

A Conversation on Staging for the Balanchine Trust

by Elizabeth McPherson

March 2011 --
Sarasota, Florida

The first abstract George Balanchine ballet I saw was Concerto Barocco, performed by Ohio Ballet in Nashville, Tennessee when I was around 13. It was a profound experience. I fell in love with Balanchine's choreography, and I have never lost my



"Divertimento No. 15"

love for it. As a student at Juilliard, I danced the opening section of Serenade which was glorious! The simplicity of the beginning; the interweaving of the dancers; the masterful use of space – being inside the choreography brought yet a stronger appreciation of Balanchine as a choreographer. While in Sarasota, Florida recently, I had the opportunity to hear Sandra Jennings and Paul Boos, two staggers from the Balanchine Trust, speak about their experiences dancing for Balanchine and about staging his ballets. This discussion took place on March 17, 2011 at the Historic Asolo Theatre. Boos and Jennings were in Sarasota staging Balanchine ballets for the Sarasota Ballet directed by Iain Webb who was the moderator for the discussion. Both Boos and Jennings were hand-picked by Balanchine to join New York City Ballet. They are passionate about their work and the responsibility it entails in preserving Balanchine's legacy. They told fascinating stories about growing up dancing, and making their way to New York and ultimately NYCB. Jennings came to New York from Boston as a fourteen year old, only weighing 50 pounds and reaching a mere 4 foot 11 inches. She soon had a growth spurt and was on her way to joining NYCB at the age of seventeen. Boos grew up in South Dakota where his father was a sheriff. Both parents were a little unsure of this path as a dancer that their son was following. At the age of fifteen, he made his way to New York with a scholarship to David Howard's summer program after which Patricia Wilde helped him secure a scholarship to the American Ballet Theatre School. He later studied at the School of American Ballet, joining NYCB at the age of eighteen.

Because I have staged several older modern dance works, what was most interesting to me in this discussion was the topic of preserving Balanchine's legacy. A central question was how much do you let his choreography shift with the changing times and with different casts? Boos and Jennings indicated their beliefs of "not much." It is a very difficult balance to let dancers of today fully inhabit a Balanchine ballet without any modifications related to their different training, experiences, and personalities from the original cast. At the same time, ballets can so easily morph into something quite different from the original. Case in point is Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'après midi d'un Faune*. The ballet continued to be performed in repertory by various companies from the time of its creation into the 1980s. However, Nijinsky's notation of the ballet was "decoded" in the late 1980s to reveal a more subtle ballet than what had been being performed. It is this sort of transformation (like the children's game of "telephone") that I believe Boos and Jennings are working to guard against. Boos told one story of seeing that the video being sent out with staggers of a particular ballet was of a performance he had danced in and made a mistake. (A note is now going out with that video explaining the mistake.) This is a pertinent example of one of the age-old problems with staging from video -- each performance is unique, and humans make mistakes that may well be recorded on a

video.

When the discussion was opened to questions from the audience, I asked how the two stagers view the transformations through the years of such older ballets as Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty. They both believe there is value to these dances continuing to be performed despite changes in tempo and other modulations that have inevitably occurred. Jennings particularly seemed proud to link her own dance lineage to these ballets. She studied with Alexandra Danilova and Felia Doubrovska, not to mention Balanchine himself, all of whom danced at the Mariinsky Theatre in Russia where the ballets premiered (as choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov). My sense was that Boos and Jennings are much more protective of Balanchine's choreography than that of Petipa and Ivanov. Of course, staging Balanchine's ballets is their job, and with other choreography, they are now observers. Alas, the time frame for this discussion was up with questions left unanswered. In terms of staging dances after a choreographer's death, many questions are unanswerable in a definitive manner. But by asking them and exploring possible answers, we continue an important dialogue on maintaining dance legacy.