “Popular-Price Opera Opens to Capacity Crowd,” *NYHT*, May 12, 1936.
100 “Popular Opera Is Successful, Johnson Finds,” *NYHT*, May 27, 1936; “Popular-Priced
Opera Scores At New York,” *WP*, June 7, 1936.
101 Ibid.
The up-beat *Bat* was something of a surprise hit for the company, an undisputed crowd-pleaser consisting musically of a “generous assortment of tunes from Strauss’s best-known operetta.” The ballet benefited from considerable visual appeal, featuring “bright-hued raiment against a luminous blue-green background,” and most spectacularly, an ingenious device for the portrayal of the title character, who was a “dual personality, portrayed by two dancers…each in spangled black and each armed with one huge bat-wing,” first danced by Holly Howard and Lew Christensen. (Figure 19) These inventive costumes and sets were designed by Keith Martin, a young artist who at the time was involved with Erick Hawkins, and later a collaborator on several works for Ballet Caravan. Although it is unclear whether Balanchine was involved in the design of this costume and concept, it is easy to see some family resemblance between the wings of *The Bat* and the dramatic angel wings of Amor in *Orpheus*. If *The Bat* was modest enough not to elicit critical rapture, it succeeded in not prompting any critical ire. Its fantastical yet breezy atmosphere recalls earlier semi-narrative ballets such as *Cotillon* and *La Concurrence*, which had been popular with American audiences and critics. As described in a brochure for the South American tour of the American Ballet, the ballet was “an evocation of the spirit and environment of old Vienna,” with a vague plot premised (not unlike *Orpheus*) on an artist in search of a muse:

> A series of confusing and mysterious encounters take place in a park. In search of inspiration, a young poet is confounded by two beautiful, identical women. Hungarian gypsies invade the scene and end up dancing

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103 Pitts Sanborn, “*Lucia* and New Ballet at the Met,” *New York World-Telegram*, May 21, 1936.
a joyous can-can. In the end there remains only shadow of the bat—*Die Fledermaus.*

Confirming this later description, programs from Met performances in the 1930s list the cast as including the Bat, the Poet, Masked Ladies, Gypsies, a Can-Can Dancer, and a corps consisting of Coachmen and Ladies of Fashion. The title character came across as more endearing than scary: “If he, or they, filled the cast with terror, the audience, for its part, had nothing but pleasure of the whole show, which it received with unstinted enthusiasm,” as Pitts Sanborn wrote. *The Bat* was premiered two days before *Orpheus,* on a double bill in which it followed *Lucia di Lammermoor,* and was reckoned “a likeable and well contrasted epilogue for the evening’s entertainment.” The ballet had a healthy staying power in its premiere season and beyond, both as an easy “afterpiece” for full-length operas or as a congenial addition to other programs. It was performed a total of six times during the spring season, paired with operas from *La Traviata* to *The Bartered Bride,* and was subsequently kept in regular rotation during the company’s tenure at the Met, including on Gala mixed bills and several out-of-town engagements. In 1941 it was remounted for the South American tour of the American Ballet as *El Murciélago.*

The other big premiere of the spring season in which the American Ballet participated was a new production of *The Bartered Bride.* The opera was received quite

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104 American Ballet South America Tour Brochure, June–December 1941, American Ballet Programs, JRDD-NYPL. Translation from Spanish mine.
105 Ballet as billed on Gala Operatic Program, Metropolitan Opera House, March 6, 1938, American Ballet Programs, JRDD-NYPL.
106 Pitts Sanborn, “*Lucia* and New Ballet at the Met,” *New York World-Telegram,* May 21, 1936.
107 “*Orpheus* on Bill for Opera May 22,” *NYT,* May 14, 1936; F. D. P., “Donizetti Opera on Double Bill at Metropolitan,” *NYHT,* May 21, 1936.
well, despite initial uncertainty as to how audiences would respond to its being presented in English. (The opera had previously been sung at the Met not in the original Czech but in German translation.)\(^{109}\) *Musical America* declared it an undisputed “hit” of the spring season, “sung in English with a success that clearly transcended expectations,”\(^{110}\) and the *Herald-Tribune* reported that the opera “was generally regarded as an unusual and significant success.”\(^{111}\) Like *The Bat*, the production was praised for its musical and visual appeal. Although its sets were not totally new they “had the look of having just been made,” and the peasant costumes “possessed a singular freshness and gaiety of color.”\(^{112}\) Its cast included numerous operetta veterans “well managed” by conductor Wilfred Pelletier.\(^{113}\) Kirstein noted in his diary when rehearsals for the opera first began that Edward Johnson had wanted the work “staged as a musical comedy with dancing throughout.”\(^{114}\) In the end, however, the opera’s dancing would be reckoned one of its low points, mostly because of its “inexplicable misconception of the charming folk dances.”\(^{115}\) One review advised audiences to literally close their eyes in response:

> The ballet was the one really jarring element in the performance, and primarily because the choreography, credited to George Balanchine, not only disregarded the Czech dance idioms which are indispensable to any valid realization of Smetana’s indications, but violated the character of the music itself. This reviewer has a weakness for *The Bartered Bride*, fostered at repeated performances in the National Theatre at Prague. He will listen to the delectable music of the polka of the first act and the waltz of the second with closed eyes at the succeeding performances of this

\(^{109}\) Per Metropolitan Opera online archives, *The Bartered Bride* was performed in German in eight seasons between 1909 and 1933.

\(^{110}\) “Spring Season Given Lively Start at Metropolitan,” *MA*, May 25, 1936.


\(^{112}\) “Spring Season Given Lively Start at Metropolitan,” *MA*, May 25, 1936.

\(^{113}\) Ibid.

\(^{114}\) LK Diaries, April 21, 1936.

\(^{115}\) “Spring Season Given Lively Start at Metropolitan,” *MA*, May 25, 1936.
work in the Metropolitan’s Spring Season, such is the clash between the music and the dancing.\textsuperscript{116}

The dancing did not significantly hinder the popularity of the production, which would end up being presented five times, more than any other opera of the spring season (with \textit{Carmen} coming in second with four performances).\textsuperscript{117}

\textit{If The Bartered Bride} aroused only minor complaints with respect to the inauthenticity of its dancing and \textit{The Bat} emerged as a reliable crowd-pleasing staple, \textit{Orpheus} was by no account one of the bright spots of the spring season, unless measured by the standard that all press is good press. A report in the \textit{Baltimore Sun} noted that although the Metropolitan’s spring season “is continuing in a blaze of glory…like most blazes, it has left some ashes” and that “a pile of these accumulated around the revival of Gluck’s \textit{Orfeo}.”\textsuperscript{118} An exhaustive survey of the spring season in \textit{Musical America} noted that ordinarily such an important revival “would have merited first place in any retrospective discussion of the season,” but \textit{Orpheus} was instead relegated to a single paragraph on the last page of the three-page spread.\textsuperscript{119} Reviews were indeed almost universally disapproving, and in important respects echoed many of the criticisms that had greeted the American Ballet’s Adelphi debut just one year earlier. The production’s reception also prefigured in intriguing ways the conservative backlash against the later twentieth-century phenomenon of \textit{Regieoper}—prefigured by the operatic innovations of the Weimar-era—whereby a canonical or familiar opera is presented with a dramaturgical

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} “Metropolitan Completes Spring Season,” \textit{MA}, June 1936, 11.
\end{flushleft}
concept that comments upon or radically undermines the received meaning and ethos of a work.

The allegation that the *Orpheus* production had undermined the sanctity of the “true” meaning of the opera was the underlying premise of most critiques. This failure was not attributed to the relative prominence of dance in and of itself, however, but rather the incongruity of the production as a whole with the perceived nobility and dignity of the work. “While the idea of performing the opera as a pantomime with the singers seated in the orchestra pit…was fraught with promising possibilities,” the *Herald-Tribune* concluded, “the treatment accorded Gluck’s work was stylistically anomalous and frequently bordered on travesty.”

Opera critic Pitts Sanborn argued that the production was not “an appropriate accompaniment to the music of Gluck, with its noble simplicity and high contempt for the sensational and trivial,” and thus should be performed only in its “original” mythological setting (whatever that might mean). By contrast, a more creative conceit had been appropriate in the case of *Le Coq d’Or*, because as “a fantastic affair” the opera “lends itself more readily to untraditional treatment than a work like *Orfeo*, which so distinctly springs from one of the most definite traditions in all of art.”

Russell Rhodes in *The Dancing Times* concurred that it was not the prominence of the dance that was the central problem, also citing the “successful” precedent of *Le Coq d’Or*. “One need not be a music critic to extol the magnificent dignity and emotional power of Gluck’s score,” he wrote, and although the production had seemed “an admirable opportunity for dance-mime interpretation,” in the end it was “a challenge to

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120 Jerome Bohm, “*Orpheus and Eurydice* at Metropolitan,” *NYHT*, May 23, 1936.
121 Pitts Sanborn, “*Orfeo* at the Metropolitan,” *CSM*, June 2, 1936.
the American Ballet which the organization was unfitted to meet.”\textsuperscript{123} Another critic cited a more specific musical criticism, namely that the production ruined the memorable exchange between Orpheus and the Furies: “The scene of Orpheus with the Furies and the terrible reiterated “No!” from the chorus, which is still, after 174 years, one of the greatest effects in all music, were tamed to an extent that would have prevented them from frightening even a timid child.”\textsuperscript{124}

Upon this original sin, the production had piled on many other minor transgressions, and critics found Orpheus by turns comical, sentimental, and commercial. Ironically, the vehemence of these critiques translated into quite vivid descriptions, and they thus provide an additional lens through which to re-imagine the production. These observations have the benefit of being closer to the actual performances than the later published accounts of Kirstein, Windham, and Tchelitchev. Notably, these outsider perspectives resonate quite closely with those of the insiders, as well as the visual record of the production. One exception, as will be apparent, is the erotic angle mentioned by Kirstein in Blast at Ballet, unless this aspect was too shocking even for critique. In order to preserve the qualitative tone of the individual reviewers, each will be offered in turn.

Jerome Bohn in the Herald-Tribune lamented that instead of “classic simplicity in both choreography and settings one gazed upon groupings as inane as those offered earlier this season by the Hollywood Ballet in its version of Prometheus”:

Among the effects were rope ladders suspended in Hades, much in the manner employed by Mr. Balanchine in his creation Errante, a masked chorus of Furies tamely cavorting in a manner that would not have frightened an infant in arms; white leafless trees, their roots completely exposed, dangling in mid-air, supposedly part of the vegetation of the

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} John Alan Haughton, “Manhattan Musical Events,” BS, May 31, 1936.
Elysian Fields, which further boasted huge, frosted cones, presumably of sugar, perhaps intended as pabulum for the happy shades. The crowning banality was the concluding vision of the be-winged William Dollar, flying through space on visible wires, following the restoration to life of Eurydice, as in Victorian Christmas pantomimes.\textsuperscript{125}

Pitts Sanborn similarly found little of redeeming value in the production:

Some source of unwisdom devised an arrangement of rigging and nets and veils and stuff that looked like spun sugar and more stuff that looked like ice floes and expected us to see in all that a setting for a Greek legend that omits neither Hades nor the Elysian Fields […] As if that were not enough, the miming and dancing, which took care of the visible drama, furnished a study in diligent ineptitude, aided not at all by vermilion figures moving clumsily through the air and an Amor equipped with huge white wings attempting aviation a la Peter Pan.\textsuperscript{126}

An anonymous \textit{Time} magazine review declared the opera “the most inept production that present-day opera-goers have witnessed on the Metropolitan stage,” which added insult to injury owing to the fact that the “long-neglected masterpiece” had not been performed for over twenty years:

The bereaved Orpheus was personified by Lew Christensen, a tall, strapping young man from Portland, Ore., who wore black trunks, black mitts, a black cape and a lyre on his back, expressed his sorrow by thrusting his fists into the air, swaying before a funereal mound which could easily have covered scores of Eurydices. Muscular William Dollar, a native of St. Louis, leaped into the picture as Amor (Love), wearing white tights and great white wings. Dancer Dollar’s function was to lead Dancer Christensen to the entrance of Hades, a giant cage contraption which housed furies and scarlet demons who proved no more terrifying than Punch & Judy puppets. […] At the end Dancer Dollar was flying through the air suspended by wires. When Orpheus and Eurydice were peacefully reunited, he climbed on top of them, suggesting nothing so much as a Japanese tumbling act.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{125} Jerome Bohm, “\textit{Orpheus and Eurydice} at Metropolitan,” \textit{NYHT}, May 23, 1936.
\textsuperscript{126} Pitts Sanborn, “\textit{Orfeo} at the Metropolitan,” \textit{CSM}, June 2, 1936.
\textsuperscript{127} “Travesty on Gluck,” \textit{Time}, June 1, 1936.
“Fair-minded critics,” including the unnamed author of this review, “spared the dancers, who had merely followed their instructions, concentrated their blame on Choreographer Balanchine and his bogus conceptions.”

One critic who did not spare the dancers entirely did not have much praise.

Russell Rhodes’s assessment of the opera for *The Dancing Times* was unflinching in its criticism, and confirms, *pace* Kirstein’s later account, that Dollar’s wires did in fact get painted white:

In the recent *Orpheus*, the singers were in the orchestra pit, while the ballet fidgeted and twisted in the stage area. The choreography was thoroughly poor and the dance-miming of Lew Christensen as Orpheus and William Dollar as Amor so uncertain, ill-defined and lacking distinction as to make one squirm. Daphne Vane as Eurydice was by far the best performer, which is not saying a great deal. But, what with long fish-net ladder arrangements slung down into Hades (a hang-over idea from Balanchine’s *Errante*), furies dancing coyly about, waving scarf-whips, the chief fury swinging through the air on a pulley, and Mr. Dollar making his final exist like Little Eva going to Heaven in a road show of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, with the strings showing up clear and white in the spotlight—it was all too, too bad. The Elysian Fields were depicted as a sort of no-man’s land, with slim, leafless trees stuck here and there, and roots sprawling above the ground. And the finale in the Temple of Love showed an astronomical background like a far-away view of Pain’s Fireworks.128

*Musical America*’s round up of the Met’s spring season was similarly disappointed at the lackluster revival of Gluck’s neglected work:

Visually, it was one of the most trying experiences of latter-day operatic history at the Metropolitan. Absurd, meaningless settings, suggesting fish nets and flying trapezes, and including a vista of the Elysium [sic] fields calculated to congeal the spirits of the most ardent Gluckist, provided the background for struttings, posings and acrobatics that could not be classed as either acting or dancing. As often as not, there was a clash, rather than synchronization, with the music. Lew Christensen, Daphne Vane and

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William Dollar were the unfortunates required to mime this tragic business. The sooner it is forgotten, the happier for all concerned.129

“All might have been well,” a Baltimore Sun review noted, “had it not been for the much touted ‘ideas’ of Mr. Balanchine”:

There were settings like nothing ever seen anywhere, with trapezes or something of the sort, dangling from the wings, and most of the miming and posing obscured rather than exemplified the beauty of Gluck’s Heavenly [sic] music, also the Hellish portions. […] When Orpheus lifted Eurydice in the air and then, inverting her, tilted her over onto the back of Amor who, incidentally, wore a pair of wings that would have easily lifted a 250-pound angel, members of the audience permitted themselves to titter. In the dance of the Furies some of the lost souls swarmed up the trapezes after the manner of a kitten up the parlor portieres.130

In the Chapter 3 discussion of the American Ballet’s 1935 Adelphi review, we found that John Martin’s often-maligned critiques found external corroboration in the voices of other critics as well as individuals close to the enterprise itself. In a similar vein, the overwhelmingly negative reception of Orpheus seems more or less justified given what has been revealed above about the production’s inception and execution. Though indeed bold in its vision, Orpheus offered more of the Europhile excess, for which so many critics had already taken the enterprise to task. However transcendent or inspired the theoretical conception of Orpheus may have been, the indefinite quality of its choreography, the overwhelming and bewildering nature of its costumes and décor, and its haphazard execution all make its poor reception if not entirely predictable, then at least not altogether surprising.

If virtually all of the critics had been displeased, the production was an important personal milestone and formative experience for Kirstein. He described the experience of

129 “Metropolitan Completes Spring Season,” MA, June 1936, 11.
the performances on May 22 as “one of the most exciting and happy days of my life,” a notable instance of unqualified joy in a diary otherwise crowded with anxiety and self-doubt. Indeed, the run-up to the premiere had been so eventful that Kirstein took a three-week break from his typically diligent journal writing. Despite a rocky dress rehearsal, in the end Kirstein thought the show came off well, despite a few unsteady aspects:

The debut went very smoothly except in various inevitable small details. But the furies flew, the shadows passed under their capes right. Dollar as Amor was campy and weak. Daphne Vane as Eurydice was fine, frail, musical and lovely. [...] The audience after the first scene was cold as ice and even after hell. There was some laughter at the final pas de trios; at the end general enthusiasm. The starlight at the end was miraculously beautiful and the Champs Elysees like an ether dream.

The negative critical reception caught the entire production team and participants by surprise, but did not affect everyone the same way. Balanchine claimed not to be completely surprised, telling Kirstein that, “he knew that either the critics would be marvelous or lousy.” Vladimirov called the performance “fin and distinguee [sic]” and predicted a bright future for Christensen, despite his apparent timidity. The dancers were somewhat “dashed” by the backlash, while Tchelitchev was “delighted” at the minor scandal, boasting that, “he’d never got so much space,” even if the critics had singled out Balanchine as the nominal culprit. This time, however, Kirstein did not respond himself to the critics, although his friend Glenway Wescott permitted him to see the initial draft of a letter subsequently published in *Time*, in which he defended the boldness of the

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131 LK Diaries, May 24, 1936.
132 Ibid.
production and chastised the magazine for having “taken sides with the powerful old
guard” against a “potent young generation.”

In an essay on Tchelitchev’s career written later in life, Kirstein blames
conservative antipathy from both the audience and critics for the opera’s reception, and
firmly maintains that was Orpheus a principled and misunderstood project that was ahead
of its time, at once “a major effort and a major disaster.” The Metropolitan audience,
“accustomed to star singers and slight supporting visual interest” were “horrified by the
reckless daring of such visions.” Although Tchelitchev had been a popular artist—and
indeed, was at work on the best-received painting of his career, Phenomena—in the case
of Orpheus, Kirstein maintained, “the starkness of his aesthetics and the relentless images
of Balanchine, twenty years ahead of general acceptance, made one of those glorious
sacrifices to a premature visionary language that stud the history of the general public’s,
and particularly the specialist critics’, fright and ignorance at innovation.”

Although the exact makeup of the Orpheus audience will never be known, it is
safe to assume that as part of the spring season, and thus sold separately from the opera’s
main subscription season, Orpheus would have been attended by a self-selected crowd.
The dance-intensive nature of the production had been discussed widely in numerous
press accounts weeks if not months in advance, suggesting that audience members would
have known at the very least that they were in for something different from a usual night
at the Met. Kirstein recalls the attendance of quite sophisticated individuals including

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133 Glenway Wescott, “Pleasure from Orpheus,” Time, June 15, 1936. (George
Balanchine Clippings, NYPL)
134 Kirstein, introductory essay to Pavel Tchelitchev, 35.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 35–7.
poet Muriel Rukeyser, critic B. H. Haggin, and Carl Van Vechten, all of whose “hostility” he sensed on the night of the show, and he accordingly avoided speaking to them. Another such person was Muriel Draper, who while more positive in her assessment, was not shy about expressing her disapproval of William Dollar’s “final flight” and Lew Christensen’s costume. Composer and music theorist Edward T. Cone, then an undergraduate at Princeton, reportedly attended one of the performances and recalled the production as less than successful. By contrast, Elliott Carter later recalled the experience as an “extraordinary production” and a “very unusual, moving spectacle.”

In any case, however, the received opinion that the poor reception of Orpheus should be laid entirely at the feet of the Met’s stuffy, blue blood audience does not stand up to much scrutiny. Sjeng Scheijen’s recent biography of Serge Diaghilev has proffered a more nuanced cause for the infamous riot that greeted the 1913 premiere of The Rite of Spring, claiming that the real offended parties were not part of a scandalized conservative elite, but rather artistically-minded “snobs,” who feared that “they had suddenly lost their claim on being the most progressive, the most daring.” I would suggest that the Orpheus debacle played out with a similar dynamic, although a notable difference was the quality of the performance itself. Whereas The Rite of Spring was a fully realized and powerful theatrical event, the Balanchine-Tchelitchev Orpheus was ill-conceived on multiple levels: an overly complicated production with arcane aesthetics, insufficiently

137 LK Diaries, May 24, 1936.
138 Ibid.
139 Conversation with Peter Westergaard.
140 Elliott Carter in Mason, I Remember Balanchine, 165.
rehearsed and prepared, offered in the context of a “popular” season of opera. In the end, it offered neither artistically-minded avant-garde circles nor a popular audience cause for true delight or genuine scandal. Instead, critical nitpicking of the opera’s unconventional theatrics and pretentious dramaturgy, neither of which was convincingly or satisfyingly realized, was able to quite easily fill the void.

The voice of the opera’s popular audience might just be found in a chorus number from the Rodgers and Hart musical On Your Toes, which was in its second month of performances when Orpheus flopped. “Great examples of the charms of Orpheus”—the chorus opines, commenting on a catalog of great composers that, admittedly, does not include Gluck—“Throw us right into the arms of Morpheus.” For a more conclusive link between Balanchine’s Metropolitan and Broadway work at the time—that is, to overhear dialogue between the American Ballet’s unpopular Metropolitan offerings and the very popular On Your Toes—we must now turn to an unrealized project from this same period, a “Bach ballet” with choreography by Balanchine starring “classical” tap dancer Paul Draper.
Figure 12: Orpheus and Eurydice Program, *MGZB American Ballet Programs, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 13: Uncredited photograph of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Scene one “At the Tomb”
Figure 14: Uncredited photograph of Orpheus and Eurydice, Scene 3 Elysian Fields, *MGZEB New York (City) MoMA Photographs: Ballet c. 1900–50, Vol. 28, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 15: Uncredited photograph of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Scene 3 Elysian Fields, *MGZEB New York (City) MoMA Photographs: Ballet c. 1900–50, Vol. 28, JRDD–NYPL.*
Figure 16: Uncredited photograph, Dance of the Blessed Spirits, *MGZEB New York (City) MoMA, Photographs: Ballet c. 1900–50, Vol. 28, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 17: Uncredited photograph, Dance of the Blessed Spirits, *MGZEB New York (City) MoMA, Photographs: Ballet c. 1900–50, Vol. 28, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 18: Uncredited photograph, William Dollar as Amor, *MGZEB* New York (City) MoMA Photographs: Ballet c. 1900–50, Vol. 28, JRDD–NYPL.
Figure 19: Uncredited photograph of *The Bat*, Holly Howard and Lew Christensen as the bat, Charles Laskey as Poet, *MGZEA, Photographs (The Bat, Balanchine), JRDD–NYPL.*
Chapter 6

Balanchine’s “Bach Ballet” and the American Dances of *On Your Toes* (1936)

In the spring of 1936 the American Ballet’s contributions to the Metropolitan Opera’s spring season were not the only project of Balanchine’s geared toward a popular audience. Just a month before the Met’s spring season began, Balanchine had premiered his first work for Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart in the musical comedy *On Your Toes*, the first of several shows on which they would collaborate. With a backstage plot that brought together the worlds of Broadway and the Ballets Russes, *On Your Toes* was crossover in its overall theme and individual songs, exemplified by its title number “On Your Toes,” which featured twin dance choruses of tap and ballet dancers. In between this show-stopping number were two other scenes in which dance was foregrounded: the Act 1 *Princess Zenobia* ballet, which emulated and made light of the orientalist fare of the Ballets Russes, and the musical’s concluding *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, a dramatic narrative in which a male “hoof” falls in love with a female nightclub dancer.

Balanchine’s dances for *On Your Toes*, along with much of his other work in so-called “popular” venues, have often been regarded as peripheral to his “official” work in ballet and opera. Bibliographically speaking, such projects have frequently been catalogued in separate lists, or otherwise regarded as “incidental” dances rather than works in their own right.¹ Certain critics at the time, however, felt no such need to

¹ The 1944 *Dance Index* catalogue of Balanchine’s works lists his work in film and musical comedy in a separate list after his ballets, as does the listing of works in Bernard Taper’s biography. Entries on Balanchine in the *Oxford Dictionary of Dance* and
separate his projects into distinct categories, for instance a June 1936 report in *The Dancing Times*. Writing for a UK-based periodical that covered dance in all its “phases,” from social dance to modern dance, Russell Rhodes apparently felt it practical to cover all of Balanchine’s activities in the context of a single review, in all their generic heterogeneity, including one other popular project, a “Bach ballet,” that would not come to fruition for several years:

The operas *Carmen*, Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*, and Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* at the Metropolitan Opera House now claim the attention of the American Ballet Company, official dance unit attached to the Metropolitan. In *Orfeo* the singers will be stationed in the orchestra pit with the dancers on stage interpreting the lyrics in pantomime and ballet. Later *Die Fledermaus*, emphasizing the overture and the Waltz, will utilize the American Ballet and, if the late Spring Season proves a success, Balanchine and Pavel Tchelitchev plan a new ballet. As an innovation the American Ballet is considering adding Paul Draper, Tap dancer, as soloist. If so, the idea will be similar to the *On Your Toes* number described at the beginning of this article wherein classical ballet steps will be contrasted with modern tap routine. Draper is expected to tap on a dais to Bach accompaniment with ballet dancers whirling below him.\(^2\)

At first glance, these offerings seem a motley and incongruous lot, dominated by the American Ballet’s various offerings for the Met’s spring season and a musical comedy. It is through the last, unrealized project mentioned in Rhodes’s summary, however, through which we can more readily see these activities as bound together by more than mere chronology or the participation of Balanchine. This was a ballet featuring “classical” tap-dancer Paul Draper to music of Bach, briefly pondered as an addition to the American Ballet’s spring season offerings at the Metropolitan, and evidently the

\(^2\) *International Encyclopedia of Dance* make only passing reference to his Broadway and Hollywood work.

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earliest incarnation of one of Balanchine’s most iconic essays in classicism, *Concerto Barocco* (1941).

With this tap-danced “Bach ballet” thrown into the mix it is easier to see Balanchine’s superficially disparate endeavors, from *Orpheus* to *On Your Toes*, as united not just by historical happenstance but by real if unconscious mutual influence on an aesthetic and institutional level. On the one hand these productions show once again that Balanchine’s style was still in part grounded in experimental modes, responsible for the failure of *Orpheus* and the lukewarm reception of the dances for *The Bartered Bride*. But Balanchine’s choreography for *On Your Toes*, most notably its concluding *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, was praised as strongly as *Orpheus* would be criticized. *Slaughter* would in fact be cited as an example of the successful reinvention of ballet in an American idiom, the erstwhile and as yet unrealized goal of the American Ballet itself. In this and other respects, Balanchine’s portfolio of projects at this time shows how his so-called “popular” endeavors and the core activities of the American Ballet can be understood as more closely connected than has been previously acknowledged.

More important, the dances of *On Your Toes* are in fact a compelling resource to understand the Americanization of Balanchine as a choreographer, especially when considered within the context of the musical’s plot. The trajectory of these three dances over the course of the show—the *Princess Zenobia* ballet, the “On Your Toes” number, and the concluding *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*—can be understood as an allegory or storyboard for the process of the Americanization of ballet so desired by Lincoln Kirstein for the American Ballet and its school. As previous chapters have shown, this process of course had yet to be successfully implemented by the actual “American Ballet,” a failure
made apparent yet again in the wake of the inexpert execution and poor reception of *Orpheus*, in the context of the Metropolitan Opera’s new “popular” spring season, no less. Indeed, both the substance and dramaturgical position of the musical’s three dance numbers provide a way to understand the evolution of Balanchine’s aesthetics. Furthermore, this more holistic approach offers a means to address longstanding concerns regarding the racial politics of Balanchine’s emergent neoclassical style. The musical’s dances and the “Bach ballet” provide a new perspective on how Balanchine’s personal contact with a range of dancers—white and African-American, tap and ballet dancers. These encounters would inform his development as a choreographer and help realize, if inadvertently, the larger theoretical goal of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise to reinvent ballet in a distinctly American idiom.

As a hitherto unexamined connection between the repertoire of the American Ballet and *On Your Toes*, this chapter first considers the unrealized Bach ballet starring Paul Draper, showing how it represents not simply an early rough draft of *Concerto Barocco*. Evidently inspired in part by Lincoln Kirstein’s experience viewing *On Your Toes*, the ballet reveals the latent potential for artistic crossover among Balanchine’s projects at the time. Section two considers the genesis and larger plot of *On You Toes*, focusing on the way that the contemporary enthusiasm for Russian ballet in America was foregrounded in its plot: a *roman-à-clef* of the Diaghilev diaspora, exemplified at the time by de Basil’s Ballets Russes. In light of the musical’s engagement with ballet, section three analyzes the *Princess Zenobia* ballet as an instance of parody but also a source of unironic balletic pleasure. For many reviewers, *Zenobia* was a highlight of the show not only because of its comedy but owing to its straightforward virtuosity, and for some bore
almost too close of a resemblance to the object of its satire. Section four examines the
title number “On Your Toes,” which through its juxtaposition of ballet and tap-dancing
serves as a choreographic turning point for the plot of the show. This number foregrounds
the very processes by which anonymous “lowbrow” creative material is made into art by
an official author—the process by which Balanchine is understood to have adapted
African-American dance idioms from his assistant on the show, Herbie Harper. More
important, “On Your Toes” is also an example of how Balanchine’s independent creative
interests—including the mixing of black and white dancers and classical and popular
styles—found a congenial creative outlet in On Your Toes. Section five turns to the
concluding scene of the musical, the “jazz ballet” Slaughter on Tenth Avenue, which
represents a creative synthesis in the context of the musical and with respect to
Balanchine’s choreographic style. Like Zenobia, this ballet was received by its initial
audiences as more serious business than might first appear and completes the process
begun in “On Your Toes,” that is, a fusion of Balanchine’s modernist balletic background
with the sensibilities of his new American home, in part thanks to the contributions of the
ballet’s Irish-American star, Ray Bolger.

1. Balanchine’s “Bach Ballet” (1936) and the Origins of Concerto Barocco (1941)

For many years the influence of popular movement vocabularies on Balanchine’s
choreographic style, specifically elements of African-American dance idioms, has been
the subject of much debate. These discussions have focused among other works on
Balanchine’s iconic ballet Concerto Barocco (1941), set to J. S. Bach’s Concerto for Two
Violins in D minor. Sally Banes sees the “lacing of classical ballet with black jazz dance”
not just as a plausible artistic response to Bach’s concerto but also of a piece with Balanchine’s wider engagement with and adaptation of black dance forms throughout his career. Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, more critical than Banes of the erasure of the latent and unacknowledged “Africanist” elements of Balanchine’s work, similarly cites Concerto Barocco as an example of his abstract, neoclassical style being indebted to black dance aesthetics. Although they reach different conclusions as to the ethics of such appropriations, both scholars cite the testimony of dancers Suki Schorer, Patricia McBride, and Barbara Walczak as well as critic Edwin Denby, who have collectively noted the “jazzy feeling” of the ballet, the quick footwork and syncopation of the choreography, and specific references to black popular dances such as the Charleston.

That such elements should inhere in this ballet from the early 1940s is not surprising for either Banes or Dixon-Gottschild. Banes notes that Balanchine was “deeply immersed in his Broadway work” when he created Concerto Barocco, only seven months after the opening of the Vernon Duke musical Cabin in the Sky, in which he collaborated with Katherine Dunham and her dance company. Dixon-Gottschild similarly observes that “Balanchine’s early American career included a substantial apprenticeship on Broadway,” in which he worked with African-American artists including Dunham, Josephine Baker, Herbie Harper—his assistant for On Your Toes—and the tap-dancing

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duo the Nicholas Brothers (featured in Balanchine’s subsequent musical for Rodgers and Hart in 1937, *Babes in Arms*). 

To this distinguished list of uncredited collaborators for *Concerto Barocco* we must now add two more individuals, however, who provide another dimension to the question of the racial politics of Balanchine’s neoclassical style and important evidence for aesthetic and institutional crossover in the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise. First is the white “classical” tap-dancer Paul Draper, who for a brief period in May 1936 was slated to perform a “Bach ballet,” choreographed by Balanchine, as part of the American Ballet’s spring season programs at the Metropolitan. Second is Lincoln Kirstein, who would strongly advocate for including the Bach work as part of the American Ballet’s spring season offerings at the Met, inspired in part by the dance numbers of the recently opened *On Your Toes*.

In the time since these debates about Balanchine’s style first began, scholars have drawn new critical attention to the overlooked contributions of African-Americans artists and performers to American modernist expression. Several of these methods and interventions offer new ways to approach the racial politics of Balanchine’s style, in particular with respect to ways in which frequently unacknowledged creative transfers between African-American and white performers were responsible for the development of distinctively American dance styles, from modern dance to tap dance. Joel Dinerstein has argued that in America jazz musicians and African-American performers (including tap-dancers) most readily captured and embodied the energy and spirit of the machine-

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age aesthetics that were so central to modernism more broadly. Although this sensibility had its origins in African-American communities these performance styles were subsequently appropriated and adapted by white performers, whether in the mechanized chorus lines of Florenz Ziegfeld and Busby Berkeley or the disciplined sophistication of Fred Astaire, by means of the broader dynamics of “love and theft” that lie at the heart of the American minstrel tradition. Susan Manning has reshaped scholarly understanding of the history of modern dance in America, demonstrating that the contemporary practice of “Negro dance” was central rather than peripheral to the development of this now quintessentially American movement vocabulary. Much of the creative exchange that informed this tandem evolution was enabled by what Manning identifies as innumerable instances of “cross-viewing,” in which spectators of performances were able to “catch glimpses of subjectivities from social locations that differ from their own,” whether with respect to race, class, gender, or sexuality. Regarding tap-dancing more specifically, Constance Valis Hill has shown how this unique American dance tradition is inherently hybrid in its origins, deriving from the twin “Afro-Irish” sources of “black vernacular dance and black rhythmic sensibilities” and “the jig and clog tradition of white Broadway.” “The amount of borrowing and imitation was so considerable between the

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9 Manning, *Modern Dance/Negro Dance*.
10 Ibid., xvi
two,” Hill writes, “that the distinctions articulated at the turn of the twentieth century were indistinct by that century’s end.”

These complex cultural and racial dynamics offer a way to approach the intriguing case of the American Ballet’s “Bach ballet” and its would-be featured performer, Paul Draper (in addition to Balanchine’s dances for *On Your Toes*). Even in the wide-ranging history of tap-dancing, Draper is something of a curiosity, a performer known for dancing to classical music and blending tap technique with elements of ballet. Draper was at liberty to pursue such an unorthodox career owing to his family’s wealth and connections in the performing arts. His aunt Ruth Draper was an internationally famous actor known for dramatic monologues, and his mother Muriel a well-heeled and well-traveled left-wing intellectual who straddled New York’s high and low bohemian circles. Draper’s unique style earned him modest success on vaudeville and variety stages in the United States and Europe, where he was most famous for his “pedestal routine,” in which he performed on a three-foot high round marble platform a couple of feet in diameter, a trick he had learned from the husband and wife tap duo Chilton and Thomas. Around the time that Draper was slated to appear with the American Ballet he was at the height of his fame, having performed the year prior in the musical *Thumbs Up* and in 1936 appearing opposite Ruby Keeler in the well-regarded film musical *Colleen*.

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12 Ibid.
13 For an overview of Paul Draper’s background and career highlights see Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 190–2.
Around this time, Draper became interested in exploring classical repertoire as accompaniment for dance and incorporating ballet technique into his style. Classical music was hardly new to him, as his childhood had featured encounters with artists including Arthur Rubinstein and Pablo Casals, and he even claimed that the first tune he learned to hum as a child was the theme of the first movement of Beethoven’s violin concerto. Draper started experimenting with Handel minuets and Bach gigues and decided to enroll at the School of American Ballet, where he “started to learn how to move around so that I was able to do the things I had wanted to do—make sounds which were rhythmically appropriate and sensible, and imaginative and inventive.” That Draper chose the School of American Ballet from among New York’s many dance schools was hardly an accident, as his mother was a close friend of Kirstein, a personal confidante and mentor since his move to the city in the early 1930s. Draper would later marry one of the American Ballet’s early principal dancers, Heidi Vosseler, deepening his connection to the institution. For the rest of his career, Draper’s performances were inspired by both classical music and popular genres including jazz, and he encouraged dancers to engage with music of all types as inspiration for dance.

Lincoln Kirstein is generally not understood to have been involved in Balanchine’s popular projects, as they were not financially or institutionally affiliated with the American Ballet, whether the school or company. The chronology of Kirstein’s involvement in Draper ballet in the spring of 1936, however, suggests that not only was

15 Draper, “Tapping Into the Classics,” 236.
16 Ibid., 236–7.
17 Hill, Tap Dancing America, 190–2.
he the most important champion of the Bach work, but that his interest in the project was potentially prompted by a “cross-viewing” experience at several performances of *On Your Toes*. During the year before, in August 1935, Draper himself had pitched to Kirstein the idea of a “concert dance of his taps,” but no immediate action was taken toward realizing such a project, with the American Ballet preparing for its cross-country tour and new duties at the opera set to begin.\(^\text{19}\) Nearly eight months later, however, the Draper project became a renewed interest on the part of Kirstein, soon after the opening of *On Your Toes*. Kirstein in fact saw *On Your Toes* twice in the space of two weeks, first on March 28 in Boston (where the show was in tryouts and the Metropolitan Opera, and with it the American Ballet, was on a brief tour) and again on April 14 in New York, only a few days after opening night. He does not record an especially enthusiastic response on either date: of the Boston performance he wrote that while the dancers were “very nice” there was “no one to sing the good songs”; of the New York performance, which he attended with his friends Cary Ross and Muriel Draper, he noted only that, “it was OK and people liked it.”\(^\text{20}\) But aside from these two performances, Kirstein had dropped in on several rehearsals for the musical in the foregoing months, and had otherwise been kept apprised of Balanchine’s involvement with the show.\(^\text{21}\) At one rehearsal he made note of the “[n]ice nos mixing ballet and tap,” a likely reference to show’s title number “On Your Toes” (discussed at greater length below) in which ballet and tap dancers shared the

\(^{19}\) LK Diaries, August 19, 1935.  
\(^{20}\) LK Diaries, March 28, 1936; April 14, 1936.  
\(^{21}\) Kirstein mentions *On Your Toes* in several diary entries prior to his attendance at the show itself in Boston and New York. See LK Diaries, February 7, 25, March 3, 6, 10, 1936.
stage.\textsuperscript{22} Kirstein had even been tempted to scout some of the dancers he saw, noting that there were “A few boys I w[oul]dn’t mind having in our company,” and later that evening over dinner at Balanchine’s apartment he recalls his host playing over some of the show’s songs on the accordion.\textsuperscript{23}

On April 16, two days after his second viewing of \textit{On Your Toes}, Kirstein saw Paul Draper perform at the Rainbow Room at Rockefeller Center. He recalls that Draper danced “extremely well” and was “very handsome,” and Kirstein decided he wanted Balanchine “to do a show for him so much in a ballet.”\textsuperscript{24} As was his wont, Kirstein quickly devoted his full energy and attention to the project, which had the potential to complicate the realization of the larger project of the American Ballet in the offing, that is, the ambitious \textit{Orpheus} production. During the following week, Kirstein spoke with Draper’s mother Muriel about having her son in a “ballet piece,”\textsuperscript{25} and the next day met with Draper himself:

Nice boy but his taps have also gone to his head and dancing as such is not his dominant interest. It is his triumph and compensating ambition over his stuttering to be in a first class review. He made $23,000 last year and has nothing to show for it. He is also boring but possibly Balanchine can work out something.\textsuperscript{26}

Despite these misgivings about Draper’s talent and demeanor, and the potential barrier of his stuttering, Kirstein briefly made the ballet a priority, over the objections of Tchelitchev, who was both against the idea of using music by Bach but more important concerned that it would cut into much-needed rehearsal time for \textit{Orpheus}, a more than

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} LK Diaries, February 25, 1936.
\item \textsuperscript{23} LK Diaries, March 10, 1936
\item \textsuperscript{24} LK Diaries, April 16, 1936.
\item \textsuperscript{25} LK Diaries, April 20, 1936.
\item \textsuperscript{26} LK Diaries, April 21, 1936.
\end{itemize}
legitimate concern as would be revealed in retrospect.\textsuperscript{27} Ever eager and ambitious, Kirstein knew instinctively that if it waited until after \textit{Orpheus} “it will never be done so I’m attempting to rush it through.\textsuperscript{28}

Sure enough, the next day on April 29 (a little more than three weeks before the May 22 \textit{Orpheus} performances) the dancer came to the Met for a “tryout rehearsal” of the Bach ballet, attended by all of the company’s dancers who knew how to tap, suggesting that Draper would not be the only tap dancer on stage.\textsuperscript{29} Kirstein noted how Draper’s stutter “not only impedes his speech but his whole dancing and personality,” but he nevertheless hit it off with the dancers, who seemed to like him despite his somewhat haughty demeanor. But Draper arrived late, ignored Balanchine, voiced a demand for “star billing,” and showed off with a “gratuitous demonstration” of his dancing. Based on this initial encounter, Balanchine “doubted the possibility of anything coming from it,” though Kirstein held out hope that “perhaps he can get over some of his terrible inferiority compensatory compulsions.” Kirstein did come to the realization, however, that it would be “impossible” to “rush the Bach through before \textit{Orpheus} got started.” But he was heartened by the fact that Edward Johnson was supportive of Draper’s potential appearance at the Met, and that if the spring season were extended—the opera was leaving its exact duration open-ended—perhaps the piece could be scheduled for later. (This same day Kirstein consulted separately with Muriel Draper, who made no special efforts to advance her son’s case. She told Kirstein that Paul “was badly conceived” during an episode of “fiendish dipsomania” of his father’s” and “kicked before he was

\textsuperscript{27} LK Diaries, April 28, 1936.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{29} LK Diaries, April 29, 1936.
born and it was a miracle he could do anything.” As a result, she “wasn’t now going to kill herself over him.”

If the prospects for the Bach ballet looked unclear from the outset, the project nevertheless made a few appearances in the press. “The canonization of tap dancing will come at the Metropolitan Opera Monday,” reported the Hartford Courant in early May, “when Paul Draper will do a routine to strains of Bach. This apotheosis will be part of a ballet by Georges Balanchine at the opening of the Opera house’s Little Season.” Like the Dancing Times notice quoted at the outset of this chapter, a front-page item in Variety pointed out the obvious affinity between the Draper ballet and the recently opened On Your Toes:

Paul Draper is practically set to tap with the American Ballet as one of the opening attractions at the Metropolitan Opera, N.Y., when the spring season gets under way Monday. Appearance will either be the first or second week. Stepping will be to Bach with Draper centered on a dais, and the artier terpers cavorting around him. Something of the same idea is used in On Your Toes musical which George Balanchine, choreographer of the American Ballet, staged.

Variety reported subsequently that the ballet’s failure was due both to Draper’s diva behavior and the shorter-than-expected duration of the opera’s spring season: “Paul Draper’s tap dancing solo appearance work with the Metropolitan opera is cold. Met’s season has been clipped for one thing and for another the opera management not favorably disposed toward Draper’s demands for stellar advertising prominence.”

That the Draper ballet was more than a passing fancy for Kirstein and possibly also Balanchine, however, is evident in its reappearance as a possible project after the

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30 Ibid.
1936 spring season concluded. Several weeks after the *Orpheus* debacle, while Kirstein was in a new burst of activity organizing the first season of Ballet Caravan (see Chapter 6), he wrote of being “[f]ull of *Pulcinella*, the Bach Ballet and a satirical ballet which is to be an attack on the critics and on the public,” the wounds of *Orpheus* apparently still quite fresh. The syntax makes it unclear whether it was Balanchine, Kirstein, or both, who were “full” of these ideas, but it nevertheless shows the project alive in some respect. A year later in May 1937, a similar ballet featuring Draper makes an appearance in a prospectus prepared by Kirstein for a series of “collaborative evenings” (also unrealized) involving Ballet Caravan. For an evening titled “The Classic Dance and Tap Combined,” in which Draper would perform alongside members of the Caravan, the program was to conclude with Draper dancing to the “Bach Double Violin Concerto,” with choreography by Balanchine. It is this 1937 source that makes it possible to posit the Draper ballet as a forerunner of *Concerto Barocco*, as no sources from 1936 mention the specific score by Bach that was to be used.

Thus even if it had to wait until 1941 to see the stage—in Rio de Janeiro, of all places, and under the auspices of a government-sponsored tour, in which it played in repertory with *El Murciélagos (The Bat)—Concerto Barocco* potentially reveals itself as

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34 LK Diaries, May 31, 1936.
35 The prospectus and budget for the “Collaborative Evenings” series was included as an enclosure in a May 20, 1937 letter from Lincoln Kirstein to Anna Bogue, Secretary of the William C. Whitney Trust, copies of which are included in correspondence between him and his father Louis Kirstein, LEK Collection.
36 Ibid.
37 Since Bach’s D minor concerto BWV 1043 (composed ca. 1730–1) is his only such extant work for two violins, we can assume that this was the music specified by Kirstein in 1937, and was in all likelihood the music for the ballet as conceived of a year earlier in 1936. On the Bach double concerto see Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: Norton, 2000), 357.
not just diffusely but quite literally born of the aesthetics of tap, and for its creative origins owes as much to Draper and Kirstein as Balanchine, not to mention the many anonymous tap performers whose contributions to the ballet—and Balanchine’s style—will never be conclusively identified. *Concerto Barocco* is thus an even more tangled case of creative exchange: its composition initially inspired by Draper’s classical adaptation of Afro-Irish dance forms, subsequently championed by Kirstein, and ultimately realized years later by Balanchine and his (at the time all white) dancers. That a WASP performer was the ballet’s potential muse, a Jewish-American impresario its most important early advocate, and a Georgian-Russian émigré its ultimate author does not of course lessen the significance of the Afro-Irish tap-dancing roots of *Concerto Barocco*. Rather, it reveals that the ballet’s origins are an even more dizzying mise-en-abyme of appropriation than previously thought. (That such a transaction took place to the soundtrack of J. S. Bach, moreover, serves to remind of the movement latent in the music of the Thomascantor himself, though that is a discussion for another day.) What is most crucial, however, the case of the Draper Bach ballet suggests that the official undertakings of the American Ballet did not operate in a sphere completely separate from Balanchine’s “popular” endeavors, but that the potential for mutual creative influence was very real for both Balanchine and Kirstein. With this in mind, we can now turn to Balanchine’s popular success of early 1936, his collaboration with Rodgers and Hart for *On Your Toes*. 
2. Balanchine and *On Your Toes*

Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart initially conceived of *On Your Toes* in 1935 as a film about a vaudeville hoofer who falls for a ballerina, inspired by a rumor that RKO was looking for a vehicle for Fred Astaire.\(^{38}\) The film project never materialized and the duo instead optioned the show to Lee Shubert, who was looking for a stage show to feature dancing star Ray Bolger.\(^{39}\) This planned production never materialized, and in the meantime Rodgers and Hart were tapped by Billy Rose to write music and lyrics for *Jumbo*, a huge extravaganza starring a real elephant performed at the Hippodrome.\(^{40}\) Although *Jumbo* lost a great deal of money for its producers, it provided Rodgers and Hart with a critical success and marked the beginning of a stretch of five hit shows, four of which would involve Balanchine. The first of these was *On Your Toes*, which found a new producer in Dwight Deere Wiman, like Warburg and Kirstein a son of privilege and somewhat dilettantish producer interested in elevating the quality of Broadway entertainment, and a subsequent producer of several other Rodgers and Hart shows.\(^{41}\) Although authored by Rodgers and Hart, the musical’s book benefited from substantial input from George Abbott, who initially quit the show but was later convinced to rejoin the production team before it opened in early 1936.\(^{42}\) The show previewed for several weeks in Boston, and opened in New York on April 11, 1936, where it would run for over a year, briefly tour a handful of U.S. cities, and be remounted in London in 1937.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 102–4.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 105.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) On the subsequent 1954 and 1983 revivals of *On Your Toes*, and the changes they made to the 1936–7 versions, see Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway*
The musical’s plot centers on Phil Dolan III (originally played by Bolger), a third-generation vaudeville dancer who in his youth performs with his parents as the “Dancing Dolans,” whose surname posits them as exemplars of the “jig-and-clog” strand of tap dancing. The play opens in 1920, when learn that “Junior,” to the dismay of his parents, has decided to abjure his born-in-a-trunk existence working “Two a Day for Keith and Three a Day for Loew” (as they recount in the musical’s first song) to study music instead.\textsuperscript{44} We then encounter Junior in his new professional environs then-present day New Deal America, as a music teacher at the WPA Extension of Knickerbocker University, instructing the unlearned masses in the masterworks of classical music, specifically the “The Three B’s,”—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms—as the number is titled. While keeping his dancing skills under wraps, Junior valiantly works to counteract the lowbrow inclinations of his students. Among other cultural transgressions, they confuse the popular song “Poor Butterfly” with Madama Butterfly; mangle the title of Shostakovich’s opera as Lady Macbeth from Minsky (“Minsky’s” being the name of a popular burlesque theater); and posit vaudeville star Borrah Minevitch—a midget famous for a harmonica act\textsuperscript{45}—as a composer “ending in –ovich.”\textsuperscript{46} (Figure 20)

\textit{Musical from Showboat to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85–92. See also Lynn Garafola’s introductory essay in the \textit{On Your Toes} Popular Balanchine dossier, JRDD–NYPL.

\textsuperscript{44} Although the songs from \textit{On Your Toes} are available in numerous recorded versions (which also include the ballet numbers), as well as in published piano/vocal score and multiple song anthologies, the full book, lyrics, and score remain unpublished. All quotations from the book and lyrics in this chapter are based on a 1936 script from the Music Division of NYPL: Richard Rodgers, \textit{On Your Toes}, RM 262 (scripts). The cover page contains the information: “As played at the Imperial Theatre, N.Y.C., Opening April 11, 1936.”

One of Junior’s female students, a budding songwriter named Frankie Frayne, discovers his secret identity, and she and another student, composer Sidney Cohn, persuade him to reconnect with his dancing roots. Junior agrees, but not content merely to return to vaudeville he instead secures a role with the visiting Russian Ballet, which Sidney coincidentally hopes can be persuaded to mount the innovative “jazz ballet” he is composing. Immersed in the new and exotic world of ballet, Junior quickly becomes ensnared in a love triangle between the all-American Frankie and prima ballerina Vera Barnova (originally played by Tamara Geva), and much of the succeeding action—including the show’s dance numbers—is occasioned by the collision of these two worlds.

*On Your Toes* is known today for several reasons, among them one of its hit numbers, “There’s a Small Hotel,” which had initially been written for and cut from *Jumbo*. More consequentially, *On Your Toes* has featured prominently in discussions of the historiography of “integrated” musical comedy, in which book, music, and choreography are governed by a more coherent and unified work concept, in contrast to more loosely structured conglomerations of song and dance. The 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!* was long credited as the inaugural work in this “integrated” form, in part thanks to the studious cultivation of this narrative on the part of the creative team themselves. Historians and critics have in recent decades contested this status of *Oklahoma!*, with many such accounts positing *On Your Toes* as one of many

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46 For an analysis of the “Three B’s Song” and background on these and other popular and classical references in the numbers, see Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, 92–5.
48 For a reexamination of the ideology behind this branding of *Oklahoma!* as an “integrated” musical see James O’Leary, “*Oklahoma!, ‘Lousy Publicity,’ and the Politics of Formal Integration in the American Musical Theater,” *Journal of Musicology* 31, No. 1 (Winter 2014), 139–82.
other shows with an earlier claim on this distinction, especially with respect to the “integrated” role of dance. Perhaps most famously, Leonard Bernstein in *The Joy of Music* explained how it was thanks to *On Your Toes* that “dancing has come into its own as a plot-furthering medium” in musical comedy, and that its concluding ballet *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* “broke ground for the building of a whole tradition of plot-dancing, for all the action ballets, love ballets, decision ballets, dream ballets and passage-of-time ballets that we have almost come to expect now” from choreographers ranging from Agnes de Mille to Jerome Robbins to Michael Kidd.49

The integrated credentials of *On Your Toes* aside, when the musical opened in 1936 the prominent role of dance in the show was seen not as an innovation in generic coherence, but more simply as a sophisticated and classy addition credited to its producer Dwight Deere Wiman. *On Your Toes* in general was viewed as a luxe item, for which the producer had evidently spared no expense:

*On Your Toes* is a product of many of the Theater’s upper-class showmen. Its impresario is Mr. Dwight Deere Wiman, dilettante and professional, who has dedicated his career and his fortune to the improvement of Broadway play going. He has equipped *On Your Toes* with musical comedy’s richest appurtenances—songs and libretto by such deft minstrels as Messrs. Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, scenery by Jo Mielziner, acting by a company of high-priced experts, and all under the supervision of Mr. George Abbott, a master of convincing detail.50

A cartoon collage of scenes from the musical printed in the *Herald-Tribune* in June attests to Wiman’s perceived ownership over the show, titled “Interludes from Mr.

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Wiman’s *On Your Toes.* It was above all the presence of a modern version of ballet created by a contemporary choreographer such as Balanchine, however, that would ensure both the stylishness of the ballet in *On Your Toes.* “Everything at the Imperial is done in the nicest and most sophisticated taste,” the *Brooklyn Eagle* noted, adding that, the presence of Balanchine will “give the ballets of *On Your Toes* an authentic air and originality.”

“To insure authentic rib-digging of the ballet, Producer Wiman called in one of the world’s greatest ballet masters, George Balanchine of the Metropolitan Opera, to stage the two terrific ballet numbers,” as one review of the Boston previews explained.

There is more to the dances of *On Your Toes* than luxurious novelty or authenticity, for they should be taken seriously in ways that have less to do with the purported integrated status of the show’s music, choreography, and plot. In the discussion that follows, I wish to analyze the dances of *On Your Toes*—the *Princess Zenobia ballet,* “On Your Toes,” and *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*—as integrated in a different sense, that is, in subtle but meaningful dialogue with Balanchine’s larger aesthetic priorities and style at the time, and thus in a more contiguous relationship with the history of the American Ballet (and by extension the New York City Ballet) than has been previously understood. In this respect, the case of Draper’s Bach ballet stands as an important precedent for the potential of Balanchine’s external “popular” projects to influence the core activities of the American Ballet. The three dance numbers of *On Your Toes* offer ways in which to view the musical as not peripheral but rather quite central to the

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51 “Interludes from Mr. Wiman’s *On Your Toes,*” NYHT, June 7, 1936.
institutional history of the American Ballet and Balanchine’s early American career, and contain compelling indicators of mutual influence with his wider work and aesthetic priorities.

3. “Burlesquing the Ballet Russe”: The Princess Zenobia Ballet

Geoffrey Block has written that *On Your Toes* is quite transparent in its status as a “musical about Art” (with a capital A), as was evident from the early “Three B’s” number.54 “For complete enjoyment of *On Your Toes*,” Brooks Atkinson explained in his review, “it is recommended that you brush up on your Beethoven and Rimsky-Korsakov, who are mentioned not only in the book but the score.”55 Witty musical allusions aside, the actual plot *On Your Toes* was in fact most invested in a more specific and timely phenomenon of art, the nationwide craze for “Russian ballet,” epitomized at the time by de Basil’s Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. This dimension of the show was hardly a secret, and the musical was seen as quite openly capitalizing upon the current “balletomania” sweeping the country, and the seemingly unstoppable popularity of the de Basil troupe in particular. “Interpretive dance fans have been increasing literally by leaps and bounds these last several years,” noted Burns Mantle in his review of the show, and “Balletomaniacs have achieved an importance that induced Arnold Haskell to write a large book about them, which Simon and Schuster published.”56 The timely theme of *On Your Toes* was made even more apparent during the musical’s opening weeks in New

54 Block, *Enchanted Evenings*, 92.
York, as the de Basil company found itself performing at the very same time at the Metropolitan Opera, in an engagement scheduled for the weeks between the opera’s main season and the start of the spring season in which the American Ballet would feature. According to a write-up in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, the de Basil troupe took the musical’s humor in stride and went so far as to boast in advertisements for their Met engagement that, “only the great deserve the darts of satire.”⁵⁷

Much of the musical’s book is a virtual roman-à-clef of the Diaghilevian diaspora, beginning with the “Cosmopolitan Opera House” in New York City, where almost half of its scenes take place. Along with Junior Dolan’s artistic mid-life crisis, the precipitating problem of the plot is ongoing financial instability of the Russian Ballet company of Sergei Alexandrovitch (~Sergei Diaghilev), whose stars—the self-obsessed beauty Vera Barnova (~Irina Baronova) and her equally egotistical partner Konstantine Morrosine (~Léonide Massine)—are locked in a continual battle of affections and egos both on stage and off. In recent years, it is revealed during the first act, Sergei has turned to the wealthy American Peggy Porterfield in order to set the company’s finances aright, and when we first encounter these characters, the company is at another fiscal dead end. (Dwight Deere Wiman thus himself fits quite neatly into this scheme, for if the Singer sewing machine and other industrial bestsellers helped underwrite many endeavors of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, the John Deere tractor might be said to have mounted *On Your Toes*.)

This time, however, the straight-talking Porterfield (originally played by Luella Gear, and in subsequent revivals by Elaine Stritch and Christine Baranski) decides she is

⁵⁷ Notice in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, October 1936 (*MGZR Clippings On Your Toes*, NYPL)
not content to sign yet another blank check, but rather wants to use her personal and professional clout to change the direction of the company. “Your public is tired of Schéhérazade, La Spectre de la Rose—they’ve seen all those Russian turkeys,” she explains to Sergei, who is also her not-so-secret lover. As something fresh and novel she pitches the new “jazz ballet” of Sidney Cohn (~George Gershwin, or as will be seen perhaps ~Richard Rodgers), a proposal that Sergei initially rejects out of hand, citing the noble tradition that he is bound to uphold (another nod to ~Diaghilev, who loathed jazz). In the end, Porterfield gets her way by threatening to withhold her line of credit—and perhaps other personal resources—unless the jazz ballet is produced. Her case for this new project is substantially bolstered by the musical’s diegetic presentation of one such “Russian turkey,” i.e. the Zenobia ballet, so that the audience of On Your Toes in effect gets to judge for itself. Thus although most attention surrounding the “integrated” credentials of On Your Toes has centered on Slaughter, Zenobia in fact makes a strong case for such claims, insofar as the ballet presents the characters of the musical in part as their “real” selves, and the performance of the ballet has quite direct consequences for the subsequent action of the plot.

The Dancing Times provided perhaps the best gloss of the Zenobia ballet, terming it “a nightmare hodgepodge of Schéhérazade, Tamar and all other Franco-Oriental ballets of the old Imperial repertory.”58 The plot of Zenobia is indeed quite old hat, revolving around the title character’s choice of a suitor and taking place in her fantastically appointed “presentation room” in the palace, modeled on Léon Bakst’s original set for Schéhérazade. The princess is attended by a bevy of handmaidens clad in harem pants

and silky veils, who are performing a brief dance as the ballet opens. Their dance is soon interrupted by a fanfare that heralds the arrival of the three men vying for her hand: the “huge warrior-prince” Kringa Kahn, the “merchant prince” Ali Shar, and finally “an ancient prince of great wealth” Ahmud Ben B’dur, who sits down “with creaking bones and asthmatic gasps.” Soon after a fourth suitor, the “ragged beggar” Abu Ben Ghysaz, begs the trumpeters also to herald his arrival but is refused. Abu eludes the guards and rushes towards the Princess, who signals to let him remain and “shows him by her glances that her royal heart is beating fast.” The Princess then explains in pantomime to her suitors that “she expects each one of them to bring her a royal gift and that she will give her hand to the suitor whose gift she most highly prizes.” The suitors, including Abu, are then dismissed, and the Princess asks her handmaidens to leave her alone to sign and gaze into her mirror and stretch herself “languorously.” (It should be noted that the satirical names of the characters were invented for the benefit of the dancers portraying them, not the audience.)

Abu then sneaks into the chamber through a window, and tells the Princess in pantomime that, “he has nothing and so can give her nothing,” whereupon she makes it clear that, “his person is not unfavorable to her.” The two then perform a “love dance,” “in which the Princess always eludes the beggar – telling him he must wait. She flirts dangerously with him but never lets him get too far.” A parenthetical stage direction explains that during this dance, some comedic effects began to be introduced, specifically that Vera and Konstantine—*qua* their characters in *On Your Toes*—“manage to play several dirty tricks on each other but apparently try to show the audience that they are greatly in love.” When Abu pleads his love again to the Princess, she makes him the gift
of five “Nubian slaves,” which in the subsequent scene she will accept as his gift in
exchange for her hand, refusing the four dancing “Lilliputians” presented by Kringa
Kahn, “casks of jewels and silk” proffered by Ali Shar, and the “bags of money” brought
by Ahmud Ben B’dur.

During the presentation of Abu’s re-gifted Nubians, however, the metatheatrical
humor of the ballet begins in earnest, at the expense of the ballet’s newest recruit, Junior
Dolan, who has not been instructed properly in how to apply his full-body blackface
makeup, nor in the ballet’s choreography:

Abu’s slaves are presented one by one and made to stand on a small
platform. One by one each slave disrobes on the block and displays his
handsome black body. After he steps down each slave executes a simple
little dance and joins the next one. Junior is the last slave on the platform.
When he disrobes he shows a white body, for in his rush, he has forgotten
to make up the torso. The members of the ballet are shocked but they
proceed to go on with the show. Finally Junior must dance with the
others—he is always out of step, not knowing the routine.

In the end, the Princess and Abu embrace in a final tableaux, but “Junior manages to
make the picture ridiculous.” A final parenthetical stage direction reiterates the
importance of the visual gag: “We must manage in placing the ranks and formations that
the white body continually kills the effect,” evident in surviving photos of the scene
(Figure 21) Reviews also noted how this effect was quite successfully executed:

Phil Dolan III (Mr. Bolger, our hero) works his way into the Russian ballet
as a Nubian slave who didn’t Nube below his collar bone and who, when
they snatched off his cloak, disclosed his horribly pale skin surmounted by
a puss of darkest lampblack, in sharp and hilarious contrast to the other
Nubian slaves who had taken the precaution to get black down to there. 59

In the face of such antics, many reviews glossed the ballet as straightforward comedy, noting that *Zenobia* would “make it impossible for anyone to ever meet *Schéhérazade* again with a straight face.”

“*Zenobia* is sheer travesty, with both Bolger and Miss Geva provoking laughs,” noted one Boston review, and a New York *Sun* item termed it a “hilarious burlesque of Russian ballet.” *Time* magazine summarized it as a scene in which “disaster strolls implacably through a conventional ballet” and it “will make it impossible for many people ever again to take the serious Dance seriously.”

In *Zenobia*, “the ballet is on its toes, executing—in the sinister meaning of the word—*Schéhérazade*,” and was danced well enough that even “a professional pirouetter in the audience found it ever so amusing.” Dancer Fred Danieli characterized the ballet as “hilarious” and a straightforward “spoof of *Schéhérazade*.”

Despite some of its obviously comedic elements, however, Tamara Geva (Balanchine’s first wife) maintained that the *Zenobia* ballet began in a quite serious and straightforward tone, and that it was because of its very real virtuosity that the scene succeeded. (Figure 22) Geva described the duet between the Princess and Abu as a “very difficult adagio,” which “started out seriously and gradually it became a satire on the

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65 Fred Danieli Interview, *On Your Toes* Popular Balanchine Dossier, JRDD–NYPL.
(The arthritic and asthmatic third prince might seem an overly comic element at the outset of the ballet, unless he is read as a more benign *demi-caractère* figure, and thus not entirely disrupting the atmosphere of serious action.) The dancing was substantive enough at the outset and the transition to comedy so smooth that Geva recalled a startling effect: much of the audience did not always immediately get the joke. Geva recalls that the ballet “gradually became funny,” and that “the balcony recognized that it was supposed to be funny much earlier than the orchestra.” Reviews praised this aspect of the *Zenobia* ballet and noted the divergent responses of different segments of the audience. Geva’s dancing incorporated “beautiful tongue-in-cheek toe and leg work,” but her “smartest trick” was “starting off in such a low key that for a while the audience is not quite sure whether it is watching art or leg pulling.” This effect had already been achieved while the show was in previews in Boston, as one review notes that the ballet was danced, “with such intense gravity and determination that it was several minutes before the audience grasped the fact that the *Princess Zenobia* ballet was reaching heights of satirical brilliance. As it progressed, its awkward posturing and groupings, deftly blended with the most obvious, stylized choreography, assumed hilarious proportions.”

Indeed, *Zenobia* was clearly not a total joke, and owed its success to Geva’s real talent as a dancer and Balanchine’s familiarity with the style and conventions of such ballets, in which he had danced during his first year with Diaghilev. “There has been an axiom current in the theatre since some pioneering spirit carved a stage out of a hillside,”

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67 Ibid., 47.
as one review explained the situation in plain-speaking terms, “that it takes the ‘McCoy’ effectively to satirize the ‘McCoy.'”70 The Dancing Times captured some of the exact movements by which Geva burlesqued the techniques in which she was obviously proficient:

The adagio pas de deux with grotesque arabesques and purposefully off-balance pirouettes, not to mention the jeté-plié that is a confusion of gauchely behaved knees, legs, and feet, are all evidence that Miss Geva is extremely adept at satire. But, even in the midst of all the general hilarity, she cannot completely disguise the fact that she is essentially an excellent classic ballerina.71

One review of the Boston previews similarly calls the ballet “the outstanding number” of the show and “superb in its satire and in the artistry of its interpretation.”72 “Those of you who are fond of serious ballets,” noted the Herald-Tribune, “will be overjoyed by Mlle. Geva’s performance as the Princess of Zenubia [sic] in a fluent pantomime of the routine school.”73

By some accounts the ballet was almost too clever, however, and ran a certain risk by trying to have it both ways. At a time when Schéhérazade was still one of the most popular (and unironic) offerings of the de Basil troupe, not everyone immediately got the joke, which is of course the double-edged danger (and pleasure) of parody, as one reviewer warned:

If anything it seems to run the danger of shooting over the heads of its audience. Satire is a risky weapon. When, for example, Mr. Balanchine chooses to poke fun at Russian ballet, it is vastly amusing to those who have some familiarity with the subject. But until the satire became frankly

73 Percy Hammond, New York Herald, April 13, 1936 (On Your Toes Scrapbook).
burlesque, some of his audience on the opening night took it with
portentous solemnity.\textsuperscript{74}

\textit{The Dancing Times} also noted the potential for confusion, explaining that the ballet
provided “genuine amusement in exaggerated comparisons for the real balletomanes and
confusion for the uninitiated.”\textsuperscript{75} As was the case with the performances by the actual
Russian ballet companies, the most knowing and attentive fans were to be found in the
cheaper seats upstairs. This ambiguous quality of \textit{Zenobia} ballet was real enough to
spawn an intriguing item of gossip, that is, that it had even managed to fool its own
dancers. “The oddest story of the week concerns the mock ballet in the first act of \textit{On
Your Toes},” explained an item titled “Say It Ain’t So” in the \textit{Boston Post}:

\begin{quote}
In the theatre district, grapevine telegraphers solemnly say that the dancers
in that ballet didn’t know it was a burlesque till they read the papers next
day. They aver, in whispers, that the ballerinas broke down and got pretty
nearly hysterical when they discovered thus indirectly that they had been,
presumably, buncoed by their distinguished ballet master, George
Balanchine.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

This was too tall of a tale for even an anonymous theater gossip column, however, which
appended the caveat that, “It is a gorgeous story. But it doesn’t make sense.” But the fact
that such a story could be propagated to begin with speaks to the actual seriousness of the
ballet’s tone. Ray Bolger recalled, however, that such confusion among the dancers was
in evidence in the New York production as well. Because Bolger had previously seen
Pavlova and Nijinsky perform he personally “was very aware of the satire” in
Balanchine’s choreography, but he claimed that “very few of the rest of the cast were

\textsuperscript{74} Edwin F. Melvin, “Song and Dance with Humors,” \textit{Boston Evening Transcript}, March
23, 1936 (\textit{On Your Toes} Scrapbook).
\textsuperscript{75} Russell Rhodes, “Burlesquing the ‘Ballets Russes,’” \textit{DT}, June 1936, 282.
\textsuperscript{76} “Say It Isn’t So,” \textit{Boston Post}, April 5, 1936 (\textit{On Your Toes} Scrapbook).
aware of it.” At opening night in Boston, moreover, Bolger recalls that Geva herself was upset at the laughter from the audience, and that the crowd was split equally between those who found the ballet humorous and those who sat in attentive silence. After a Boston critic praised Geva’s comic abilities, she demanded of Balanchine the next day, “George! Where are my laffs? I want my laffs!”

Regardless of who may or may not have been in on the joke on stage or off, all of this is to suggest that the *Zenobia* ballet might better be regarded as less of an incidental dance for *On Your Toes*—as it is currently labeled in the *Balanchine Catalogue*—and more of a work in its own right, and quite “integrated” not just with the plot of *On Your Toes* but with Balanchine’s general creative interests at the time. The ballet was comparable in scale and seriousness at the very least to *The Bat*, itself a well-received confection of another set of artistic conventions. In light of the descriptions of *Orpheus* noted above, moreover, the twenty-minute *Zenobia* likely contained more actual ballet technique (and dancing on pointe) than the whole of the dance-intensive opera production. One photo of the Princess with her dancers shows them swirling in another of Balanchine’s signature swirling formations, much like the “Dance of the Blessed Spirits.” (Figure 23) *Zenobia* had another resemblance to *Orpheus*, however, insofar as the duet between the Princess and Abu, in which the woman is construed as an object always just out of reach, recalls the artist-and-elusive-muse conceit behind *Orpheus* (which would be foregrounded yet again in *Slaughter*).

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78 Ibid., 156.
79 Ibid.
Even more tantalizing is an example of how *Zenobia* may have stayed with Balanchine long enough to be reused for his own satirical purposes not at the “Cosmopolitan,” but at the Metropolitan for a 1938 production of *Aida*. Balanchine’s dances for *Aida* had been among his most contested work for the opera during the American Ballet’s three-year tenure, with many patrons complaining about their overly sensual nature, specifically that there was too much “*danse du ventre.*” By the spring of 1938 the situation had deteriorated enough that the dances were cheekily labeled in programs as “after Marius Petipa” in order to placate the management and audiences, something that Balanchine and Kirstein openly bragged about after the fact. One such dance for April 1938 performances of *Aida* credits a “Ballet Group”—in contrast to the credit for the “American Ballet Ensemble”—for the Moorish dance in Act 2, scene 1, more specifically labeled a “Negro Dance.” Recollections by dancers suggest that this number was if not directly inspired by than at least loosely modeled on the *Zenobia* ballet in its style and perhaps intentionally comic execution. “Instead of having darling little children in *Aida*’s court, he put the six tallest men in the ballet and had them blackened,” recalled Ruby Asquith, “and the audiences were horrified.”

What is more, the very tall (and very white) Lew and Harold Christensen recalled that they never had the opportunity to rehearse this number in their full body paint, and thus were unable to recognize each other in the actual performance, which led to a certain amount of on-stage scrambling. Given Balanchine’s bitterness towards the Met by this point, it is not difficult to imagine that he would reach into his musical comedy files to send up his uncongenial professional situation, and perhaps even intentionally set up his blackened

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80 Quoted in Sowell, *The Christensen Brothers*, 110.
81 Ibid.
male dancers to present an inadvertent comedy routine in the presentation chamber of Amneris, a joke that unlike *Zenobia*, few members of the audience, if any, would have been in on.

4. “On Your Toes” and Balanchine’s Racial Imagination

Unlike *Zenobia* and *Slaughter*, the “On Your Toes” number does not boast a fully realized libretto, and its details are preserved instead in descriptions from reviews and dancers’ memories. Generally speaking, however, the number’s dancing, lyrics, and music, and the way all these elements are framed by the plot, reveal the number as an *ars poetica* for the show, appropriate enough for a title song. “On Your Toes” is an *ars poetica* of another sort, however, allowing us to read between the lines for elements of the analysis and critique articulated by Banes and Dixon-Gottschild regarding Balanchine’s incorporation of black dance forms. For “On Your Toes” foregrounds the very process by which anonymous creative work can be quickly assimilated and transformed by official authors and creators. Through its juxtaposition of lowbrow popular song and popular dance forms with musical composition and ballet choreography, the number stages the way in which the contributions of “collaborating” individuals are rendered invisible, especially when such contributors are female or black. Much like *Zenobia*, moreover, “On Your Toes” can be understood as more than “incidental” with respect to Balanchine’s creative output, for it was in fact a serendipitous outlet for ideas that he had long been pondering on his own regarding the mixing of popular and classical dance, and more crucially, black and white dancers.
The character Frankie Frayne is established from her first appearance in *On Your Toes* as an accomplished songwriter, although her work is dismissed and derided by Junior as substandard popular fare. “Miss Frayne has sold another song,” Junior announces to his music class, praise that he immediately qualifies, however, with the caveat that it is “a catchy tune…but cheap.” Junior feels the same way about a second song Frankie is working on, calling it “not exactly bad” but more fatally, “unimportant.” The foil for Frankie’s frivolous style is the aspiring “composer” Sidney Cohn—a man, of course—a figure who might be understood to stand in for George Gershwin (or Richard Rodgers *qua* the actual composer of *Slaughter*) in the musical’s *roman-à-clef*. Like Frankie, Sidney is proficient and conversant in Tin Pan Alley idioms, but unlike her he possesses additional “higher” compositional aspirations, specifically his quest to compose his “jazz ballet.” “Is that the song you played for me yesterday?” Sidney asks Frankie as she walks away dejected, clutching the sheet music of her “cheap little thing.” Sidney tells Junior that he’s “crazy” to dismiss the song and assures Frankie that “it’s a honey.”

Soon after the audience is allowed to judge for itself, as Frankie and Junior perform her work-in-progress, “It’s Got To Be Love,” an upbeat ditty that catalogs the various unimportant indignities that might be mistaken for love, whether “tonsillitis” and “neuritis,” or “fallen arches” and “too many starches.”

A comparable dynamic provides the set up for the “On Your Toes” number in the second act, though here the damage done to Frankie is more consequential than hurt feelings, not that she complains. Frankie has written a third song—a level of productivity that one would think would earn her some unqualified praise—which she again asks Junior to provide feedback on. Sidney again vouches for the song’s quality (calling it a
“piperoo”) and hands it to the rehearsal pianist, who begins playing. Despite his initial misgivings that it sounds “cheap” like her previous song, Junior in the end is forced to admit that he likes it, and that “it might be a very effective number in the theatre.” Sidney and Junior then set to imagine how Frankie’s humble tune could be realized with a full orchestra, with their brainstorm bringing forth an immediate realization by the actual instruments:

Sidney: I’d start the melody on two pianos – I can almost hear it –

(Two pianos start to play.)

Then I’d sneak in a solo trumpet.

(Trumpet picks up.)

Then the traps softly.

(Traps using fly swatter.)

Junior: (Entering the spirit.)

Excellent. And then the fiddles would have a counter melody.

(Fiddles begin to play)

This process continues until the song begins in earnest with the full orchestra, and thus constitutes a pedagogical moment for both Frankie and the audience, educating them on how a “good” number is put together. But sadly, Frankie lacks the authorization or ability to contribute to such a realization herself and is instead a passive bystander as the boys go to town improving her “cheap” little number. She is permitted to get in on the action only when it is time for her to sing, thus placing herself in an appropriate role for a woman, as a contained “canary,” as the typically female singer fronting an ensemble was condescendingly termed. What is more, it is the lowbrow female songwriter who
articulates her own message about striving for something higher. Frankie’s buoyantly syncopated and playfully chromatic melody frequently attains one of its highest pitches on the word “up,” but not before resting for twice as long on a blue note just before:

See the pretty apple, top of the tree,
The higher up, the sweeter it grows.
Picking fruit you’ve got to be
Up on your toes!

See the pretty penthouse, top of the roof,
The higher up, the higher rent goes.
Get that dough, don’t be a goof;
Up on your toes!

They climb the clouds
To come through with airmail.
The dancing crowds
Look up to some rare male
Like that Astaire male.

See the pretty lady, top of the crop.
You want to know the way the wind blows?
Then, my boy, you’d better hop
Up on your toes!
Up on your toes!

Although he did not remember any details of the routine, dancer Fred Danieli described the “On Your Toes” number as using a double dancing chorus of sixteen tap dancers and sixteen ballet dancers (each divided equally between men and women) and that the sequences were “exciting” and “audiences loved ‘em.”82 Along with Zenobia and Slaughter, reviews singled out “On Your Toes” as one of the show’s most memorable scenes, both musically and choreographically. Audiences “will remember for a long time the imaginative and intriguing presentation of the title song, with the composer of the American ballet explaining how he would orchestrate the number” and the

“choreographic accompaniment to this tune brings out the show’s full force of ballet and

82 Fred Danieli Interview, 37.
tap dancers in a breathlessly exciting routine.”

Burns Mantle said that the “scene in which the young promoters vision the successful orchestration and execution of Slaughter on Tenth Avenue, and the final showing of the ballet itself are, I think, as exciting as any that have been done recently.”

The Dancing Times describes how the number effected a creative blending of the contrasting styles of ballet and tap, while using a uniform musical tempo:

Far more ingenious than his burlesque [Princess Zenobia] is the “On Your Toes” number in which Balanchine, to some lively music by Richard Rodgers, enlivens the stage by the unusual spectacle of fast-stepping Tap dancers alternating with a group doing classical ballet routine. The tempo never changes. One group follows another and at times both are on the stage simultaneously, the one hopping and “shagging” in syncopation, while a whirl of pirouettes, toe dancing and elevations represent the other.

The effect is exciting, a fine show of grace, rhythmic movement that is kaleidoscopic with the change of lights on costumes and amazing variety in choreographic pattern.

Balanchine did not come up with such effects on his own, as for On Your Toes he benefited from the talents and consultation of tap dancer Herbert Harper. That Harper’s status was subordinate is evident first and foremost in official credit for the final show, as an “assistant to Mr. Balanchine,” whereas the “choreography” was credited to Balanchine alone.

(Balanchine also benefited from the assistance of William Dollar for the musical’s ballet choreography, and Dollar was accorded an “assistant” credit identical to Harper’s.) Kirstein’s diaries recount a brief interaction with a man who could have been Harper in early March, and his recollections characterize him in subservient and indeed

83 Helen Eager, Boston Traveler, March 23, 1936 (On Your Toes Scrapbook).
86 On Your Toes playbill from Imperial Theater, dated August 17, 1936, *MGZB Programs, On Your Toes, NYPL.
87 Ibid.
even minstrel-like terms. Kirstein saw Balanchine “give instructions” to an unnamed “negro assistant,” whom he recalls as a “nice boy,” though Kirstein himself was all of twenty-eight at the time. Even more intriguing, Kirstein recalls that this assistant’s speech fell into stereotypical idioms: “Mr. B is sure the cleverest man he’s ever seen and everyone sure does love him and how he no kidding wished he were like Mr. Balanchine.”

Danieli maintained that “Balanchine always liked tap” and that he and Harper “collaborated” to devise the number, describing Harper as a “very good tap teacher.” Dancer Grace Houston Case, who performed under the stage name Grace Kaye, recalled differently that Harper was recruited to assist Balanchine after rehearsals had already begun, in response to the choreographer’s lack of expertise or interest in tap dancing:

Balanchine had no great respect for tap dancers. He had to tolerate the hoofers because he was on Broadway. Balanchine choreographed the show. Harper was a tap teacher; he worked in a studio off Broadway somewhere, and taught a lot of people who wanted routines or private classes. Two more unlikely choreographers you couldn’t imagine in the same show. I got the impression that Balanchine didn’t want to work with tap dancers and said get me someone to work with them. So they hired Herbie, and he came. Herbie wasn’t there right at the beginning.

Despite some initial antipathy to the form, Balanchine nevertheless treated the tap dancers with a gentility and respect that they were not accustomed to:

He had a way of staging the numbers even if it was tap. I had never had a choreographer take me by the hand and lead me by the fingertips into a group and then into another group; he led you with the hand, instead of shouting “give me line-ups, get the lead out, let’s go” over that PA system

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88 LK Diaries, March 3, 1936.  
89 Ibid.  
90 Fred Danieli Interview, 37.  
91 Grace Houston Case Interview, On Your Toes Popular Balanchine Dossier, JRDD–NYPL.
they shouted through; that was how they usually talked to us. Balanchine came in as though he were in *Swan Lake*.92

It was through these personal touches that Balanchine in part “integrated ballet into tap,” as Case recalled. In contrast to the militaristic way in which she was used to being ordered around during her time as a Rockette, Balanchine treated her and her fellow hoofers like his own ballet dancers.

Aside from establishing a more refined atmosphere in rehearsal, Balanchine combined ballet and tap in more literal ways in the “On Your Toes” number. Case recalled “arm waving and a kind of ballet turn” in one of her routines, and that even though they were tap dancing “there was a lot of arm work.” Case also recalls the complexity and swiftness of the number in general:

> We worked in groups of two, three, and four dancers; the whole thing was movement to a very, very fast arrangement, Broadway music. [Balanchine] would take a group of four across the stage; then a group of six would appear; then four, very quickly on and then off the stage; that’s how he kept it moving. It was a very successful number. A fast number to wake up the audience, with forty dancers on stage.93

Case further describes a “breaking up” of the ballet and tap combinations, which she recalls as especially innovative and interesting about the choreography.

Although the musical had an all-white cast, other evidence suggests that above and beyond Harper’s direct involvement, black dancing and dancers influenced the “On Your Toes” number in more diffuse ways as well. As noted above, the underlying concept for *On Your Toes* the musical did not originate with Balanchine himself, having been conceived of by Rodgers and Hart many years before, and the choreographer was engaged for the show through his agent “Doc” Bender, who was also Hart’s

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92 Ibid.  
93 Ibid.
representative at the time. Numerous statements attributed to Balanchine during his early years in the United States, however, reveal how his interests had been tending in the direction of crossover dance numbers on the model of “On Your Toes” long before his work on the musical, with black dancers, in particular black women, foremost in his mind. As noted in Chapter 1, during one of their initial conversations about founding a ballet school and company in the United States, Balanchine had told Kirstein that he wanted to train a racially diverse cadre of students. “For the first,” Kirstein wrote to Chick Austin of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Balanchine would admit “4 white girls and 4 white boys, about sixteen y[ear]s old and 8 of the same, negros [sic].” This idea evidently arose from the primitivist fancy of Balanchine, who as Kirstein’s letter elaborates, “thinks the negro part would be amazingly supple … They have so much abandon—and disciplined they would be nonpareil.”

Black dancers continued to occupy Balanchine’s creative imagination in the following years. Kirstein records in his diary that in November 1933, only weeks after arriving in America, Balanchine declared that, “it w[oul]d be fine to do a classical ballet with negresses in tutus of gold and silver pailletes and white bodices.” In a January 1934 interview with critic Arnold Haskell published in Balletomania, Balanchine articulated his interest in mixing black and white dancers in contrasting styles, describing “the effect that would be produced by six Negresses dancing on their pointes and six white girls doing a frenzied jazz!” These statements suggest that Balanchine had independently arrived at the central conceit of the “On Your Toes” number several years

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94 Kirstein to Austin, July 16, 1933, in Mason, I Remember Balanchine, 116.
95 LK Diaries, November 7, 1933.
96 Haskell, Balletomania, Then and Now, 98.
before Rodgers and Hart’s musical, with an explicitly racial dimension ascribed to the encounter of ballet and popular dancing. What is more, in January 1936, just as *On Your Toes* was beginning production, Balanchine had just completed his first work for the *Ziegfeld Follies*, for which his duties had included a “West Indies” dance starring Josephine Baker and a separate number called “Sentimental Weather” starring white tap dancer Duke McHale (a star of Balanchine’s next Rodgers and Hart show, *Babes in Arms*). All of which serves to suggest that the despite its all-white cast and lack of any literal engagement with questions of race, the “On Your Toes” number offers evidence of the abiding influence of black dancers on Balanchine’s creative output. And regardless of Balanchine’s authorial control of the ultimate form and content of “On Your Toes,” the number shows that his popular projects had the potential to be more than merely work for hire, but an actual outlet, however serendipitous, for his own creative imaginings.

This dimension of “On Your Toes” is even more important given the way the number serves to realize the larger ambitions claimed for *On Your Toes* the musical noted at the outset. It is the prestige of ballet, and in particular modern Russian ballet, that most crucially helps elevate the show, and indeed, dancing on pointe provides an implicit metaphor of aspiration in *On Your Toes*. Through the *Zenobia* ballet the musical showed that it could master “real” ballet, if only to send it up and render it ridiculous. But it is the “On Your Toes” number, in which ballet and jazz dance are juxtaposed—and, as Case recalled, somewhat hybridized—that serves as the transitional object to make possible the real fusion of ballet and jazz—both musically and choreographically—of *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*. To understand how this creative allegory concludes we must now turn to

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97 *Balanchine Catalogue.*
Slaughter, the culminating number of the musical’s plot and the consummating moment of its metatheatrical ambitions.

5. Balanchine’s “Modernistic Ballet”—Slaughter on Tenth Avenue

Slaughter on Tenth Avenue was remounted by Balanchine as a standalone work for the New York City Ballet in 1968 and remains in the company’s repertory to this day. Although it might be tempting to read this reconstructed exemplar as bearing witness to the original, Geva maintains that the 1968 version bears little resemblance to the one she danced in 1936, and Balanchine himself never claimed the later Slaughter as an authentic version in any strict sense. In one interview, Geva identifies only one sequence as having survived the intervening years, when the woman is dragged back by the hoofer. Geva’s main quarrel with the newer Slaughter does not center on choreographic fidelity, however, but rather the fact that the newer ballet is played for laughs. “It has nothing to do with the first. Absolutely not a thing,” Geva maintained of the later Slaughter: “It’s a joke. The other one wasn’t a joke at all. It was quite serious and it ended up with shooting, and dead people. I was killed at the end.” Reviews confirm that Slaughter was indeed received as serious, especially in contrast to the partially tongue-in-cheek Zenobia. A review in Cue noted that how the ballet did indeed mark something new in Broadway theater, that “the show turns serious for a moment at

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98 Slaughter also survives in two film versions, in the 1937 On Your Toes movie starring Vera Zorina and the 1948 film Words and Music (danced by Gene Kelly and Vera-Ellen). Although the 1937 film was overseen by Balanchine its version of Slaughter is not regarded as a definitive rendering of the original stage dance.

99 Rethinking the Balanchine Legacy, interview with Tamara Geva, conducted by Constance Valis Hill, *MGZIC 9-3945, cassette two, JRDD–NYPL, hereafter Rethinking the Balanchine Legacy interview.

100 Tamara Geva Interview, 47.
the end to demonstrate that ballet can be pretty exciting in a musical show setting."\textsuperscript{101} A color photo-illustration in \textit{Vogue} captures some of this dramatic tone of the ballet (Figure 24) and other photos show the dark nightclub setting where it was set (Figure 25).

Although serious business in its original form, \textit{Slaughter} was not without crowd-pleasing elements, however. The \textit{New York Post} said it could not be denied, “that real tension as well as genuine comedy abounds in the \textit{Slaughter on Tenth Avenue} ballet which concludes the program.”\textsuperscript{102} Geva recalls the opening of the ballet as a “Gypsy Rose Lee” striptease, in which she ended up in only nude body tights, with three small American flags strategically placed for the sake of modesty.\textsuperscript{103} (Lee was then a featured performer in the \textit{Ziegfeld Follies}, as advertised in an \textit{On Your Toes} playbill.\textsuperscript{104}) After a thirty-second costume change, it was then a tour de force to the end, and not to be taken lightly:

\begin{displayquote}
All I can tell you—I can’t explain the steps—but it was a dramatic performance, something that made people sit there and never laugh. And it wasn’t high kicks or anything like this. There were very interesting combinations we did. This third man was involved, George Church, who was very powerful who could toss anybody like mad. He was carrying me and doing very interesting things.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{displayquote}

\textit{Slaughter} was also an outlet for Balanchine’s penchant for experimentation with strategically chosen props, in this case a bottle, as Geva recalls:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\textsuperscript{101}] Herbert Drake, “The Stage: On Your Toes,” \textit{Cue}, April 18, 1936 (\textit{On Your Toes} Scrapbook).
\item[\textsuperscript{102}] John Mason Brown, \textit{New York Post}, April 13, 1936 (\textit{On Your Toes} Scrapbook).
\item[\textsuperscript{103}] Geva mentions the striptease in both interviews cited above, but mentions the American flag pasties only in the later Rethinking the Balanchine Legacy interview with Hill.
\item[\textsuperscript{104}] \textit{On Your Toes} playbill from Imperial Theater, dated August 17, 1936, *MGZB Programs, \textit{On Your Toes}, NYPL.
\item[\textsuperscript{105}] Tamara Geva Interview, 48.
\end{footnotes}
There was one moment when Ray Bolger and I, in the third part of it, we were discovered at the bar. Then we started this kind of love duet and we had a bottle with us. The bottle passed from one hand to another while we were dancing in such a way that he never knew where the bottle was going, but it was always in somebody’s hands. You know, George is a master of things like this. He can take that and do absolutely magic—and people started applauding! Here we were dancing, he was behind me somehow and in front of me, and around, and the bottle was sometimes in his hand, sometimes around my neck, it traveled constantly as we danced. It was marvelously done.¹⁰⁶

Geva is quick to defend such “gimmicks,” which in fact echo Balanchine’s use of props elsewhere, whether the table of Prodigal Son, the hoop in Reminiscence, or soon after the opening of On Your Toes, the giant wings of The Bat: “They are gimmicks, but they are very good! I think that there is nothing against gimmicks if it enhances.”¹⁰⁷

Scott McMillin in The Musical as Drama cites Slaughter as an instance of another technique, if not a gimmick, of musical comedy, that is, the way that the completion of a number, often a virtuosic dance number, represents as a triumphant turning point in the show’s action. “The drama focuses on the challenge of completing the number,” he explains, “and at that point, the completion of a song or dance may become a turning point in the book, perhaps the turning point of the book.”¹⁰⁸ As a realization of Sidney Cohn and Peggy Porterfield’s artistic ambitions, the performance of Slaughter certainly fits this bill in a certain respect. But the ballet is also premised on the peril of completing a number too soon: Junior keeps dancing at the end of Slaughter to stave off his own imminent demise, as the gangsters in the audience are waiting for the audience’s applause to cover the sound of their gunshots, in a “hit” arranged by Konstantine, his rival for

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
Vera’s affections. Junior “frantically extends his final routine,” in McMillin’s words, “dancing to gain time until the police arrive and save him from disaster,” and although the dancing is “sensational,” the plot device that occasions it is “daft.” In similar terms, Ethan Mordden has questioned the premise by which Slaughter is truly “integrated” into the plot, claiming that most of the ballet is peripheral to the action of the show, and only at the end does the dance begin to assert a real role in the musical’s action as Dolan attempts to save his own life.109

If the “integrated” status of Slaughter will always remain open to some debate, there was little doubt about the effect the ballet had on its original audiences, and this was powerful and even terrifying. Reviews confirm Geva’s recollections that Slaughter was indeed serious business, and that Ray Bolger as Junior was understood to be truly dancing for his life:

[Dolan’s] time came when one of his pupils wrote a ballet about the murder of a Tenth Ave. gangster, a lurid item, which works the show to its climax and Mr. Bolger into a state bordering, I should think, on collapse. It takes up the greater part of the last act, and it is rendered dramatic not only by the dance itself (designed admirably by Mr. Balanchine), but by the fact that the two gunmen plan to shoot Phil Dolan III from a stage box. Mr. Dolan’s girl friend saves his life in a way too satisfactory to mention.110

In the “On Your Toes” number the chorus took the audience on a breezy tour of the richer and poorer areas of the metropolis, singing of “those who dwell / In Richmond Hill and New Rochelle / In Chelsea or / In Sutton Place.” Slaughter, by contrast played out in the then seedy part of the city still affectionately termed Hell’s Kitchen. Despite its lurid

theme, the ballet and Bolger’s full-out dancing inspired an unambiguous ovation for its more Sutton Place opening night audience:

The episode which caused an uproar Saturday night at the Imperial was called *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*. In it Mr. Bolger danced frenetically because he had been told that if he ceased his activities he would be shot by villains sitting in an upper box. While these sinister figures, lit up by green spotlights, threatened him with destruction, Mr. Bolger danced desperately, beginning with jazz’s simple single taps, thence proceeding to triple hoof-beats and flights of soaring. [...] They cast off their furs and gave vent to heated approbation.\(^{111}\)

Bolger similarly recalled the genuine desperation that his dancing was meant to convey, and how his physical exhaustion and endurance was a great part of the drama of the scene:

You’ve got to do a step. You’ve got to jump up. You’ve got to keep dancing. You’ve been on for fifteen minutes. You’ve been doing this thing and you’ve had a fight and you’ve leaped over the bar. You’ve done all of the acrobatic kinds of things that you do in this sort of ballet. And I still had to live. “I want to live. And if I stop dancing they’re gonna shoot!”\(^{112}\)

In this light, *Slaughter* can be understood as a second, if less literal parody of *Schéhérazade* in *On Your Toes*. In the tale that inspired Rimsky-Korsakov’s score and Fokine’s ballet, the captured princess must keep spinning off tales to stave off her execution. In *Slaughter* it is dancing instead of storytelling that must be prolonged for survival. This serious dimension of *Slaughter* thus serves to obliquely remind of the real terror at the heart of the Schéhérazade story itself—as well as the ballet it inspired, which culminates in an orgy of violence—a quality all too easily obscured by the ballet’s orientalist haze. This side of *Slaughter* also throws into more serious relief the more


\(^{112}\) Ray Bolger in Mason, *I Remember Balanchine*, 156.
American “scene of subjection” (in the formulation of Saidiya Hartman\textsuperscript{113}) that makes possible the comedic disintegration of the *Zenobia* ballet itself: the black bodies—more precisely, white bodies in blackface—that are exchanged in an untroubled manner between the Princess and Abu.

*Slaughter* was also seen to have made good on the ambitions that Junior, Sidney, and Porterfield articulated for the ballet in the context of a plot. Numerous critics saw *Slaughter* as a thoroughly authentic and quite successful “modern ballet”\textsuperscript{114} or “modernistic ballet”\textsuperscript{115} in an American idiom. A Boston review said the “modernistic ballet, *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, is most amazing with both [Geva and Bolger] dancing remarkably well,”\textsuperscript{116} a sentiment echoed by the *Hollywood Reporter*, which said “the modernistic ballet” was “one of the finest musical and choreographic numbers ever presented,” and was thus surely being scouted for the silver screen.\textsuperscript{117} Ray Bolger was praised as “one of our finest modern dancers, admirable in technique, execution and imagination.”\textsuperscript{118} That only an American dancer such as Bolger could have pulled off such a hybrid work, moreover, was also articulated in the book itself. Junior is recruited to play the lead in the ballet only after it becomes evident that the Russian Konstantine is unable to figure out the unexpected rhythms of the music.

What is more, *Slaughter* was seen as having the potential to hold its own outside of the context of the musical itself. A review in *Cue* said that *Slaughter* “brings down the house with frenzy approximating the ritual bravos, bis’s and delirium of the confirmed balletomane”\(^{119}\) and was also praised as “a triumph of rhythm and alacrity over the static romance of Times Square comic opera.”\(^{120}\) Above and beyond *Zenobia*, the ballet was “an even more impressive theatrical miracle,” in the estimation of *Time* magazine, and it “would probably evoke an ovation from modernists anywhere outside *On Your Toes*.”\(^{121}\) The *Brooklyn Eagle* thus saw the ballet as evidence of an even larger achievement, the creation of an American ballet idiom that could hold its own with the Russians:

Ray Bolger is the chief dancer, American from tip to toe, and no doubt it was Mr. Balanchine’s idea that with such dancers as he extant in the country we can have striking ballets of our own. *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* is the answer, an answer more than adequate. We have had that answer before but never previously has it been given so great a prominence, the ultimate effect of a whole show based upon it.\(^{122}\)

Gilbert Seldes saw *Zenobia* and *Slaughter* as the distinct highlights of the show, and cited them explicitly as evidence that American dance had come into its own, thanks to the talents of Bolger and the catholicity of Balanchine’s creative imagination. In *Zenobia* the dancer was “almost unbearably funny” and in the second revealed himself to be “as fine a dancer as any native or imported star we have seen,” a formulation that Seldes immediately emends: “As fine? Better than. George Balanchine, who directs the dancers of the American Ballet School, has managed to create a brilliant burlesque and a brilliant

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\(^{119}\) Herbert Drake, “The Stage: *On Your Toes,*” *Cue*, April 18, 1936 (*On Your Toes Scrapbook*).

\(^{120}\) Percy Hammond, *New York Herald*, April 13, 1936 (*On Your Toes Scrapbook*).

\(^{121}\) “New Play in Manhattan,” *Time*, April 20, 1936 (*On Your Toes Scrapbook*).

ballet at the same time.” Indeed, the *Brooklyn Eagle* reviewer’s double-edged praise of *On Your Toes* implies that the musical represented a temporary step “up” for Balanchine, having taken him briefly away from “his activities with the amateurs of his American ballet.” In stark contrast to the offerings of the American Ballet, *Slaughter* proved that Americans—in this case Ray Bolger, in both his guises as “a jazz Nijinsky, an Astaire in mufti”—were capable of matching and even surpassing the likes of the de Basil troupe, thus earning the praise that Balanchine and Kirstein had yet to conclusively earn for their “real” American Ballet.

Much like the dynamics between Frankie, Junior, and Sidney, and the contributions of Herbie Harper and the tap-dancers of the “On Your Toes” number, *Slaughter* also represented a notable moment of creative exchange and encounter between Balanchine and Ray Bolger, who like his character Junior Dolan was a representative of the Irish Broadway strain of tap dancing. Bolger recalled fondly the process by which he and Balanchine collaborated on *Slaughter*, in particular how the choreographer sensed the “innocence of my character,” and as a result had him and Geva avoid actual physical contact for their duets. For the virtuosic finale of the ballet, in which Junior is dancing for his life, Bolger was allowed free rein to invent his own steps:

> When it came to the end of the ballet, where I had to do my own thing, I did a lot of eccentric jumping up steps, anything that I liked, a hodgepodge. Nothing really had any form to it. I was trying to avoid any

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126 On Bolger’s background and career see Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 149–50.
form, to make it look like it was pure desperation. [...] That was the end, and Balanchine just let me go.\textsuperscript{127}

Though Bolger was not credited as the official choreographer of these steps, he did get to assert his authorship through his solo performance on stage, in contrast to Harper and the other dancers of the chorus, whose ideas were incorporated into the larger whole without an opportunity for them to reassert their ownership. Bolger did suspect that Balanchine took something away from such encounters, though he was not quite sure what it was:

> What Broadway taught Balanchine I don’t know. Perhaps it taught him something besides Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Some of these things come from America. When you look at his modern ballets, you can see that Balanchine loved, adored, and worshiped such things. Hoedowns would be wonderful things to Balanchine. There was no jealousy in his body. His American works have been magnificent. You can see great study and thought behind them. The man is a lesson, a lesson how to work, how to study, how to never let yourself down.\textsuperscript{128}

As Bolger states, it is impossible to say conclusively what Balanchine “took away” from Broadway, or who precisely he may have taken it from, or what he in turn gave back to the dancers he worked with. In the absence of contemporary recollections from Balanchine himself, his dances for \textit{On Your Toes} provide a window into his creative development at the time. In later years he would indeed tackle explicitly American themes in his ballets, whether in the western folk tunes of \textit{Western Symphony} (1954) or the Sousa marches of \textit{Stars and Stripes} (1958). In one notable instance he combined American square dancing with a medley of Vivaldi’s concertos, complete with a “caller” announcing the steps (\textit{Square Dance}, 1957). In the meantime, four years after \textit{On Your Toes}, after he had spent even more time on Broadway and also made several Hollywood films, he would return to Bach’s Concerto for Two Violins, hearing in the insistent

\textsuperscript{127} Ray Bolger in Mason, \textit{I Remember Balanchine}, 155–6.
\textsuperscript{128} Ray Bolger in Mason, \textit{I Remember Balanchine}, 158.
rhythms and brilliant counterpoint of the score the energetic tapping of by then not so new American home.

6. Postscript: On Your Toes, Orpheus, and the American Ballet

The foregoing chapter on the American Ballet’s ill-fated Orpheus, the success of On Your Toes, and the intervening interlude of Draper’s Bach ballet thus offers another example of how the dominant historiographies of Balanchine’s life and the early history of New York City Ballet have obscured much of what is most compelling about his early years in the United States. Far from a bold artistic statement dismissed by a conservative public, Orpheus represented yet another half-hearted essay in “Riviera aesthetics” for which the American Ballet had already been criticized on multiple occasions, and thus its negative reception should hardly be regarded as shocking. And it was, ironically, in the context of one of Balanchine’s alleged side projects, not any official undertaking of the American Ballet, that the choreographer successfully achieved what the organization had first attempted with Alma Mater, and what Kirstein would subsequently attempt to replicate with Ballet Caravan soon after in the summer of 1936.

Indeed, it is tantalizing to imagine what might have been had the American Ballet’s debut performances in 1934 and 1935— not to mention their popular season at the Metropolitan— resembled the dances of On Your Toes more than the repertoire of Les Ballets 1933. Instead of ineffectively attempting to outdo the de Basil company with ambitious cross-country tours and Europhilia such as Errante or Dreams, they could have wowed the New York public with their simultaneous mastery and deconstruction of the “Russian turkeys” of the Ballets Russes. A spectacular mash-up of ballet and tap like “On
Your Toes,” with or without Paul Draper, would have certainly made headlines and attracted audiences, with the added benefit of exemplifying in practice the fusion of the Old and New worlds so longed-for by Kirstein in theory. And as the musical’s reviewers noted, a work such as Slaughter could have stood on its own as a satisfying “modern ballet,” with an aspirational new score by an American composer, sexy plot, and gritty urban setting.

That it is easier to imagine such a scenario with the more comprehensive hindsight of history of course goes without saying. But it is less clear as to why such an alternative view has not been pondered even as a theoretical possibility. This is perhaps less surprising given the neoclassical gauze through which we are accustomed to viewing Serenade, and the disbelief with which many have glossed critiques of the company’s early performances, whether of the Adelphi debut or Orpheus. It almost goes without saying that such an alternative history more readily accommodates the contribution of its overlooked collaborators, whether the fictional Frankie Frayne or the real-life Herbie Harper. But this sort of alternative view is possible only when we consider the multifaceted activities of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise in their unruly entirety, not parcelled out for discrete analysis along generic, institutional, or disciplinary lines.

Indeed, we can learn much from what we would today label the “crossover” sensibility of artists such as Balanchine, all of whose American dances were in obvious and fruitful dialogue from the very start.
Figure 20: Knickerbocker University scene, *MGZB On Your Toes Souvenir Program, 1936, Music Division–NYPL.
Figure 21: Junior and Nubian slaves, *Princess Zenobia* ballet, *MGZR Clippings On Your Toes*, MD–NYPL.
Figure 22: Princess Zenobia ballet, *MGZB On Your Toes Souvenir Program, 1936, MD–NYPL.
Figure 23: *Princess Zenobia* ballet, *MGZR Clippings On Your Toes*, MD–NYPL.
Figure 24: *Slaughter* photo-illustration from *Vogue*, *MGZR Clippings On Your Toes*, MD–NYPL.
Figure 25: Slaughter set, *MGZR Clippings On Your Toes, MD–NYPL.
Chapter 7

The American Ballet’s Caravan

In accounts of the early years of the ballet enterprise of George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, one institutional predecessor of the New York City Ballet (NYCB) has come to be treated as a more independent organization, operating separately if concurrently alongside the American Ballet and School of American Ballet. “Ballet Caravan” has earned this special status on the one hand due to the special leadership role that Kirstein played in its formation and management, and on the other owing to the distinctly American agenda of its aesthetic program, both of which distinguished it from its parent organization. “Meanwhile,” as Nancy Reynolds introduces the Caravan in her narrative of the pre-history of NYCB, “to provide summer employment, a group of twelve [dancers] organized a touring ensemble called Ballet Caravan,” stressing its simultaneity with the work of the American Ballet.1 “Kirstein immediately became interested,” she continues, “and began providing scenarios, composers, and scene designers; with his encouragement, the subject matter was mainly American.”2 In an anthology of Kirstein’s writings, Reynolds recounts a comparable story in prefatory remarks to two articles on the company.3 Lynn Garafola has similarly described the

1 Reynolds, Repertory in Review, 34.
2 Ibid.
3 “In 1936, to give his dancers summer employment—and to test a thesis about “American” ballet—Kirstein formed Ballet Caravan, a company of twelve. The idea was that a group of American dancers would perform new repertory based on American subject matter, with choreography, scores, and decors commissioned from American artists.” Nancy Reynolds, prefatory remarks to Lincoln Kirstein, “Our Ballet and Our

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Caravan as a “short-lived chamber company founded by Lincoln Kirstein,” and “an experiment in creating a repertory that was American in theme and modernist in form.”

Kirstein himself stressed his central role in the Caravan’s organization, first in his 1938 pamphlet *Blast at Ballet* and later in *Thirty Years*, his diary-style history of NYCB:

> Early in 1936 it had come to me that, all else failing, I had best attempt to form some sort of company by myself. [...] I decided to organize a small troupe on my own and call it Ballet Caravan. It would be self-sufficient, using a dozen of our best dancers, who would also serve as stage managers and stagehands. We could travel by bus and truck with our own lighting equipment, portable switchboard, drapes, and bits of scenery.

This chapter revisits the genesis and first season of Ballet Caravan to show how the troupe was not entirely conceived in such independent and determinative terms and was by no means a thoroughly American-focused endeavor in its inception. This new history of the Caravan’s origins draws upon journalistic accounts of the company’s first season, archival materials related to its performances, as well as Kirstein’s diaries and correspondence. These sources reveal not just the contradictions in Kirstein’s own accounts of the Caravan, but most important, they change our understanding of the troupe’s initial relationship with the American Ballet. By no means a dancer-driven...

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6 Kirstein, *Blast at Ballet*, 41–8, discussed below.
7 Kirstein, *Thirty Years*, 68.
8 In addition to the works by Garafola and Reynolds cited above, Martin Duberman’s biography of Kirstein discusses the formation and first season of the Caravan in similar terms, using some of the same sources as the present article. Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, 315–23.
initiative or a carefully conceived attempt by Kirstein to pursue an American artistic agenda, the Caravan was a hastily organized affair, conceived barely six weeks prior to its first performances in July 1936. The Caravan was in fact Kirstein’s practical response to an institutional crisis in the American Ballet and was precipitated by specific challenges suddenly faced by the company, including Balanchine’s continuing health problems and Edward Warburg’s increasing disinterest in remaining involved with the enterprise.

If we are to regard the Caravan as Kirstein’s from the outset, it was “his” not necessarily as an intentional aesthetic or institutional endeavor, but rather as an insurance policy to secure the continued existence of the ballet enterprise in which he was so invested, both literally and psychologically. The Caravan thus was not intended as a schism (even though it was perceived of as such from its earliest days) but on the contrary was a means of ensuring the continued existence of the American Ballet in the event of the withdrawal of Balanchine or Warburg (or both) from the company. The American Ballet and Ballet Caravan thus reveal themselves, at least in the Caravan’s first season of the summer and fall of 1936, as far more contiguous than distinct, sharing personnel, aesthetic values, and choreographic styles. As I will show, the Caravan was at once fully aligned with the American Ballet while also beginning to explore a distinct mission of its own. Although the Caravan began without a clear plan and mission, it achieved an unexpected level of success in its first summer of touring and later performances in the fall of 1936, in part by embracing the ethos and infrastructure of modern dance and the popular theater. The troupe would even be praised as a more successful version of the American Ballet, even as it replicated many elements of the
aesthetic program of its parent organization, including the choreographic style of Balanchine. Although it was the success of the Caravan’s first season that eventually led Kirstein to strike out more definitively on his own with the troupe in subsequent years, in its first season the troupe was very much the American Ballet’s Caravan.

1. Formation of Ballet Caravan and Bennington College Debut

In the planning phases and first months of the Ballet Caravan, Kirstein took great pains to maintain it as an official affiliate of the American Ballet, not as a distinct organization. In fact, the Caravan’s affiliation with the American Ballet, and by extension the Metropolitan Opera, was one of Kirstein’s selling points for the troupe. An early promotional brochure created for the first season describes the Caravan membership as “twelve accomplished dancers, all members of The American Ballet Ensemble which has recently completed its first season with the Metropolitan Opera in New York.” Press coverage of the Caravan’s first summer season of touring in July and August 1936 followed suit, identifying the troupe as composed of dancers from the American Ballet and making prominent reference to their affiliation with the Metropolitan Opera. The first of these was John Martin’s introduction of the Caravan, the lead item in his Sunday dance column in the New York Times: “Its personnel consists of twelve dancers and a company manager from the ranks of the American Ballet.” In subsequent reports on the group,

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10 Undated Ballet Caravan Brochure, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook. Although undated, this brochure is evidently from the earliest days of the Caravan, since it mentions the Erick Hawkins ballet Rondo, which was scrapped while still in rehearsal and never performed by the troupe (see discussion below). This brochure will subsequently be referred to as “Ballet Caravan Brochure 1936a.”
Martin identifies the Caravan as “the cooperative group from the American Ballet” \(^{12}\) and “the summer company recruited from the ranks of the American Ballet.” \(^{13}\) “Ballet Caravan Forms To Give Performances: Twelve Members of American Ballet in New Group,” announced an unsigned notice in the *New York Herald Tribune*, adding in the article itself that the group “has been formed with the approval of the directors of the American Ballet.” \(^{14}\) A brief notice on the close of the Caravan’s summer tour in *Musical America* bore the headline “American Ballet Group Completes New England Tour” and identified the group as “the Ballet Caravan, a group of dancers from the American Ballet of the Metropolitan Opera,” meaning that in a two hundred word write-up the American Ballet’s name was mentioned twice and the Caravan’s only once. \(^{15}\) Similar talking points with prominent references to the American Ballet and the Met appear in press for the Caravan’s other summer performances. \(^{16}\) Still other notices mention only their opera affiliation, describing them as “young dancers from the Metropolitan Opera,” leaving out the American Ballet entirely. \(^{17}\)

In some sources, the “Caravan” was rendered a common rather than a proper noun, suggesting that group’s name, much less its larger identity or artistic agenda, was not particularly obvious to some of its audiences, or at least those who reported on them. A photo caption included in a story on the Caravan in *The Dancing Times* (Figure 26) explains that, “Some members of the American Ballet are touring the States in a caravan

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\(^{14}\) “Ballet Caravan Forms to Give Performances,” *NYHT*, July 5, 1936.


and presenting ballets in different towns,” although the story itself gets the name correct.\textsuperscript{18} Other reports mangled the company’s name in various ways. Of the troupe’s performance in East Hampton, New York, reporters refer to the “ballet ‘Caravan,’”\textsuperscript{19} while an appearance in Manchester, Vermont, elicits a reference to “the performance of the ballet caravan to be given here.”\textsuperscript{20} Neither of these accounts mentions the American Ballet or the Metropolitan Opera, suggesting that in some of its engagements, the Caravan was just a group of dancers who happened to be available to perform.

Even the simple question of the company’s membership presents evidence of the complex institutional politics of the Caravan’s dependence on or independence from the American Ballet. Twelve dancers, seven women and five men, formed the core: Ruby Asquith, Ruthanna Boris, Gisella Caccialanza, Harold Christensen, Lew Christensen, Rabana Hasburgh, Erick Hawkins, Albia Kavan, Charles Laskey, Eugene Loring, Annabelle Lyon, and Hannah Moore.\textsuperscript{21} The leaders of the group were two of Kirstein’s protégés, dancer and choreographer Douglas Coudy, also Kirstein’s lover at the time,\textsuperscript{22} who was the company manager (Figure 27), and Lew Christensen, identified as ballet master.\textsuperscript{23} In addition, William Dollar, one of the principal male dancers of the American Ballet, was also associated with the Caravan and choreographed a ballet for the

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{18} Russell Rhodes, “New York Letter,” \textit{DT}, August 1936, 498.
  \item\textsuperscript{19} “E. S. Twinings Southampton Hosts at Reception, Tea,” \textit{NYHT}, July 28, 1936; “Mrs. R. L. Patterson Gives Garden Tea At Southampton,” \textit{NYHT}, July 29, 1936.
  \item\textsuperscript{20} “Manchester Plans Ballet Caravan for Summer Visitors,” \textit{NYHT}, August 9, 1936.
  \item\textsuperscript{22} Kirstein’s diaries indicate that he and Coudy had begun spending time together outside of the studio in March 1936, and by the time of the summer tour were lovers, sharing rooms for many of the troupe’s stops. LK Diaries, March 6, May 26, June 9, 16, 24, July 24, August 29, 1936.
  \item\textsuperscript{23} John Martin, “Odyssey of the Dance,” \textit{NYT}, September 13, 1936.
\end{itemize}
company’s first season, in addition to appearing with Kirstein in a lecture-demonstration in the fall.\textsuperscript{24} Despite this close relationship, Dollar is not named among the company members and is explicitly identified in the press as “not a member of the present company, but of the American Ballet, of which the Ballet Caravan is an offshoot.”\textsuperscript{25} Such minute distinctions reveal the curious institutional profile of the Caravan. Even as it claimed to be completely contiguous with its parent organization, it was apparently regarded as separate enough that Dollar’s status had to be affirmed as that of a guest choreographer and not a company member.\textsuperscript{26}

Such confusion about the company’s name and institutional status reflected the speed with which the group was organized, for the Caravan was a distinct latecomer to the 1936 summer season. Despite his claim in \textit{Thirty Years} that he developed the plan for the Caravan in “early 1936,”\textsuperscript{27} Kirstein’s diaries and press coverage of the company attest to a more compressed time frame for the group’s formation. Kirstein first mentions the very concept of a summer touring group in a diary entry dated May 28 and again on May 31, when he first uses the “caravan” moniker.\textsuperscript{28} John Martin’s introductory report on the Caravan, published in the last days of June, explicitly characterizes the group as latecomers: “To the list of summer dance activities already announced must now be added a postscript of particular interest. This is to do with a little ballet company which is

\textsuperscript{24} Dollar’s ballet \textit{Promenade} is discussed below. On his appearance in Lincoln Kirstein’s 1936 lectures see Kriegsman, \textit{Modern Dance in America}, 54.
\textsuperscript{26} A preview of the Caravan’s October 1936 performances at the YMHA makes this distinction explicit: “The choreographers, except for Mr. Dollar, are members of the company.” John Martin, “The Dance: Events Ahead,” \textit{NYT}, October 18, 1936.
\textsuperscript{27} Kirstein, \textit{Thirty Years}, 68.
\textsuperscript{28} LK Diaries, May 28, 31, 1936.
planning to tour the summer theatres under the name of the Ballet Caravan.” Most notably, the troupe’s debut at Bennington College on July 17 and 18 was itself a hastily arranged affair. Martin’s June 28 column makes no mention of Bennington—an important piece of news that he was not likely to have overlooked given his affinity for modern dance more generally and close ties to the festival in particular—and thus suggests that the debut had not yet been scheduled at press time. And indeed, Martin subsequently announced the Bennington performances in his column of July 5, indicating that it was arranged in the intervening week, barely two weeks in advance. Word of the debut did not spread quickly, since brief items on the Caravan published July 5 and July 12 in the New York Herald-Tribune make no reference to Bennington. Kirstein for his part mentions the Bennington dates in a July 9 letter to his parents, then vacationing in France, and first references the engagement in his diary on July 15.

The Caravan’s performances at Bennington were not just last minute, but regarded as peripheral to the main festival program. A Baltimore Sun report on the festival mentions the Caravan in the last sentence of the last paragraph of a section summarizing the events of the festival, and implies a marginal and less-than-official status for the Caravan’s performances: “In addition, the newly formed Ballet Caravan staged an unscheduled appearance.” Margaret Lloyd of the Christian Science Monitor also describes the Caravan performances as an outlier to the larger activities at

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30 Ibid.  
33 Lincoln Kirstein to Rose and Louis Kirstein, July 9, 1936, LEK Collection.  
34 LK Diaries, July 15, 1936.  
Bennington: “This last season it unexpectedly presented two programs by the Ballet caravan, a summer offshoot of the American Ballet.”

John Martin’s report on the performances similarly posits the Caravan’s appearance as peripheral to the main events of Bennington’s third, much-expanded season of public performances: “The present season is marked by a doubling of these activities and the addition of a pair of performances outside the regular festival series of the newly formed Ballet Caravan, which made its début here in the little college theatre.”

The performance chronologies in Sali Ann Kriegsman’s history of the festival confirm these critics’ observations. The Caravan’s performances of 1936 (and 1937) are classified among “Lectures, Special Events, Recitals, and Student Demonstrations,” distinct from the official “Bennington Festival Series.”

If Kirstein was eager to embrace certain aspects of the moderns, and even later maintained that, “Modern Dance may be said to have launched Ballet Caravan,” the company and its ballet-focused programs (discussed in greater detail below) were still kept at some remove from Bennington’s official offerings. Despite this outsider status, the company received a much warmer welcome than they had anticipated. According to Kirstein’s diaries, the dancers were worried enough about their reception that they had mentally prepared themselves for “even heckling,” but in the end

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36 Margaret Lloyd, “On with the Dance: Bennington the Focus of This New Movement,” CSM, November 10, 1936.
38 Kriegsman, Modern Dance in America, 53–62 (1936 season) and 63–73 (1937 season).
39 Kirstein, Thirty Years, 69.
40 Lynn Garafola has demonstrated the ways in which Kirstein self-consciously embraced the aesthetics, politics, and larger ethos and institutional infrastructure of modern dance. See Garafola, “Lincoln Kirstein, Modern Dance, and the Left,” 18–35. Sally Banes also discusses the Caravan in the context of American modern dance in “Sibling Rivalry,” in Dance for a City, see especially 82–6. On Kirstein’s earlier and more critical views of modern dance, directed with particular vehemence against Mary Wigman, see Manning, Ecstasy and the Demon, 259–65.
the festival was more than generous and accommodating to the Caravan, and “Everything passed off quite well.” The group even earned special praise from Martha Graham. “Miss Graham was charming and demonstrative,” according to Kirstein, and “said she realized we were in different worlds but she firmly believed in our destiny and in the vitality of the classic form.”

2. Summer On the Road

Although its Bennington debut sought to position the Caravan among the leading and most influential exponents of American modern dance, the company’s subsequent performances would embrace the ethos of the latter in a different way, that is, by patching together a summer season through a heterogeneous itinerary of colleges, civic auditoriums, movie theaters and other popular and private venues. Although the barnstorming journeys of Anna Pavlova had followed similar circuits (albeit to much larger audiences), the more immediate model for the Caravan was the touring enterprises of Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey, and Martha Graham. This was perhaps no surprise since the woman responsible for the Caravan’s management, Frances Hawkins, had made her name booking talent for such artists, most notably as a manager for Graham, and enjoyed direct entrée to the sphere of modern dance. Indeed, it was Hawkins who no doubt helped broker the Caravan’s appearance at Bennington, since she had worked as an

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41 LK Diaries, July 24, 1936.
42 LK Diaries, July 24, 1936; on Kirstein and Graham’s later correspondence and relationship see Garafola, “Lincoln Kirstein, Modern Dance, and The Left,” 22–4.
43 On the touring activities of Denishawn and Martha Graham see Soares, Louis Horst: Musician in a Dancer’s World.
administrative assistant at the festival in 1935 and in later seasons helped manage publicity.\textsuperscript{44} Kirstein was well aware of Hawkins’s unique portfolio, including her vaudevillian pedigree, and saw it as an asset for the Caravan’s efforts:

The daughter of a distinguished labor lawyer in Denver, she had absconded from Bryn Mawr to perform for several seasons in vaudeville in an acrobatic adagio act. There was little about vaudeville she didn’t know; American vaudeville was at once her preparatory school and postgraduate course in theatrical administration. She knew more about touring conditions across the entire continent than I would ever learn; she had excellent taste, and loved dancing. With little to go on—no newspaper reviews to sell us at the start, small capital, and wildly overoptimistic program—she found some forty engagements for our first season.\textsuperscript{45}

Although forty is an exaggeration—the number was closer to twenty-five—Hawkins was nevertheless an invaluable resource for Kirstein and the Caravan.

According to Kirstein’s diaries, he first met with Hawkins on June 5 to discuss the possibility of her managing the Caravan, only a week after he had first mentioned the idea of the troupe,\textsuperscript{46} and on June 16 she was officially contracted to manage the tour.\textsuperscript{47}

“The mechanics of traveling seem far easier than I thought,” Kirstein noted in late July, “due mostly to the efficiency of our m[ana]g[e]r Francis [sic] Hawkins a very nice person indeed.”\textsuperscript{48} Although Hawkins did not remain with the group for the entirety of the tour, she was “on hand at all important junctions and very helpful.”\textsuperscript{49} She additionally came up with a key public relations gambit when the plan for the Caravan was hatched, advising Kirstein to downplay his involvement and instead pretend that the troupe had been a

\textsuperscript{44} Kriegsman, \textit{Modern Dance in America}, 15.
\textsuperscript{45} Kirstein, \textit{Thirty Years}, 68–9.
\textsuperscript{46} LK Diaries, June 5, 1936.
\textsuperscript{47} LK Diaries, June 16, 1936.
\textsuperscript{48} LK Diaries, July 24, 1936.
\textsuperscript{49} LK Diaries, August 7, 1936.
dancer-led initiative. All in all, the success of the Caravan’s first summer season—launched at the seat of modern dance and continued in a string of heterogeneous venues—might be properly credited more to Hawkins’s unique professional network and expertise than any distinct strategy on the part of Kirstein. This success is all the more notable given the extremely short lead-time that Hawkins had to arrange the tour at all.

If it is sometimes unclear where, what, and for whom the Caravan performed on each stop of its first summer tour, the overall complement of dances they presented is well documented. Many of the dances in this repertoire outlasted the summer, moreover, and were presented in several engagements in the fall of 1936 and in the Caravan’s subsequent seasons. Initially the repertoire included four one-act ballets, two of which were typically presented at any given performance. Lew Christensen’s Encounter, set to Mozart’s Haffner Serenade is described by turns as a “classic ballet,” “in the classic manner,” or a “neo-classic ballet,” and featured costumes “after drawings of J. G. Von Schadow” but did not have any literal plot. Eugene Loring contributed the more narrative “ballet pantomime” Harlequin for President (initially called Harlequin’s Election) a commedia dell’arte inspired “satire on contemporary politics” with music by Scarlatti and costumes by Keith Martin. The choreography for the “character ballet”

50 LK Diaries, June 11, 1936.
52 “Dance Notes,” NYHT, July 12, 1936.
Pocahontas has been generally credited to Christensen\textsuperscript{54}—one account claims it was
“composed by the group jointly”\textsuperscript{55}—with an original score by Elliott Carter and costumes
“after the engravings of Theodore de Bry.”\textsuperscript{56} William Dollar’s Promenade used Ravel’s
Valses nobles et sentimentales, and featured costumes “after Horace Vernet” and was
said to be based “on the modes and manners of the ascendant middle class of France in
the period just after the revolution.”\textsuperscript{57} In keeping with the insistence on Dollar’s special
status with respect to the Caravan, Promenade was sometimes identified as “the only
ballet composed outside the ranks of the company.”\textsuperscript{58}

In Blast at Ballet, Kirstein maintained that the decision to include work by a
variety of choreographers was an intentional strategy: “Realizing the danger Diaghilev
risked by never having more than two choreographers at his disposal at one time, and
only five in his entire career, I started off by mounting four works by four different
dancers.”\textsuperscript{59} As will shown below, there was a darker side to this strategy having to do
with Balanchine’s failing health, but in any event, Kirstein’s decision was most likely
born of necessity given the haste with which the company was organized. What is
indisputable, however, is that Kirstein had primary artistic purview over the Caravan’s
repertoire, and most of the season’s ballets were based on concepts that originated with
him. In early June at Ashfield Kirstein met personally with Elliott Carter to discuss the

\textsuperscript{54} John Martin, “Odyssey of the Dance,” NYT, September 13, 1936.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.; John Martin, “Odyssey of the Dance,” NYT, September 13, 1936; Margaret
\textsuperscript{57} “Summer Theatres: Ogunquit Playhouse,” BG, September 1, 1936.
\textsuperscript{58} John Martin, “Odyssey of the Dance,” NYT, September 13, 1936.
\textsuperscript{59} Kirstein, Blast at Ballet, 42.
commission of *Pocahontas* and coached Christensen through its conception and creation. The music, décor, and libretto for William Dollar’s *Promenade* similarly originated with Kirstein, who consulted Horace Vernet’s *Incroyables et Merveilleuses* engravings at the Metropolitan Museum in his research on the ballet’s costume designs. Christensen’s *Encounter* and Loring’s *Harlequin* were the two exceptions, although both were clearly pursued with Kirstein’s approval and ongoing consultation.

On the Caravan’s initial programs at Bennington, these four ballets were to be rounded out by a complement of “divertissements,” comprised of “national dances and solos to music of Glinka, Prokofiev, Brahms, Corelli, and many other composers.” An early promotional brochure describes them as the concluding part of each program, calling them “a series of divertissements demonstrating in national dances and ballet solos the virtuosity of the company.” Nine such dances were created and as many as seven were to be included on a program: Mazurka (Glinka), *Morning Greeting* (Schubert), *Pas de deux* (Liebling), *Gitana* (Torré), *Can-Can* ([Johann?] Strauss), *Pas Classique* (Benjamin Godard) and *Rhapsody* (Liszt), *Valse* (Ravel), and *March* (Prokofiev). Although none of these short pieces is credited to a specific choreographer, Kirstein’s diaries indicate that company manager Douglas Coudy was responsible for at least some of them. Interestingly, this embrace of the crowd-pleasing divertissements as a rousing closing act shows an affinity with the practices of performers such as Pavlova

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60 LK Diaries, June 9, 1936
61 LK Diaries, July 4, 1936.
62 LK Diaries, July 2, 9, 1936.
63 LK Diaries, June 5, 11, 1936.
65 Ballet Caravan Brochure 1936a, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
67 LK Diaries, July 2, 1936: “Coudy has set some of the divertissements very well.”
and La Argentina, against whom Kirstein in other contexts would position his own institutional efforts.\(^{68}\) The Caravan’s divertissements were apparently more bewildering than crowd-pleasing, however, perhaps providing context for Marjorie Church’s remark in a *Dance Observer* review of the Bennington performances that the Caravan’s dancers, “seem a bit lost in eclecticism, at present, both of style and of technique.”\(^ {69}\) (Additionally, this extensive musical repertoire was all performed on the piano.\(^ {70}\) What effect this might have had on the overall ethos of their shows is debatable—lending the performances either a more coherent or more monotonous quality—it remains a virtuosic feat in its own right.)

The Caravan’s debut programs at Bennington can be regarded as a template for its eclectic approach to programming. The first performance paired the classic *Encounter* with the more narrative and topical *Harlequin*, while the second included *Promenade* and *Pocahontas*, the latter of which was incomplete, but performed in part “so we could see what it looked like.”\(^ {71}\) The first program was rounded out by a series of seven divertissements, but for the second night, Kirstein decided to scrap the shorter pieces entirely, since “there wasn’t enough good stuff to save it,” and they were not included in subsequent performances.\(^ {72}\) Variety continued to be a goal for the Caravan, however,

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\(^ {68}\) On the ideology of Kirstein’s drive to distinguish ballet from popular dance performance and similar efforts on the part of John Martin and modern dancer, see Mark Franko, *The Work of Dance*, 107–23.

\(^ {69}\) Marjorie Church, *DO* 3, no. 7 (August-September 1936), 78.

\(^ {70}\) Two pianists, David Steimer and Edmund Horn, are credited in the Caravan’s 1936 performances. See programs in Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.

\(^ {71}\) “Dance Notes,” *NYHT*, July 12, 1936; LK Diaries, July 24, 1936.

\(^ {72}\) Ibid. This evidence contradicts the performance chronology of Kriegsman in *Modern Dance in America*, 57, which lists seven divertissements for each of the Caravan’s performances. This is likely due to the fact that she was working from the printed programs, which would not have reflected this last-minute decision.
with the American-themed and narrative ballets complementing more abstract fare on its programs, but the combinations of ballets remained flexible.

The Caravan’s fifth ballet, added to the repertoire partway through the summer tour, was *The Soldier and the Gypsy*, a “character ballet in seven scenes” with music by Manuel de Falla choreographed by Douglas Coudy.\(^73\) The ballet was a condensed retelling of *Carmen*, albeit with a different score, and featured costumes by Charles Rain “unconventionally of Spanish flavor.”\(^74\) Denby praised the narrative quality of the ballet, reporting that it was “an interesting attempt to combine dancing with *parlando* movement, so to speak.”\(^75\) Like *Pocahontas* and *Promenade*, the concept, score, and décor (and in this case even the casting) for this ballet originated with Kirstein, who in mid-July mentions the idea of “a Spanish ballet on *Carmen* for Ruthanna Boris” to be created by Coudy.\(^76\)

Additionally, several press accounts mention a sixth work called *Rondo*, a “ballet in classic style” choreographed by Erick Hawkins to music by Carl Maria von Weber, which would occasion one of the more tumultuous episodes in the Caravan’s early history.\(^77\) The ballet was in fact abandoned in rehearsal after the dancers revolted against its confusing and overcomplicated choreography, with the situation becoming so dire that Hawkins was briefly voted out of the Caravan by his fellow dancers, to be reinstated later.

\(^76\) LK Diaries, July 15 and August 13, 1936.
after careful politicking on the part of Kirstein.\textsuperscript{78} Unlike the dancers, Kirstein remained committed to Hawkins’s ballet despite seeing its faults as it was under development, at first describing it as “too full of difficulty but may be OK when cleaned up”\textsuperscript{79} but later recognizing that the ballet was “impossibly difficult and complex and the kids hate to do it.”\textsuperscript{80} Kirstein expresses a keen sense of loyalty to Hawkins, since the dancer had in fact been the first consulted about the idea of the Caravan, and Kirstein cites this early enthusiasm, as well as his talent, as a reason for keeping him on.\textsuperscript{81} This refusal on the part of Kirstein to give up on the ballet explains why \textit{Rondo} is mentioned in two previews of the Caravan’s summer activities,\textsuperscript{82} and in an August report in the \textit{Dancing Times}, perhaps written and filed before the ballet was definitively scrapped.\textsuperscript{83} In addition to references in the press, \textit{Rondo} is listed alongside \textit{Encounter}, \textit{Pocahontas}, and \textit{Harlequin} in an early Caravan promotional brochure; however, none of the ballets are attributed to specific choreographers, suggesting Kirstein may have been hedging his bets.\textsuperscript{84} Its contentious backstory aside, \textit{Rondo} represents a choreographic credit for Hawkins one year earlier than what is generally regarded as his first ballet, the 1937 \textit{Show Piece}. Kirstein’s advocacy for \textit{Rondo} also demonstrates his early belief in the talent of Hawkins, who would ultimately achieve his greatest success not in ballet but in modern dance first with Martha Graham and later as the director of his own company.

\textsuperscript{78} LK Diaries, June 5, 9, 11, 16, 24, 25, July 2, 4, 1936.  
\textsuperscript{79} LK Diaries, June 16, 1936.  
\textsuperscript{80} LK Diaries, June 24, 1936.  
\textsuperscript{81} LK Diaries, May 28, July 2, 1936.  
\textsuperscript{84} Ballet Caravan Brochure 1936a, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
After its Bennington debut, the Caravan stayed in the immediate vicinity for several performances in Vermont. In Burlington the company performed on July 20 at City Hall, presented by the University of Vermont’s Summer Session, 85 (Figure 28) and the following day before a capacity audience in the gymnasium at Middlebury College, at the invitation of Professor André Morize’s summer French program. 86 The Caravan would return to northern New England in mid-August, performing in Keene and Claremont, New Hampshire; Dorset, Manchester, and Woodstock, Vermont; and then after a considerable journey up the coast, Skowhegan, Maine. 87 John Martin reported that several of these engagements were part of a larger arrangement with a chain of movie theaters:

Among the more interesting aspects of the tour was the reaction of the manager of a chain of moving-picture theaters in New England who, feeling the rivalry of the numerous summer theaters in his territory, introduced the ballet into his own programs with a most cordial response from the audiences. This seems a most practical kind of friendship to have established. 88

Kirstein’s diary mentions this theater owner by name and reports a generous gesture on his part after a lightly attended performance at a movie theater in Keene: “Mr. Latchi the Greek proprietor of a string of 14 movie houses refused his percentage (some $10) because we’d made no complaints.” 89 Demetrius Latchis was in fact the name of the theater owner, a Greek immigrant whose name still adorns a theater complex in

85 Lincoln Kirstein to Rose and Louis Kirstein, July 9, 1936, LEK Collection; LK Diaries, July 24, 1936.
86 Ibid.
87 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” NYHT, August 30, 1936.
89 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936.
Brattleboro,\footnote{On the present-day Latchis Theatre in Brattleboro, see Howard Weiss-Tisman, “Seventy-Five Years of the Latchis,” \textit{Brattleboro Reformer}, January 24, 2013.} and whose Claremont, New Hampshire, venue, where the Caravan performed in August, was called the Latchis Theatre (Figure 29).\footnote{Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.}

If the Caravan was practical enough to accept gigs dancing in movie theaters—and well-behaved enough to endear itself to the owners—the group also made itself available to more exclusive clients. On two occasions it scheduled what amounted to command performances in summer enclaves of the East Coast elite. The above-mentioned performance in Manchester, Vermont, on August 18 was one such engagement, evidently not arranged by anyone as recently arrived to the U.S. as Mr. Latchis. The Caravan was instead the evening entertainment for a gala dinner, reported only in the society columns. “Manchester Plans Ballet Caravan for Summer Visitors: Dinner Dance Is Climax of Social Activity During Golf Tournament,” the headline announces, with no further information apart from the un-capitalized name of the “ballet caravan” in the column itself, which, true to convention, is comprised almost wholly of the names of couples slated to attend the event.\footnote{“Manchester Plans Ballet Caravan for Summer Visitors,” \textit{NYHT}, August 9, 1936.} It is not clear whether this performance by the Caravan actually took place, however, since no program survives, nor is it mentioned in any other report or in Kirstein’s diaries. If the troupe did perform, it would have amounted to a doubleheader of an evening, since sources verify that the troupe performed in Dorset on that same evening, seven miles away from Manchester.\footnote{LK Diaries, August 29, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” \textit{NYHT}, August 30, 1936; Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.}

A week prior to this possible Manchester appearance, the Caravan had received more extensive, albeit similarly nominal coverage for a semi-private engagement in East
Hampton, Long Island, on August 9. Mrs. Lorenzo E. Woodhouse was the hostess of the benefit performance, which was held in the gardens of the “playhouse” on her estate.\(^94\) By most reports, the event’s beneficiary was the scholarship fund at Smith College, which suggests that Kirstein’s sister Mina may have had a hand in its planning.\(^95\) Other accounts report that it was a benefit for both Smith and the scholarship fund of an acting studio directed by Mr. Leighton Rollins, who assisted in the organization of the event itself.\(^96\) No fewer than two ancillary activities were held in advance of the benefit. First was a July 30 reception and tea “for the Southampton and East Hampton patrons’ invitation committee for the Ballet Caravan” hosted by Mrs. Henry Austin Clark at her home, Four Acres.\(^97\) Over thirty women are listed as having attended this event, all members of the “patroness committee working for the success of the performance of the Ballet Caravan.”\(^98\) Mrs. Clark is also reported to have hosted the “distinguished Smith graduate, Miss Anna Hempstead Branch of Hempstead House, New London” for the weekend of the Caravan performance.\(^99\) The second advance event was a July 31 luncheon for “several Southampton members of the junior committee who will act as ushers at the performance of the Ballet Caravan,” hosted by Miss Elizabeth Clark (presumably Mrs. Clark’s daughter) at the Beach Club.\(^100\) What is more, the Caravan’s performance held a prominent enough place on the summer social calendar that it merited

\(^{94}\) “Studio Party Held At East Hampton,” *NYT*, July 26, 1936;
\(^{95}\) “Maureen V. Smith Is Guest at Dinner,” *NYT*, August 1, 1936
\(^{96}\) “Studio Party Held At East Hampton,” *NYT*, July 26, 1936; “Brothers to Honor Maureen V. Smith at Dance Friday,” *NYHT*, July 30, 1936.
\(^{98}\) “T. H. Wrights Hosts At Southampton,” *NYT*, July 30, 1936.
\(^{99}\) “Guild Hall Dinner At East Hampton,” *NYT*, August 9, 1936
\(^{100}\) “Maureen V. Smith Is Guest at Dinner,” *NYT*, August 1, 1936.
mentioning amid the byzantine comings-and-goings of individuals not directly involved in the planning of the performance:

Mrs. John A. Topping of Greenwich, Conn., who is visiting Mrs. William A. Lockwood at Ivy Cottage, will be guest of honor at a luncheon to be given by Mrs. Harry L. Hamlin Sunday at the Hedges. The party will see ‘Ballet Caravan,’ at Mrs. Lorenzo E. Woodhouse’s Playhouse later. 101

Although the Caravan’s East Hampton performance and its ancillary events are mentioned in over a dozen society notices, no details as to the program are mentioned, much less the names of any of the dancers, or Kirstein or Coudy. As was the case in Manchester, the Caravan was merely the entertainment du jour, not invited due to any special interest on the part of the hosts in their artistic agenda. Although Kirstein’s diary does not explain how the engagement came about, it does capture its uninspiring atmosphere, describing Mrs. Woodhouse as “a dreary white woman who was dashed because I w[oul]dn’t let her play her Wurlitzer in the intermission” and the assembled audience as “cold and Republican.”102 Underscoring the outsider status of this engagement is its absence from John Martin’s generally authoritative column in the New York Times. On the same day that his newspaper was reporting on the benefit, Martin’s column of August 9 makes no mention of the performance, instead discussing the past and upcoming activities at Bennington, including the Caravan’s July debut.103 His later account of the Caravan’s summer activities also makes no mention of these special events, despite his praise of the troupe’s nimble institutional flexibility.104

101 “East Hampton Planning Benefit Fashion Show,” NYHT, August 7, 1936; this same news is reported in “Notes of Social Activities in New York and Elsewhere,” NYT, August 7, 1936.
102 LK Diaries, August 13, 1936.
However unsatisfying they may have been (and whether or not the Manchester performance took place), these society engagements demonstrate how the Caravan was able to operate in multiple spheres during its first experimental season. It benefited not just from Frances Hawkins’s knowledge and expertise in the ways of modern dance and vaudeville, but also from the Kirstein family’s standing among the East Coast establishment, the same kind of connections that had made possible the American Ballet’s first performances at the estate of Felix and Frieda Warburg in White Plains, New York, in June 1934 and their engagement at the Metropolitan Opera (as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4). These engagements are absent from Kirstein’s published accounts of the Caravan, not quite in keeping with the populist and politically leftists ethos that he would later cultivate for the project in later seasons, with ballets such as *Filling Station* and *Billy the Kid*.

The Caravan’s adaptability was also demonstrated by the first of its two extended engagements of the summer, an appearance in a weeklong production of Molière’s *The Would-Be Gentleman* at the Country Playhouse in Westport, Connecticut, beginning on August 3.\(^\text{105}\) This English-language production was produced by Theatre Guild co-founder Lawrence Langer and starred vaudeville star and “master pantomimist” Jimmy Savo in his first speaking role as M. Jourdain. (Both Langer and Savo would cross paths with Kirstein and Balanchine later: Langer as a co-founder of the short-lived American

Shakespeare Festival with Kirstein, and Savo as the original Dromio in Rodgers and Hart’s 1938 *The Boys from Syracuse*, for which Balanchine was choreographer.) The Caravan was credited by name in advertisements for the play, a high-low admixture—Louis XIV meets vaudeville—that in retrospect was entirely in keeping with the eclecticism of their summer activities (Figure 30). The gig also served the Caravan’s mission of providing choreographic experience for its dancers, since the troupe was responsible for four original incidental dance numbers. For music they turned to Lully’s original *comédie-ballet* score, with Lew Christensen’s Mozartian *Encounter* also adapted as an interpolated number. Of the original dances, Eugene Loring created the *Dance of the Tailors* and the *Ballet of the Cooks*, while Christensen was responsible for a ceremonial dance in the play’s Turkish scene, in addition to *Encounter*. The fourth new number, the *Ballet of the Peacock Among the Roosters*, is attributed to Erick Hawkins—like the above-mentioned *Rondo* a choreographic credit one year earlier than his 1937 ballet *Show Piece*. In the end, some of their effort would be for naught. According to Kirstein’s diary, Loring’s ballets “looked neat” and were presumably given in their entirety, while only half of Hawkins’s *Peacock* ballet made the cut, and only the last movement of Christensen’s *Encounter* was ultimately included.

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 LK Diaries, August 7, 1936; Duberman cites this diary entry outside of the context of the Westport engagement and claims that the shortening of these two ballets was an instance of Kirstein’s asserting his artistic authority over the troupe. More likely is that the ballets were shortened out of theatrical exigency, a decision that was not necessarily Kirstein’s alone to make. See Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, 320.
The troupe’s second extended engagement of the summer was also its last, a week-long “dance festival” at the summer stock theater owned and operated by Walter Hartwig in Ogunquit, Maine, beginning August 31 and closing on Labor Day, September 7 (Figure 31). Unlike their weeklong appearance in Westport, this series of performances included all five works of its core repertoire in three different programs. According to one account it was “believed to be the first time in this country that a ballet company is playing a week’s series from its own repertoire in the summer season.” Of their offerings at Ogunquit, Harlequin for President was evidently better received than it had been in the Hamptons, and even elicited vocal acclaim from the otherwise quiet theater-goers:

The highlight of the evening was the end of the ballet called Harlequin for President, a satire on contemporary politics, which a few weeks ago aroused the indignation of certain conservatives in the audience on Long Island. In Ogunquit, where there is an equally conservative audience, the interpretation of the satire seemed a bit different, and there were shouts of “Bravo” from the front rows—the first time this season that the patrons have ever raised their voices during a production.

This same review claims that this was the first time that a ballet group had been presented on a summer theater program. Kirstein’s diaries describe the audiences as “sparse but enthusiastic,” and that the weather was “cool and damp.” Kirstein also maintains that it was the Ogunquit performances that had occasioned the addition of The Soldier and the Gypsy to the company’s ballets, since without a repertoire of five ballets they would not

111 “Summer Theatres,” BG, August 30, 1936; Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
112 “Ballet Closes Tour, Will Fill Week’s Engagement in Ogunquit, Me.,” NYHT, August 30, 1936.
113 “Summer Theatres: Ogunquit Playhouse,” BG, September 1, 1936.
114 LK Diaries, September 25, 1936.
have been able to secure the engagement, a successful and satisfying end to what only
two months earlier had appeared to be an uncertain summer of touring.  

3. The Caravan Continues, Fall 1936

Buoyed by its summertime success, the Caravan carried on into the fall, with several performances in New York City and in surrounding regions. In fact, on September 6—the Sunday of Labor Day weekend, while the Caravan was still performing in Ogunquit—John Martin’s column announced the troupe’s most significant booking to date: the opening performances of the YMHA dance season. That the Caravan would be first in a series to include Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, and Anna Sokolow confirms the group’s continued alignment with modern dance circles. In their two performances the group presented the five core works from its summer tour: on October 31, *Promenade, The Soldier and the Gypsy*, and *Encounter*, and on November 1, *Encounter, Pocahontas*, and *Harlequin for President*. Prior to this New York debut, on October 13 Kirstein and members of the Caravan presented a lecture-demonstration on “the development of the ballet” at the New School the third event in a series termed “The Dance in the Social Scene.” (Curiously, the *New York Times* announced a lecture on the same day at the New School by George

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115 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936.
117 Ibid.
Balanchine with members of the American Ballet.120) These two engagements at key institutional homes of modern dance point to Kirstein’s larger ambitions for the group’s permanence and aesthetic independence. The Caravan also went back on the road to New England, performing on October 20 in Montpelier, Vermont at the invitation of the town’s Theatre Guild and two days later at Amherst College at the invitation of the campus group the Amherst Masquers,121 in addition to appearing at Smith College122 and in Hartford and Danbury, Connecticut.123

Kirstein’s decision to continue the Caravan’s activities into the fall did not lend credence to the claim that the troupe was merely a summer adjunct of the American Ballet. And indeed, despite the insistence on the Caravan’s collaborative relationship with the American Ballet, there had been rumors of schism from the start, made all the more plausible given how quick Kirstein had been to assert the cordial relations between the two entities. John Martin’s initial report on the Caravan quoted the organizers as maintaining that the group is “neither a secession from nor a part of the American Ballet, but a collective arrangement of its members, and enjoying the good wishes of the directors of the American Ballet itself.”124 “It represents a round dozen of the youngsters who have danced at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet this season,” reported Russell Rhodes in The Dancing Times, alluding more directly to contentious politics, “and emphasis is

120 “Music Notes,” NYT, October 13, 1936.
121 “Current Happenings on College Campuses,” NYT, October 11, 1936; Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, October 6, 1936, LEK Collection; Programs, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
122 Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
placed on the fact that there is a rift in the ranks of the ballet, but that the directors have wished this little group luck in their summer enterprise.\textsuperscript{125} Economic necessity was also cited as a practical rationale for the existence of the group, promoted via the innocent cover story concocted by Frances Hawkins: “Its personnel consists of twelve young members of the American Ballet,” as Martin reported, “who were anxious to keep at work and earn a livelihood during the long interval when the parent organization was inactive.”\textsuperscript{126} To be fair, the majority of the fall performances of the Caravan did not interfere with the American Ballet’s duties at the Metropolitan Opera, whose 1936 season did not begin until December 21.\textsuperscript{127} The Ballet’s duties thus resumed at the start of the month, meaning that Kirstein had to secure a special dispensation for only one of the Caravan’s performances, on December 1 in Hartford, the troupe’s final performance of 1936.\textsuperscript{128}

If the Caravan tried not to conflict with the American Ballet’s obligations at the Met, it did begin to assert a more independent status in the course of its summer tour and into the fall. A brochure prepared for the company later in its first season maintains explicitly that the Caravan, despite drawing its membership from the American Ballet, “is a separate entity and its entire repertory is newly composed by its own dancers.”\textsuperscript{129}

Musical America terms them “a group of thirteen dancers from the American Ballet, but

\textsuperscript{127} “Twenty-One New Singers Are Announced by Metropolitan,” \textit{NYHT}, November 16, 1936.
\textsuperscript{128} LK Diaries, October 12, 1936.
\textsuperscript{129} Undated Ballet Caravan Brochure, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook. This brochure will be referred to as “Ballet Caravan Brochure 1936b,” to distinguish it from the previously mentioned “1936a.” Its later date is corroborated by its inclusion of all five of the Caravan’s initial ballets, including Coudy’s \textit{The Soldier and the Gypsy}, which debuted in the course of the summer tour (see discussion above).
independent from the parent organization,” even as the headline of this same notice calls them a “unit” of the American Ballet.\(^{130}\) Most notably, Edwin Denby’s review of their performance at the YMHA refers to them as the “American Ballet Caravan,” commonly regarded as the name invented by Kirstein for the South American tour of the combined remnants of the two companies in 1941.\(^{131}\) That this amalgamation appears in association with the group from its earliest days, and would continue to be associated with the Caravan, especially after the collapse of the American Ballet in 1938, shows how the two branches of the organization remained chronologically and institutionally contiguous, two separate yet dependent units of the larger Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise.

Setting all such politics aside, Kirstein’s \textit{Blast at Ballet} ascribes both a nonchalance and retrospective intentionality to the formation of the Caravan, notably following Hawkins’s talking points to emphasize the interest of the dancers themselves in pursuing a new kind of ballet: “So I organized a small troupe of dancers from our own school, which had been incidentally very successful, and from among those of the American Ballet proper who were dominantly interested in classic ballet choreography applied to native themes.”\(^{132}\) Kirstein even posited larger ambitions for the group, calling it “in microcosm a permanent laboratory for classic dancing by, with and for Americans.”\(^{133}\) As Kirstein’s own diaries reveal, however, his decision to form the Caravan did not in fact arise purely from his own interests, much less those of the dancers. The Caravan was a venture thrust upon him by necessity, a response to a constellation of dire circumstances suddenly facing the American Ballet.

\(^{132}\) Kirstein, \textit{Blast at Ballet}, 41.
\(^{133}\) Ibid., 42.
These challenges facing the American Ballet centered first and foremost on Balanchine’s ongoing ill health. As discussed in Chapter 2, Balanchine had suffered a shocking seizure-like attack in Kirstein’s presence in July 1934, never definitively diagnosed but likely resulting from the lingering effects of tuberculosis.\textsuperscript{134} Two years later, Balanchine’s health continued to pose a challenge to the stability of the ballet company, and in the months prior to the formation of the Caravan, his condition took another turn for the worse. On May 25, 1936 Kirstein recorded that Balanchine was home sick for several days “with fever and a flare up in his lungs,” and as a result William Dollar had to oversee the Ballet’s rehearsals at the Met, “rather sloppily though they seem to come out ok on the stage.”\textsuperscript{135} Balanchine’s health episode was severe enough, especially in light of previous incidents, that it sent Kirstein “into [a] pitch of how to organize for activity without him,” and even prompting him “to think of what to do if Bal[anchine] died: Loss of Met. Dispersal of the troupe.”\textsuperscript{136}

At the same time that Kirstein saw Balanchine’s life as in danger, the American Ballet’s summer performance schedule was also looking bleak. As noted in Chapter 4, the company had been relatively active during the previous summer, with performances at Lewisohn Stadium, the Robin Hood Dell, and the Westchester Girl Scouts benefit. Prior to the summer of 1936, things were looking similarly promising, as the troupe had been tentatively slated to appear not just again at Lewisohn Stadium and also at Jones Beach for several weeks of performances. In late May, however, just as Balanchine was falling sick, this engagement fell through because the Lewisohn management insisted that

\textsuperscript{134} LK Diaries, July 12, 1934.
\textsuperscript{135} LK Diaries, May 25, 27, 1936.
\textsuperscript{136} LK Diaries, May 27, 1936.
the group not reprise their existing repertoire but rather present new work, which the company was not in a position to do. 137 “The Stadium, Jones Beach etc all seem to be dubious for some reason or another,” Kirstein wrote in his diary, and was in ongoing discussions with Warburg about how to deal with this situation. 138 By May 28 the Lewisohn engagement was completely out of the picture: “Stadium doesn’t want us. Hence 3 w[ee]ks of work in July is out: rather depressing for the kids.” 139

This loss of work would not have been so devastating in and of itself had it not been for another related challenge, that is, Edward Warburg’s waning interest in the American Ballet. “The kids w[oul]d go and come back,” Kirstein noted after the engagement fell through, “but I hate to let them go for the whole summer as I fear Warburg w[oul]d lose interest.” 140 Warburg for his part was not just losing interest in the American Ballet, but was resistant to the idea of the Caravan, perhaps correctly understanding it as a covert power grab on the part of Kirstein, and even cited trumped up legal concerns to delay the signing of Frances Hawkins’s contract, which only made Kirstein’s resolve stronger: “Warburg thinks up all sorts of possible horror for the Amer[ican] Bal[let] in the Caravan but in spite of him I shall continue even if it am[oun]ts to a break.” 141 Kirstein soon after managed to get Warburg to admit that he wanted out of the Ballet, that his involvement amounted to “being screwed without pleasure,” and he only continued to remain involved out of a sense of guilt. 142 (Despite his ambivalence, Warburg remained with the company for the summer and into the

137 LK Diaries, May 25, 1936.
138 LK Diaries, May 25, 27, 1936.
139 LK Diaries, May 28, 1936.
140 Ibid.
141 LK Diaries, June 11, 1936.
142 LK Diaries, June 24, 1936.
following year, and only deepened his financial investment, acquiescing in August to Balanchine’s request for a $5,000 Stravinsky commission for the coming season, which would result in the ballet *Jeu de cartes*.\(^{143}\)

If Kirstein was increasingly frustrated with Warburg and wanted the Caravan to himself, the troupe did not represent a definitive break with Balanchine. And if his bad health had been one of the precipitating events that had led to the creation of the Caravan, Balanchine was healthy enough to be consulted regularly about the Caravan’s activities over the course of the summer. Only a week after Kirstein had been contemplating the choreographer’s imminent death, Balanchine was again on the mend and was not “as sick as we feared. Mainly a question of rest.”\(^{144}\) Soon after, Balanchine was back in the studio for the Caravan’s initial rehearsals and, notably, advised Erick Hawkins not to use Debussy but rather the sonatas of Weber for his new ballet.\(^{145}\) Balanchine decamped the following day to Westport, Connecticut, to convalesce but would remain involved in planning the Caravan’s season.\(^{146}\) In mid-June, Kirstein and Coudy made a special trip to Westport to update him on the progress of the Caravan, in a meeting at which William Dollar was also present. Balanchine’s had “mental reservations” about the Caravan, specifically about whether “the boys can do choreography,” but was reserved in expressing this opinion owing to Dollar’s presence.\(^{147}\) At the end of June, Balanchine returned to the city to observe the progress of the Caravan’s first three ballets. He apparently concurred with the growing concerns about Hawkins’s *Rondo*, deeming it “too

\(^{143}\) LK Diaries, August 1, 1936.
\(^{144}\) LK Diaries, June 4, 1936.
\(^{145}\) LK Diaries, June 5, 1936.
\(^{146}\) LK Diaries, June 6, 1936.
\(^{147}\) LK Diaries, June 17, 1936.
confused,” but like Kirstein saw greater potential and declared that “in 4 y[ea]rs he w[oul]d be excellent choreographer.”148 Christensen’s *Encounter*, by contrast, “had taste and brilliance and was complete,” and while he was not taken by Loring’s *Harlequin* ballet, he thought it would be a popular success.149

When the Caravan came to Westport for its appearance in *The Would-Be Gentleman*, Balanchine was again back in the mix, but still not fully recovered. On the one hand he was “full of necessity to have Stravinsky and Gershwin ballets and 2 mo[nth]s of rehearsals,” but at the same time declared himself too weak to sign a first edition of Noverre he had purchased as a gift for Kirstein.150 Kirstein and Balanchine met on August 1 in Westport to discuss the future of the Ballet, and both were evidently at peace with Warburg’s potential defection, in part because they agreed that “as soon as [he] has no responsibility will give twice as much cash.”151 As he had done earlier in the summer, Balanchine came to rehearsal and provided a good deal of “useful criticism” about the incidental dances for the play and “was very nice with the kids.”152 Kirstein still had concerns about his health, however: “Doesn’t seem terribly well. He coughs and is not a dry atmosphere here.”153 These lingering worries lend more credence to Kirstein’s earlier claim to have recruited multiple choreographers for the Caravan so as not to depend entirely on one artistic figure.

Balanchine’s involvement, however sporadic, gives lie to the status of the Caravan as an exclusively Kirstein-driven vehicle and separate from the American Ballet.

148 LK Diaries, June 25, 1936.
149 Ibid.
150 LK Diaries, July 28, 1936.
151 LK Diaries, August 1, 1936.
152 LK Diaries, August 7, 1936.
153 Ibid.
Indeed, when the Caravan’s ballets were first in preparation, Kirstein already noted the influence of Balanchine: “Choreography will continue straight through from George Bal. but it must have this chance.”\textsuperscript{154} This influence was obvious not just to Kirstein but to some critics, showing how also with respect to its initial choreographic style the Caravan remained closely aligned with its parent organization. A review of the Caravan’s Hartford performances captures the Balanchine ethos that pervaded the repertoire:

As for the choreography itself, no one is going to deny that it shows the impress of the troupe real maitre, George Balanchine. It is not to be otherwise expected. It has much of his free style, in which the classic restraint is rather unlaced, but in which the classic manner and form is always there. It has his penchant for continual movement, particularly of the ensemble as a whole; his sense of build-up and climax; his partiality for the athletic. The neo-Romantic touch is continually there, in the spirit of \textit{Promenade} especially.\textsuperscript{155}

Not only had the dancers internalized their master’s technique, they had also gleaned the better qualities of his style, eschewing his more “modernist” inclinations. As one critic noted, approvingly, their choreography “happily does not employ the grotesqueries to which Balanchine has been too often drawn.”\textsuperscript{156}

4. \textbf{Ballet Caravan and the American Ballet}

Ballet Caravan has often been posited as the most explicitly American of the several antecedent companies of the New York City Ballet. “At first our ideas were disjointed and vague,” Caravan dancer Ruthanna Boris recalled, “but gradually they connected themselves and emerged as a beautiful, possible dream—a dream of American

\textsuperscript{154} LK Diaries, June 11, 1936.
\textsuperscript{155} “Ballets Are Brilliantly Performed,” \textit{Hartford Courant}, December 2, 1936 (per copy in Douglas Coudy Scrapbook).
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
ballet dancers dancing America!\textsuperscript{157} Edwin Denby called the troupe “pleasantly un-Russian” and praised their “American freshness.”\textsuperscript{158} Such enthusiasm aside, it is evident that there was very little that was explicitly American about the Caravan’s first season, aside from the nationality of their dancers, choreographers, and designers. This should not be regarded as a failure of the organization, for Kirstein’s belief in an American ballet company was rooted in the eminent adaptability of the danse d’école in new contexts.

And to be sure, the makeshift quality and hodgepodge venues of the Caravan’s first tour certainly distinguished it from its more established European forebears and its contemporary competitors, most notably Colonel de Basil’s Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.

Nevertheless, it is remarkable to what extent the repertory of the Caravan’s first season remained within the aesthetic comfort zone of the Franco-Russian tradition consolidated and cultivated by Diaghilev and his followers. Even as Kirstein’s Caravan sought to shed the pejorative “ballets américains” label that had dogged the American Ballet since its first performances, they were for all intents and purposes still heavily indebted to the aesthetics of the “Russianballet,” for which the Caravan was supposed to be the antidote, as Kirstein maintained in Blast at Ballet. The ballets featured repurposed classical music by Scarlatti, Mozart, Ravel, and de Falla, and were based on material from the French Revolution to Carmen. Despite Kirstein’s claim of pursuing stripped-down production values, each of their ballets included an explicit credit for costumes, whether for the actual designer or the artist who had inspired them, in keeping with Diaghilevian practice, and all works were in the one-act format long codified by the

\textsuperscript{157} Ruthanna Boris, “The Ballet Caravan” Dance Herald 1, no. 1 (October 1937): 1 quoted in Kriegsman, Modern Dance in America, 58.

Ballets Russes. The earliest days of the Caravan confirm in a very direct way Nancy Reynolds’s observation that Kirstein quite consciously modeled his aesthetics and career as an impresario on the great Diaghilev. In another respect, Kirstein’s mentor-like (and sometimes erotic) relationships with the Caravan’s young and exclusively male choreographers should similarly be understood as an implicit if not explicit emulation of Diaghilev.

Diaghilev aside, the Caravan’s repertoire in its first year was not appreciably different from the initial offerings of the American Ballet, and certainly not much more American, despite being choreographed, danced, and designed by Americans. Following the American Ballet’s example, the Caravan presented only one work with an explicitly American subject and a newly-commissioned score by an American composer. If the collegiate satire Alma Mater had been the American Ballet’s only native calling card, the Caravan similarly had only Pocahontas, with an American theme and new American music, to offer in its first year. Loring’s Harlequin, with its American political subject matter, only partially passes muster on this account, given its commedia dell’arte aesthetic and score by Scarlatti. It might seem odd that the Caravan reproduced the very aesthetic that they were trying to break free from, virtually replicating the Europhile model of its parent organization. In light of the internal politics discussed above, however, in which the Caravan was not an independently conceived organization but rather an insurance policy designed to keep the American Ballet from collapsing, this convergence of style makes more sense.

If in their repertoire the Caravan had produced an aesthetic alignment with the American Ballet, in other respects the troupe emerged as a more successful foil to its parent organization, especially in the modest scale of its productions values. Margaret Lloyd of the *Christian Science Monitor* explicitly praised the Caravan as a more satisfying kind of American ballet than had been attempted by the first seasons of the American Ballet. Although both organizations excelled in the youthful exuberance of their performers, it was the Caravan that had leveraged its talents and acknowledged its limitations appropriately, and had more fully lived up to the name of its parent organization:

The American Ballet, having only youth and vivacity to work on and being pushed too far ahead of its capacities, has not yet risen adequately to its assignment. Having for chief choreographer the Russian, Georges Balanchine, and being mainly of American constituency, it was unable to blend the opposing psychologies. But that was only one trouble. The larger difficulty lay in their being rushed to a task they were not ready for.

The Ballet Caravan was organized last summer soon after the close of the opera season, for the purposes of developing a truly American ballet, giving the young dancers a chance to compose for themselves and an opportunity to work together in that cooperative spirit which makes for unity. [...] During this period [the summer season] they have built up a repertoire, strengthened their resources, while earning their own way, and probably enlarged their visions for the future.

Like Lloyd, Edwin Denby similarly praised the naïve and genuinely American ethos of the Caravan, whose charm and commitment compensated for any apparent faults in technique or execution:

There is an American freshness and an American modesty that is charming. There may be as yet the usual faults of beginners,—lyricism, too timid a dramatic attack, too little concentration choreographically, and occasionally by some dancers more projection than the moment warrants.

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But the important thing is that young talents get a chance and that the enterprise as a whole is lively and real and part of us.\(^\text{161}\)

Kirstein in *Blast at Ballet* downplayed the successes of the Caravan’s first summer tour, calling it “more of a hard vacation than work, a feeling-out of our future” and that it was “of not much interest except to the dancers and myself.”\(^\text{162}\) But ironically, the Caravan in fact represented the best and most consistently successful offerings of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise as a whole. Indeed, by not attempting to emulate the large-scale, high-budget cross-country touring of the de Basil company—as the American Ballet had unsuccessfully tried the previous fall (as seen in Chapter 4)—the Caravan became something of a sleeper hit. Despite the congruence of their aesthetics, the differences between the institutional footprints of the American Ballet and its Caravan are striking. The American Ballet had made its debut in a Broadway theater and subsequently aligned itself with the Metropolitan Opera, America’s largest and most establishment performing arts organization, and one in which dance was treated as subordinate. The Caravan, by contrast, was independent and adaptable, and had more or less invented an organizational model out of whole cloth, however makeshift and fragile, in which dance was distinctly in the foreground. Its tour boasted several innovations with respect to the institutional positioning of ballet performance in the existing cultural infrastructure, performing in venues previously not hospitable to ballet, whether city halls or summer stock theaters.

Although the Caravan’s institutional model was not entirely new, having been employed successfully by Pavlova and modern dancers, John Martin saw the Caravan’s

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\(^{162}\) Kirstein, *Blast at Ballet*, 42.
innovations as something distinctive, hailing the company’s summer season as an example that others should emulate to fill the otherwise fallow months of the summer. Given Martin’s previous antipathy toward the American Ballet more generally and bad blood with Kirstein in particular, his unqualified praise is worth quoting at length:

Starting out the middle of July with very little advance preparation, the company has managed to play twenty-five performances in seven weeks. This seems to constitute a record of sorts, for available statistics reveal no other instance of a Summer tour of anything like so extended a character by any company of dancers hereabouts. […]

That such a courageous venture should succeed is excellent on its own account, but its principal value lies rather in the possibilities which it has uncovered for the field at large. If so much can be done by an unknown company and a booking method known technically as “wildcatting,” it becomes at once apparent that there is an extensive Summer territory for dancing to be opened up, and profitably, if the matter is approached in a more formal matter. It would seem to be a matter well worth looking into.  

With his experiment thus deemed a success on aesthetic, institutional, and even nationalist grounds, Kirstein was eager to keep the Caravan going. Even before the 1936 summer tour had concluded, he was busy brainstorming ideas and setting his own goals for the group’s 1937 season. During the Ogunquit engagement, he wrote in his diary that he saw the first season the “foundation for 8 weeks of solid work next summer and 2 months in the fall.” The coastal atmosphere of Maine—“with the rollers of the Atlantic dashing in all along the miles of beach,” as Kirstein later recounted—inspired him to begin planning one of the Caravan’s ballets for the coming season, Yankee Clipper. And if the American Ballet and Metropolitan Opera still remained part of Kirstein’s

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164 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936.  
166 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936.
overall strategy, by the end of 1936 he was beginning to regard the Caravan as his primary professional affiliation. In correspondence from Kirstein to his father, letters sent through October appear on letterhead for the School of American Ballet, on which he was listed with the catch-all title of “Treasurer-Secretary.” Beginning with a letter dated November 4, Kirstein’s preferred writing stock would be letterhead for Ballet Caravan, of which he was the “Director.”

Although it had begun as a practical, perhaps short-term response solution to long-term challenges facing the American Ballet, the would-be summer Caravan was here to stay.

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167 In the LEK Collection correspondence, the last letter from Lincoln to Louis on SAB letterhead is dated October 6, 1936, and a letter of November 4, 1936 is the first to use Ballet Caravan letterhead.
Figure 26: Photo and caption from Russell Rhodes, “New York Letter: The Autumn Season,” *The Dancing Times*, September 1936, 498.
Figure 28: Ballet Caravan Flier, *MGZRS 00-1604, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook, NYPL.
THE LATCHIS THEATRE
CLAREMONT, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Presents

The Ballet Caravan
Lincoln Kirstein, Director

Monday Evening, August 24, 1936
at 8 o'clock, Eastern Standard Time

Figure 29: Ballet Caravan Program, *MGZRS 00-1604, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook, NYPL.
WESTPORT, CONN.

WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE
BOSTON POST ROAD    Tel. Westport 4167
Week Beg. TOMOR'W EVG. 8:40. Mat. Wed. 2:30

JIMMY SAVO
in Moliere's Famous Comedy
"THE WOULD-BE GENTLEMAN"
with RUTH WESTON - ALBERT CARROLL
and The Ballet Caravan

Figure 30: Advertisement, New York Herald Tribune, August 2, 1936.
Figure 31: Ballet Caravan Program, *MGZRS 00-1604, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook, NYPL.
Afterword

The Nonprofit Performing Arts in America (1933–54)

Not generally cited in the history of the performing arts in America (much less in accounts of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise), the 1950 film *All About Eve* opens with a simple, dichotomous summary of the institutional economics of theatrical production. “There are, in general, two types of theatrical producers,” an assured voice-over from theater critic Addison DeWitt explains: “One has a great many wealthy friends who will risk a tax-deductible loss. This type is interested in art. The other is one to whom each production means potential ruin or fortune. This type is out to make a buck.” Such an observation might seem a self-evident summary of the state of theatrical entertainment in postwar America, the era when *All About Eve* is set and when the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise finally achieved institutional permanence as the New York City Ballet in 1948. Then as now, for many individuals involved in the performing arts, whether artists or producers, the question is not necessarily how one wishes to make money, but how one wishes to lose money. Commercial organization of traditional symphonic music, opera, or ballet is today all but nonexistent, having been supplanted by charitable nonprofit corporate structures, and although some theater (most notably on Broadway) remains organized on a for-profit basis, any “investment” in such projects numbers among the riskiest financial instruments available.

DeWitt’s strict distinction between charitable and commercial theater, however, did not characterize the early years of the Balanchine-Kirstein ballet enterprise, which
operated in a somewhat mixed institutional model. Although ostensibly commercial in their corporate structures, the early companies and school founded by Balanchine and Kirstein were continually reliant upon philanthropic support, whether in the form of cash, familial or business connections, or in-kind managerial or artistic support. That the early years of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise did not neatly conform to the nonprofit institutional structures of today is not entirely surprising. The research of sociologist Paul DiMaggio has demonstrated how the “high culture model”—that of a trustee-governed nonprofit enterprise—was adopted by theater, opera, and dance only during the 1930s and 1940s, a transitional period that is roughly contemporaneous with Balanchine and Kirstein’s early efforts.¹

As DiMaggio and other scholars of nonprofit history have noted, moreover, such institutional innovations—including the bureaucratic codification of the nonprofit organization or “501(c)3”—did not occur in a bureaucratic or historical vacuum. That is, changes to the law are more descriptive than prescriptive, constantly catching up with the actions of individuals such as Balanchine and Kirstein, and not the other way around. As legal scholar Henry Hansmann explains:

The tax code did not set forth in the beginning a well-defined set of sectors in which nonprofits could qualify for exemption, generating nonprofits in those sectors. Instead, as nonprofits have moved into new types of activities, the tax code has been reinterpreted or amended to permit nonprofits undertaking those activities to qualify for exemption.²

In other words, to understand why the performing arts are today organized as mostly nonprofit endeavors, we should look not to the law but to the struggles (and eventual successes) of figures such as Balanchine and Kirstein.

After *On Your Toes* Balanchine continued to pursue an active career on Broadway and spent a considerable amount of time in Hollywood, including choreography for the 1938 film *The Goldwyn Follies*. After the end of the American Ballet’s tenure at the Metropolitan Opera, Kirstein made Ballet Caravan his personal focus, commissioning new scores and organizing ambitious nationwide tours for the troupe, attempting unsuccessfully to challenge the monopoly on balletic performance controlled by impresario Sol Hurok. In the early 1940s Balanchine and Kirstein would again join forces to form the American Ballet Caravan, contracted by the Department of Inter-American Affairs (led by Kirstein’s close friend Nelson Rockefeller) to undertake several tours of South America, one of many endeavors designed to promote friendly relations between the United States and its southern neighbors in the face of international unrest.

These and the incidents recounted in the foregoing chapters are typically glossed as culminating in the 1948 founding of the New York City Ballet, which recently celebrated its 65th year as a company some thirty years after Balanchine’s death in 1983. The School of American Ballet, now housed at Lincoln Center, has similarly maintained a profile as one of the country’s leading training academies for ballet. The real story of the origins of the enterprise, however, reveals that such success was hardly assured or inevitable. From the false start at Hartford’s nonprofit Avery Memorial museum, to the poorly received debut of the company at the Adelphi Theater, to the mismanaged cross-country tour, to the ill-conceived *Orpheus and Eurydice* production—these and other
incidents did not suggest that triumph was just around the corner for Balanchine and Kirstein. Coupled with the competition of de Basil’s Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the international fame of Léonide Massine, not to mention Balanchine’s personal health issues, it was anything but certain that their ballet enterprise would achieve institutional permanence.

But this new history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise also provides a context to reconsider another received teleology of post-WWII America: the codification of the nonprofit organization as a normative institutional structure in the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, the year that serves as the endpoint of this study. Like countless other performing arts organizations in the United States today, NYCB and SAB are designated as non-profit-making entities referred to by the alphanumeric label “501(c)3,” the section of IRS regulations under which they are organized. This particular designation did not exist prior to 1954, when the Code underwent a significant overhaul during the Eisenhower administration, its first major update since 1927. Unlike previous regulations, under which the performing arts had been organized as more vaguely “charitable” endeavors, the 1954 revisions more formally codified the designation of certain activities, including the performing arts, as non-profit-making endeavors.

It is beyond the scope of a brief conclusion to bring about a new synthesis of sociological and humanistic research methods. But I hope to have demonstrated in this dissertation not just the significance of institutional and economic conditions to understanding cultural history. More important, this examination of the early history of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise shows the need for humanistic research to continue to engage in questions typically under the exclusive purview of sociologists or economists.
If social scientists have offered compelling explanations for when and how the structure of the nonprofit organization evolved, musicologists and dance historians have the knowledge and expertise to answer the question of *why* artists came to favor such a structure over time, how such structures affected the art they produced—and how such structures in turn affect the way we experience and re-imagine their lives and careers today.
Appendix A

Ballets Performed by American Ballet, Ballet Caravan, and American Ballet Caravan, 1934–40

In order of first performance in the United States.

Musical score has same title as ballet unless otherwise noted.

For additional details on ballets, including original performers, consult Balanchine Catalogue and Nancy Reynolds, Repertory in Review.

1934

Mozartiana
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: P. I. Tchaikovsky, Suite No. 4 “Mozartiana” Op. 61
Costumes: Christian Bérard
Date: June 9, 1934

Dreams
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: George Antheil
Costumes: André Derain
Date: June 10, 1934

Serenade
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: P. I. Tchaikovsky, Serenade for Strings Op. 48
Costumes: no credit, rehearsal dress
Date: June 10, 1934

Alma Mater
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Kay Swift, orchestrated by Morton Gould
Libretto: Edward M. M. Warburg
Costumes and Sets: John Held, Jr.
Date: December 6, 1934
Venue: Avery Memorial Theatre, Hartford, Connecticut
Transcendence
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Franz Liszt, *Mephisto Waltz, Ballade, Hungarian Rhapsodies* Nos. 10, 13, 19, arranged by George Antheil
Costumes and Sets: Franklin Watkins
Date: December 6, 1934
Venue: Avery Memorial Theatre, Hartford, Connecticut

Errante
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Franz Schubert “Wanderer” Fantasy, arranged by Charles Koechlin
Costumes and Sets: Pavel Tchelitchev
Date: March 1, 1935
Venue: Adelphi Theatre, New York, New York

Reminiscence
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Benjamin Godard, orchestrated by Henry Brant
Costumes and Sets: Sergei Soudeikine
Date: March 1, 1935
Venue: Adelphi Theatre, New York, New York

La Traviata
Act III divertissement, “Gypsy Dance”
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Date: December 16, 1935
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Faust
Act I, scene 2 incidental dance, “Kermesse”
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Charles Gounod
Date: December 19, 1935
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Aida
Act I and II ballets
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Date: December 20, 1935
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York
Lakmé
Act II ballet
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Léo Delibes
Date: December 23, 1935
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Tannhäuser
Act II ballet
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Richard Wagner
Date: December 26, 1935
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Carmen
Act IV ballet
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Georges Bizet
Date: December 27, 1935
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Rigoletto
Act I incidental dance
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Date: December 28, 1935
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

1936

Mignon
Act I gypsy dance(?)
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Ambroise Thomas
Date: January 4, 1936
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Manon
Act III scene 1(?)
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Jules Massenet
Date: January 10, 1936
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

La Juive
Act I valse, Act III ballet pantomime
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Jacques Halévy  
Date: January 11(?), 1936  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

**La Rondine**  
Act II waltz  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Giacomo Puccini  
Date: January 17, 1936  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

**Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg**  
Act III scene 2 incidental dance  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Richard Wagner  
Date: February 3, 1936  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

**Concerto**  
Choreography: William Dollar and George Balanchine  
Music: Frédéric Chopin, Piano Concerto No. 2 Op. 21  
Costumes and Sets:  
Date: March 8, 1936  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

**The Bartered Bride**  
Act I, II, and III ballets  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Bedrich Smetana  
Date: May 15, 1936  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

**Lucia di Lammermoor**  
Act III scene 1 incidental dance  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Gaetano Donizetti  
Date: May 20, 1936  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

**The Bat**  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Johann Strauss, selections from *Die Fledermaus*  
Costumes and lighting: Keith Martin  
Date: May 20, 1936  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York
Orpheus and Eurydice
Choreography: George Balanchine
Music: Christoph Willibald Gluck
Costumes and décor: Pavel Tchelitchev
Date: May 22, 1936
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Encounter
Choreography: Lew Christensen
Music: W. A. Mozart, “Haffner” Serenade K. 250
Costumes: After drawings of J. G. von Schadow
Date: July 17, 1936
Venue: Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont

Harlequin for President
Choreography: Eugene Loring
Music: Domenico Scarlatti, keyboard sonatas
Costumes: Keith Martin
Date: July 17, 1936
Venue: Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont

Promenade
Choreography: William Dollar
Music: Maurice Ravel, Valses nobles et sentimentales
Costumes: After Horace Vernet
Date: July 18, 1936
Venue: Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont

Pocahontas
Choreography: Lew Christensen
Music: Elliott Carter
Costumes: Karl Free, after the engravings of Theodore de Bry
Date: July 18, 1936
Venue: Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont

The Would-Be Gentleman
Incidental dances
Choreographers: Lew Christensen (Turkish dance), Erick Hawkins (Ballet of the Peacock Among the Roosters), Eugene Loring (Dance of the Tailors and Ballet of the Cooks)
Music: Jean-Baptiste Lully
Costumes: After drawings of J. G. von Schadow
Date: August 3, 1936
Venue: Country Playhouse, Westport, Connecticut
Note: Lew Christensen’s Encounter also interpolated in part as incidental dance

The Soldier and the Gypsy
Choreography: Douglas Coudy
Music: Manuel de Falla, *Seven Popular Songs*
Costumes: Charles Rain
Date: August 17, 1936
Venue: Colonial Theatre, Keene, New Hampshire

*Samson et Dalila*
- Act I incidental dance, Act II scene 2 bacchanale
- Choreography: George Balanchine
- Music: Camille Saint-Saëns
- Date: December 26, 1936
- Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

1937

*Le Coq d'Or*
- Incidental dances
- Choreography: George Balanchine
- Music: Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
- Date: February 4, 1937
- Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

*Caponsacchi*
- Act I ballet
- Choreography: George Balanchine
- Music: Richard Hageman
- Date: February 4, 1937
- Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

*La Gioconda*
- Choreography: George Balanchine
- Music: Amilcare Ponchielli
- Date: February 18, 1937
- Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

*Apollon Musagète*
- Choreography: George Balanchine
- Music: Igor Stravinsky
- Date: April 27, 1937
- Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

*Jeu de Cartes*
- Choreography: George Balanchine
- Music: Igor Stravinsky
- Date: April 27, 1937
- Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York
Le Baiser de la Fée  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Igor Stravinsky  
Date: April 27, 1937  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Marouf  
Act II “oriental dance”  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Henri Rabaud  
Date: May 21, 1937  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

Yankee Clipper  
Choreography: Eugene Loring  
Music: Paul Bowles  
Costumes: Charles Rain  
Date: July 12, 1937  
Venue: Town Hall, Saybrook, Connecticut

Folk Dance  
Choreography: Douglas Coudy  
Music: Emmanuel Chabrier  
Date: July 15, 1937  
Venue: Town Hall, Saybrook, Connecticut

Show Piece  
Choreography: Erick Hawkins  
Music: Robert McBride  
Costumes: Keith Martin  
Date: July 15, 1937  
Venue: Town Hall, Saybrook, Connecticut

Roméo et Juliette  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Charles Gounod  
Date: December 16, 1937  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York

1938

Don Giovanni  
Act II incidental dance  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: W. A. Mozart  
Date: January 1, 1938  
Venue: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, New York
**Filling Station**  
Choreography: Lew Christensen  
Music: Virgil Thomson  
Costumes and decor: Paul Cadmus  
Date: January 6, 1938  
Venue: Avery Memorial Theatre, Hartford, Connecticut

**Romeo and Juliet Ballet**  
Dance number for *The Goldwyn Follies*  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Vernon Duke  
Date: January 28, 1938  
Venue: World premiere screening in Miami, Florida

**Water Nymph Ballet**  
Dance number for *The Goldwyn Follies*  
Choreography: George Balanchine  
Music: Vernon Duke  
Date: January 28, 1938  
Venue: World premiere screening in Miami, Florida

**Air and Variations**  
Choreography: William Dollar  
Music: J. S. Bach, *Goldberg Variations*  
Costumes: Walter Gifford  
Date: April 25, 1938  
Venue: Winthrop College, Rock Hill, South Carolina

**Billy the Kid**  
Choreography: Eugene Loring  
Music: Aaron Copland  
Costumes and Décor: Jared French  
Date: October 6, 1938  
Venue: Chicago Civic Theater, Chicago, Illinois

**1939**

**Charade or The Debutante**  
Choreography: Lew Christensen  
Music: Stephen Foster and Louis Gottschalk, arranged by Trude Rittman  
Costumes and Décor: Alvin Colt  
Date: October 17, 1939  
Venue: Lancaster, Pennsylvania

**City Portrait**  
Choreography: Eugene Loring
Music: Henry Brant
Costumes: Forrest Thayr, Jr.
Date: October 23, 1939
Venue: Four Arts Club, Mobile, Alabama

1940

*A Thousand Times Neigh!*
Choreography: William Dollar
Music: Tom Bennett
Libretto: Edward Mabley
Costumes: Alvin Colt
Date: May 18, 1940
Appendix B

Performance Chronology of the American Ballet, 1934–35

Date: June 9, 1934¹
City: White Plains, New York
Venue: Woodlands, Estate of Frieda and Felix Warburg
Repertoire: *Mozartiana*
Note: Performance canceled due to rain after *Mozartiana*

Date: June 10, 1934²
City: White Plains, New York
Venue: Woodlands, Estate of Frieda and Felix Warburg
Repertoire: *Dreams, Serenade, Mozartiana*
Note: Rescheduled performance

Dates: December 6–8 (with December 8 matinee), 1934³
City: Hartford, Connecticut
Venue: Avery Memorial Theater, Wadsworth Atheneum
Repertoire: *Mozartiana, Alma Mater, Transcendence*

Dates: February 7–8, 1935⁴
City: Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
Venue: Goodhart Hall, Bryn Mawr College
Repertoire: *Serenade, Alma Mater, Transcendence*


³ Program (December 8 matinee) and Souvenir Program, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook; John F. Kyes, “Native Ballet in Hartford Premiere,” *MA*, December 25, 1934, 34; Press release and Flier, Producing Company Scrapbook. NOTE: Although *Serenade* was initially scheduled to be given on the final evening performance on December 8, it was scrapped and replaced by *Mozartiana*. See LK Diaries, December 8, 1934.

⁴ LK Diaries, January 19, February 5, 6, 7, 8; Program, Patterson–Dollar Papers, Scrapbook, Box 18; “Artistic Offering by American Ballet” and “American Ballet: New Dance Group Under Balanchine in Program at Bryn Mawr College,” unidentified clippings, Patterson–Dollar Papers, Scrapbook, Box 18.
Dates: March 1–4 (with March 2 matinee), 1935
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Serenade, Alma Mater, Errante, Reminiscence*

Dates: March 5–6, 1935
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Dreams, Alma Mater, Transcendence*

Dates: March 7–8, 1935
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Serenade, Reminiscence, Transcendence*

Date: March 9, 1935 (matinee)
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Serenade, Alma Mater, Reminiscence*

Date: March 9–10, 1935
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Errante, Alma Mater, Reminiscence*

Dates: March 11–12, 1935
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Alma Mater, Errante, Reminiscence*

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6 Programs, Leda Anchutina, Gisella Caccialanza, MGZB Programs, Vertical File, NYPL.


10 Program, Charles Laskey, MGZB Programs, Vertical File, NYPL.
Date: March 13–14, 1935\textsuperscript{11}
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Serenade, Dreams, Reminiscence*

Date: March 15, 1935\textsuperscript{12}
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Alma Mater, Errante, Reminiscence*

Date: March 16, 1935 (matinee)\textsuperscript{13}
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Alma Mater, Dreams, Errante*

Dates: March 16–17, 1935\textsuperscript{14}
City: New York, New York
Venue: Adelphi Theatre
Repertoire: *Reminiscence, Errante, Transcendence*

Date: August 12, 19, 1935\textsuperscript{15}
City: New York, New York
Venue: Lewisohn Stadium
Repertoire: *Reminiscence, Alma Mater, Serenade*

\textsuperscript{12} “*Alma Mater* to be Given,” *NYHT*, March 14, 1935; Advertisement, *NYT*, March 15, 1935.
\textsuperscript{13} “*Alma Mater* to be Given,” *NYHT*, March 14, 1935; Advertisement, *NYHT*, March 16, 1935.

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Date: August 16–17, 1935
City: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Venue: Robin Hood Dell
Repertoire: Serenade, Alma Mater, Reminiscence

Date: September 28, 1935
City: White Plains, New York
Venue: Westchester County Center, Benefit for Rock Hill Camp Fund, presented by Westchester County Girl Scouts
Repertoire: Overture to The Bat (Strauss), Mozartiana, Rhapsody in Blue (Gershwin), Alma Mater, Golliwogg’s Cake Walk (Debussy), Reminiscence.

Date: October 15, 1935
City: Greenwich, Connecticut
Venue: Greenwich High School Auditorium, presented by the Wednesday Singing Club
Repertoire: Serenade, Alma Mater, Reminiscence

Date: October 16, 1935
City: Bridgeport, Connecticut
Venue: Central High School Auditorium, presented by Musical Research Club of Bridgeport
Repertoire: Mozartiana, Alma Mater, Reminiscence

October 17, 1935
City: New Haven, Connecticut

16 “American Ballet Listed at Dell Next Thursday,” “Limbering Up for the Dell,” and “Dell Patrons Welcome American Ballet Dancers,” unidentified clippings, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook. Anatole Chujoy claims that both the Thursday and Friday night shows were rained out and that the troupe performed on Saturday and Sunday nights. This needs to be corroborated by press from Philadelphia. See Chujoy, The New York City Ballet, 51. One clipping mentions a rain delay, though it does not specify the specific day: “The performance scheduled for last night was rained out,” “Limbering up for the Dell,” Philadelphia Record, undated clipping, Patterson–Dollar Scrapbook. Philip Klein’s review in the Daily News references two performances by the company “after three nights of rain” but does not specify which days the performances (or the rain) occurred on.

17 Program, Patterson–Dollar Papers, Box 1, Folder 2; “Ballet in Westchester To Aid Girl Scout Camp,” NYHT, August 11, 1935.
18 Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook; “Ballet To Carry Out Metropolitan Plans,” NYT, October 27, 1935
Venue: Shubert Theatre
Repertoire: Overture to *Marriage of Figaro* (Mozart), *Mozartiana*, *España* (Chabrier); *Alma Mater*, *Pavane et Saltarello* (Pierné), *Reminiscence*

Date: October 18, 1935
City: Allentown, Pennsylvania
Venue: Lyric Theatre
Repertoire: Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (Glinka); *Serenade*, *España* (Chabrier); *Alma Mater*, *Pavane et Saltarello* (Pierné); *Reminiscence*

Date: October 19, 1935
City: Princeton, New Jersey
Venue: McCarter Theatre
Repertoire: Overture to *Marriage of Figaro* (Mozart), *Mozartiana*, *Alma Mater*, *Pavane et Saltarello* (Pierné), *Reminiscence*

Date: October 21, 1935
City: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
Venue: Majestic Theater
Repertoire: Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (Glinka); *Serenade*, *España* (Chabrier); *Alma Mater*, *Pavane et Saltarello* (Pierné); *Reminiscence*

Date: October 22, 1935
City: Scranton, Pennsylvania
Venue: Temple Theatre
Repertoire: Overture to *Marriage of Figaro* (Mozart), *Mozartiana*, *España* (Chabrier), *Alma Mater*, *Pavane et Saltarello* (Pierné), *Reminiscence*

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Appendix C

Performance Chronology of Ballet Caravan, 1936–37

Date: July 17–18, 1936
City: Bennington, VT
Venue: Bennington College
Repertoire: July 17: *Encounter, Harlequin’s Election* (later renamed), and divertissements; Program 2: *Promenade, Pocahontas.*

Date: July 20, 1936, 8:30 pm
City: Burlington, VT
Venue: City Hall Auditorium, University of Vermont Summer Session
Repertoire: *Promenade, Harlequin for President, Pocahontas*

Date: July 21, 1936
City: Middlebury, VT
Venue: Middlebury College gymnasium, presented by Prof. André Morize’s Summer School of French
Repertoire: unknown

Date: August 3–8?, 1936
City: Westport, CT
Venue: Country Playhouse

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2 Lincoln Kirstein to Rose and Louis Kirstein, July 9, 1936; LK Diaries, July 24, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” *NYHT*, August 30, 1936; Program and flier, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
3 Lincoln Kirstein to Rose and Louis Kirstein, July 9, 1936; LK Diaries, July 24, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” *NYHT*, August 30, 1936.
Date: August 9, 1936
City: East Hampton, NY
Venue: Playhouse Gardens, Estate of Mrs. Lorenzo E. Woodhouse
Repertoire: *Harlequin for President*, and other unidentified ballets.

Date: August 17, 1936, 8:30pm
City: Keene, NH
Venue: Colonial Theatre
Repertoire: *Harlequin, The Soldier and the Gypsy, Pocahontas*

Date: August 18, 1936
City: Dorset, VT
Venue: The Playhouse
Repertoire: *Promenade, Pocahontas, Encounter*

Date: August 20, 1936
City: Woodstock, VT
Venue: The Woodstock Theatre
Repertoire: *Promenade, Soldier and the Gypsy, Encounter, Pocahontas*


6 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” *NYHT*, August 30, 1936; Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook; Program, Charles Laskey, MGZB Programs, Vertical File, NYPL.

7 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” *NYHT*, August 30, 1936; Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook. An article in the *New York Herald Tribune* announced a performance by the troupe in Manchester on this same day. See “Manchester Plans Ballet Caravan for Summer Visitors,” *NYHT*, August 9, 1936. However, no other references to this performance are in evidence in Kirstein’s diaries or correspondence or in the Douglas Coudy Scrapbook, suggesting it may not have taken place, especially since the Dorset performance on the same day is documented in multiple sources.

8 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” *NYHT*, August 30, 1936; Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
Date: August 24, 1936, 8pm
City: Claremont, NH
Venue: The Latchis Theatre
Repertoire: *Encounter, Pocahontas, Soldier and the Gypsy*

Date: August 26
City: Skowhegan, ME
Venue: The Lakewood Theater
Repertoire:

Dates: August 31–September 7
City: Ogunquit, ME
Venue: Ogunquit Playhouse, operated by Walter Hartwig
Repertoire: August 31 and September 1: *Promenade, Harlequin for President, Encounter*; September 2, 3: *Pocahontas, Promenade, Encounter*; September 4 (matinee and evening): *Soldier and the Gypsy, Pocahontas, Encounter*; September 5: Harlequin for President, Promenade, Soldier and the Gypsy; September 7 (Labor Day), Gala performance: *Soldier and the Gypsy, Pocahontas, Promenade*.

Date: October 13, 1936
City: New York, NY
Venue: New School for Social Research
Repertoire: Lecture by Lincoln Kirstein on “Development of the Ballet” with demonstrations by Ballet Caravan, part of “The Dance in the Social Scene” series. (Per 10/13 notice in NYT, Balanchine and members of the American Ballet gave a lecture demonstration on the same evening.)

Date: October 20, 1936
City: Montpelier, VT
Venue: Montpelier City Hall Auditorium, presented by Montpelier Theatre Guild
Repertoire: *Promenade, Soldier and the Gypsy, Encounter*

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10 LK Diaries, August 29, 1936; “Ballet Closes Tour,” *NYHT*, August 30, 1936; Program, American Ballet Caravan Scrapbook. *MGZRS, NYPL.*
13 Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
Date: October 22, 1936
City: Amherst, MA
Venue: College Hall, Amherst College, presented by Amherst Masquers
Repertoire: Promenade, Soldier and the Gypsy, Harlequin for President

Date: October 26, 1936
City: Northampton, MA
Venue: Smith College
Repertoire: Encounter, Pocahontas, Harlequin for President

Dates: October 31 and November 1, 1936
City: New York, NY
Venue: Theresa Kaufmann Auditorium, YMHA

Date: November 18, 1936
City: Danbury, CT
Venue: unidentified high school
Repertoire: Encounter, The Soldier and the Gypsy, Harlequin

Date: December 1, 1936
City: Hartford, CT
Venue: Woman’s Club Auditorium, presented by Hartford Woman’s Club
Repertoire: Promenade, Harlequin, Soldier and the Gypsy, Encounter

14 “Current Happenings on College Campuses,” NYT, October 11, 1936; Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, October 6, 1936, LEK Collection; Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
15 Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
1937

Date: July 12–17, 1937
City: Saybrook, CT
Venue: Town Hall

Date: July 19–20, 1937
City: Philadelphia, PA
Venue: Robin Hood Dell
Repertoire: July 19: *Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Encounter*; July 20: *Promenade, Harlequin for President, Folk Dance*.

Date: July 24, 1937
City: Bennington, VT
Venue: Vermont State Armory, presented by Bennington College School of the Dance
Repertoire: *Encounter, Yankee Clipper, Show Piece*

Date: July 26, 1937
City: Burlington, VT
Venue: Southwick Memorial Auditorium, University of Vermont Summer Session
Repertoire: *Folk Dance, Yankee Clipper, Show Piece*

Date: July 27, 1937
City: Montpelier, VT

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Venue: City Hall Auditorium, presented by Montpelier Theatre Guild
Repertoire: *Folk Dance, Yankee Clipper, Show Piece*

Date: July 29, 1937
City: Manchester, VT
Venue: Modern Theater
Repertoire: *Encounter, Yankee Clipper, Folk Dance*

Dates: August 4–7, 1937
City: Gloucester, MA
Venue: American Legion Hall
Repertoire: August 4, 5: *Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Encounter*; August 6, 7: other program

Date: August 10, 1937
City: Orono, ME
Venue: Little Theatre, University of Maine Summer Session
Repertoire: *Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Encounter*

Date: August 12, 1937, 3:30 and 8:30
City: Bar Harbor, ME
Venue: Mount Desert Island, Building of the Arts
Repertoire: Matinee: *Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Encounter*; Evening: *Folk Dance, Show Piece, Harlequin for President.*

Mrs. and Mrs. Edsel Ford Noted among advance reservations; in August 1 NYT billed as American Ballet Caravan directed by Warburg and Kirstein.

Date: August 17, 1937
City: Keene, NH
Venue: Colonial Theatre

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28 Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook; Program, American Ballet Programs.
Repertoire: *Show Piece, Yankee Clipper, Encounter*

Date: November 2, 1937
City: Worcester, MA
Venue: Clark University
Repertoire: *Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Encounter*

Date: November 8, 1937
City: Lowell, MA
Venue: Lowell Memorial Auditorium
Repertoire: *Folk Dance, Harlequin for President, Encounter*

Date: November 15, 1937
City: Cortland, NY
Venue: Cortland Normal School Auditorium
Repertoire: *Show Piece, Yankee Clipper, Encounter*

Date: November 17, 1937
City: Aurora, New York
Venue: Macmillan Hall, Wells College
Repertoire: *Show Piece, Yankee Clipper, Promenade*

Date: November 18–19, 1937
City: Syracuse, New York
Venue: Civic University Theatre
Repertoire: 18: *Yankee Clipper, Promenade, Encounter*; 19: ?

Date: November 20, 1937
City: Mansfield, PA

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29 Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
31 Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, November 13, 1937, LEK Collection; Program, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
32 Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, November 13, 1937, LEK Collection.
33 Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, November 13, 1937, LEK Collection; Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, November 26, 1937, LEK Collection; “Ballet Caravan Opens at Civic Theatre,” *Daily Orange* November 19, 1937 (per copy in Douglas Coudy Scrapbook); Flier, Douglas Coudy Scrapbook.
34 Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, November 13, 1937, LEK Collection.
Date: November 29, 1937
City: Brooklyn, NY
Venue: Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences “Music and Dance” series
Repertoire: Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Show Piece

Date: December 1, 1937
City: Washington, DC
Venue: Roosevelt High School Auditorium, presented by National Concert Plan and Community Center Department of the DC Public Schools
Repertoire: Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Encounter

Date: December 10, 1937
City: Cumberland, MD

Dates: December 12, 1937
City: New York, NY
Venue: Dance International “Evening of Ballet,” Center Theater
Repertoire: Show Piece

Dates: December 15–31
City: New York, NY
Venue: Julien Levy Galleries, 15 E. 57th St.
Repertoire: Group Exhibition “Ballet Caravan Collaborators,” including work by Paul Cadmus (Filling Station), Karl Free (Pocahontas), Keith Martin (Harlequin for President and Show Piece), Charles Rain (Folk Dance and Yankee Clipper)

Dates: December 15–18, 1937
City: Pittsburgh, PA

37 Lincoln Kirstein to Louis Kirstein, December 2, 1937
Date: December 27, 1937
City: New York, NY
Venue: Washington Irving High School, Students’ Dance Recitals
Repertoire: Promenade, Yankee Clipper, Show Piece

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