



BWW Dance Interview: Paul Boos

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Born in Sioux Falls, SD, Mr. Boos relocated himself to NY at 15 to study dance on full scholarship at the Harkness House. Following this, he studied on scholarship at the American Ballet Theater School, and finally the School of American Ballet. It was at SAB, while working extensively with both George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, that Mr. Boos developed an intimate understanding of the connection between music and movement. After dancing principal roles in Balanchine's *Symphony in C* and Robbins' *Dances At a Gathering* as part of the SAB workshops, Mr. Boos was asked to join New York City Ballet at the age of 18.

Mr. Boos went on to dance with NYCB for 13 years before launching into the international scene as a guest teacher, initially with the Royal Danish Ballet where he taught for three years. In 1992, Mr. Boos was entrusted by the George Balanchine Trust to become a sanctioned répétiteur. Since then he has gone on to stage ballets all over the world with such companies as the Paris Opera, Bolshoi, Mariinsky, La Scala, the Joffrey, and others.

In 2016 The George Balanchine Foundation named Mr. Boos as "Project Associate" for its Interpreters Archive (IA). The IA, under the direction of Nancy Reynolds, preserves Balanchine's oeuvre by recording original principal cast members and dancers who worked closely with Balanchine himself in rehearsal, coaching today's dancers and documenting Balanchine's original intention of his ballets.

Known for his exacting eye and devotion to musicality, Mr. Boos teaches a class which emphasizes accepting full responsibility and understanding of the body's movement. Through this common sense approach, dancers develop a disciplined command of their bodies, secure in the ability to apply technique.

It is these tenets for simple, honest teaching that Mr. Boos learned while working alongside Balanchine and Robbins that have allowed him to excel in his capacity as master teacher, role assignation, and stager of ballets to this day.

Broadwayworld Dance recently sat down to talk with Mr. Boos.

Q. Tell me where you were born and earliest influences, training, performances, etc.

A. I'm originally from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the sixth of seven children. My parents came from two disparate worlds: my father from rural Minnesota and my mother from Brooklyn. They were both into the military and met during World War II. Our household reflected a certain amount of that strict discipline, especially from our mother. She signed up two of my sisters for ballet and was baited by their teacher, Mrs. Petersen, to include me in the package, a sort of Billy Elliot story.

Mrs. Petersen was a benign and sweet first-steps teacher who handed the studio over to a Hungarian refugee couple, Judith and Miklos Szakats. Miklos was once married to one of Vaslav Nijinsky's daughters! We had yearly recitals that still make me cringe when I think of them.

My first viewing of professional ballet was Minnesota Dance Theater, and on that program was Balanchine's *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*. Shortly after, Washington DC's National Ballet came to town, and I saw Ben Stevenson's *Wild Boy*. On television, I remember seeing Rudolf Nureyev in the National Ballet of Canada's *Sleeping Beauty*.

Q. When you were 15 you received a scholarship to study at Harkness, after which you studied at the ABT school and finally at SAB. Tell me about that trajectory.

A. It was David Howard's invitation that brought me to New York to study at Harkness on a scholarship. I auditioned for him in Chicago at a dance convention; subsequently he remained a silent and positive presence during my entire career. I was very emotional when I was asked to teach his morning classes following his death. He was a true altruist.

I was a 15-year-old boy from South Dakota arriving in NYC in the summer of 1973, stunned by the city's wealth, diversity, summer heat, and urban smells. Getting lost in the sweltering subway between Brooklyn and Manhattan was a regular occurrence. Harkness was a *trip*, housed in an enormous mansion on the east-side with Dali paintings draping the walls. Encased at the foot of a Hollywood circular staircase was a Dali 18K gold chalice, studded with mechanical butterflies made from emeralds, diamonds and rubies. That was my first NYC dance studio!

At Harkness we were given ballet classes taught by Russian guest teachers, as well as director David Howard and Maria Vegh. Ballet was augmented with flamenco, jazz and modern. I had to go out and buy a pair of castanets!

By then I'd drunk the NYC Kool-Aid and had no intention of returning to Sioux Falls. I auditioned at the ABT School, where Pat Wilde made an offer I couldn't refuse. My mother actually accused me of lying when I told her that Pat had offered me full tuition to both ABT and the Professional Children's Schools, as well as a stipend. When she met Pat and Leon Danielian, the co-head of the ABT school and heard their offer, she said, "You mean he has talent?"

Q. What was it like at ABT?

A. It was the golden era at ABT. Students rubbed elbows in studios bustling with the coddled foreign stars and its disgruntled American stars.

Q. What was the audition like at SAB?

A. SAB's audition was comical. I was asked to show up on a certain Wednesday to be looked over by Mme. Tumkovsky, a famously no nonsense horse trainer of a teacher. She saw your talents and flaws in a flash and remembered everyone and everything. She looked at three or four decisive actions from her applicants and made her decision to admit or reject.

Once admitted, I was only allowed to take intermediate classes, but after a week or two came the news that I was promoted to the "Advanced Men's" class. This meant I would have two ballet classes a day, as well as pas de deux twice a week. The big news was that I'd be in Stanley Williams' class, which was populated by the likes of Fernando Bujones, Peter Schaufuss, Peter Martins, Rudolf Nureyev and later Baryshnikov.

For my junior and senior year SAB graduation performances, Suki Schorer cast me in her stagings of first, *Allegro Brillante* and then *Symphony in C*; Alexandra Danilova cast me as a Tatar warrior in *Prince Igor*, and Jerome Robbins cast me in *Dances at a Gathering*.

Q. Describe going into your first company class?

A. It began with Lincoln Kirstein, who was also ever present. His office was at SAB, just outside the studio where Stanley taught. Lincoln caught sight of me in a *Tarantella* rehearsal for SAB's Education Department's lecture demonstration series and afterwards he instructed me to go to company class. This was without Mr. B's knowing anything about it. Shortly after Mr. B began class the next day he asked me who I was, and when I told him Lincoln sent me, he just smiled and continued teaching. At the end of class he very diplomatically thanked me and told me that I needed one more year in the school. Agreed!

Q. You said that working with Balanchine meant business?

A. My first rehearsal with him was a casting call for a student production of *Prince Igor*. He lined the boys up in a diagonal and asked for Kevin to step forward. There were two Kevins in our class, and the pushy big-headed of the two stepped forward. We all knew this was a mistake. Balanchine made it clear he wanted the other Kevin to step forward, not him. This Kevin got his nerve up to say, "Well, I **AM** Kevin," to which Balanchine said, "Well, I'M George, and if anyone in this room is named George, then **he's** welcome to run the rehearsal!" Kevin's tail went straight between his legs and rehearsal resumed with no question. Mr. B meant business.

Soon after, Mr. B assembled a group of sixteen school dancers for a Juilliard Opera production of Charbrier's *Le roi malgré lui*. This was my first real taste of Balanchine at work. He set up a group of four quadrilles, very similar to his *Tombeau de Couperin*, and choreographed most of the ballet on my partner and me, but he seemed most focused on testing my physical strengths at the time. He handled me like a butcher, pulling, pushing, sometimes punching, and always challenging my limitations. I was determined, but I felt like a total disappointment to him. It was humiliating. With the little pride I could muster I decided to ask him to replace me with someone more capable; clearly I couldn't meet his expectations. Later that morning there was a posting on the men's dressing room: "Paul Boos report to company class tomorrow."

Q. Describe company class and working with Balanchine.

A. Mr. B was a constant presence at the school; heartbeats quickly rose and relaxed attitudes ceased.

At that time, the company had more than one hundred dancers and nearly everyone was in class. It was PACKED. It felt like a Rubic's Cube. As friendly as everyone was, there was definitely a competitive air in the room, especially with the women. As soon as Mr. B entered the room from the corner by the service elevator, dancers gravitated to their place at the barre and awaited his commands. Occasionally he'd give a plié combination and often he just let the pianist play. We'd do our own starting pliés while he'd converse, mostly with principal dancers about the previous night's performance. His subsequent exercises were repetitive, specific, scientific in matching our bodies to musical phrases; he sculpted our bodies into pliant steel. The barre could be as short at ten minutes, but we were never unprepared for what followed. For me, it was a brutal assault.

After a year or two, I found my body responded better if I took barre from Maggie Black as my warm up. That required subway rides to Union Square and then uptown to Lincoln Center. There were four or five of us, mostly men, who did this on a regular basis. His class was almost entirely focused on the women. "Ballet is Woman." Right?

There was a period where it seemed all he gave the women were bourrées in every possible direction, circles, triangles, zig-zags, forwards, backwards. It was amazing to watch these women buzzing across the floor like centipedes. People like to say he used class as an experiment in choreography, but he gave straightforward classical steps, just faster, slower, bigger.

Q. What were your first roles in the corps? Could you describe a few of them in detail? The choreography and how it felt to dance them?

A. The first NYCB ballets I remember dancing, aside from *Nutcracker* parent, mouse and Hot Chocolate, are *Diamonds*, *Stars and Stripes* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I blanked after the first entrance in *Stars* and faked it until the end. When we exited, I was sure I'd be instantly ejected from the theater. It was the last time I blanked, though I still do in my dreams. *Diamonds* and *Midsummer* confused me because the boys would appear, move to the sides, reappear and return to the sides. All the music was repetitive and nearly identical, so I couldn't identify which was which, and I often felt lost. Once I started learning the modern composers, that fog lifted. I was riveted with constant change in combinations of rhythmic complexities. *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* I learned in an hour and performed it a few days later. It seemed to fit like a glove. I was working with original cast members who kept an eye out for me. Not all partners are easy to work with. I was lucky most of the time.

Q. How would you describe Balanchine's relationship between music and dance?

A. First of all, when he taught class is was more like a conductor running a rehearsal; the attention to synching our movement to mirror the rhythms of the piano was paramount. It was common for him to challenge the dancers in class, to move the legs in repetitions of five and the upper body in 4, or vice versa, with the music in 4/4. These musical exercises, or games, prepared us for the Webern and Stravinsky in the rep. In the Webern/Balanchine *Episodes*, at one point in the "Symphony" section, the men flip the ladies upside down-it's a literal reflection of the score. Mr. B's musicality wasn't necessarily "literal," step per note per se, but occasionally he couldn't resist the fun of it. How many choreographers can read a score by Webern? We all know that he studied composition and piano at the St. Petersburg Conservatory when he wasn't in ballet class, or scrambling for food to survive, but not until you witnessed this first hand did you understand music was the air he breathed.

Q. You also worked with Jerome Robbins. What roles did you dance? How were his rehearsal methods and stage directions?

A. Jerry decided to work with the school on our workshop end of year performance, my last year before joining the company. It was then that I got to know Jerry. We learned the steps from Sally (Sara) Leland and then Jerry took over with excerpts of his masterpiece, *Dances at a Gathering*. I really feel he loved us. Once Jerry got his hands on us it was pure heaven. We couldn't wait for him to come back and see how we'd improved from day to day. At one point in the Grand Waltz I tossed Lindy Roy to Wally (Patrick) Bissell. The choreography calls for a double tour, but Lindy was a daredevil, and we increased it to a triple. It scared the hell out of Jerry, and he wouldn't let us repeat it again. My friendly relationship with Jerry sustained over the years, always on an affectionate basis, even when he ripped me a new one. Where Balanchine mostly ignored his men, Jerry did not. It balanced our sense of validation, like having two parents. Jerry was famous for his insecurity and taking it out on dancers. I found that if you *really* listened and got it right the first time, there were no confrontations, but if you didn't, you learned very quickly to pay better attention. Not everyone felt his attacks were deserved or healthy. I just learned to prick up my ears and steer clear when he was most neurotic. He came prepared, as if his mother was looking over his shoulder, whereas Balanchine always seemed to toss material off, as if he were brushing his teeth. Throughout my 13 years in the company I danced in most of Jerry's ballets--*Goldberg Variations*, *Four Seasons*--and nearly all corps de ballet roles.

Q. You retired from dancing at a very early age, 30 I believe. Did you prepare your next career move in advance?

A. Close, I was 32. The Dancers Transition Fund was founded around that time, and I was able to reach out to them for advice. Systematically they walked me through financial preparedness, emotional preparedness, and finally aptitude in alternatives. Banking was their solution! The more I soul searched the more I was convinced that I wasn't ready to abandon dance. Teaching seemed to be a viable option. Karin von Aroldingen was staging ballets during the latter part of her dancing career, and she often asked me about steps and counts, particularly in *Violin Concerto*. Only then did I consider the possibility of staging ballets. When Jerry knew I was planning to leave the company he asked me to make a list of ballets I felt qualified to stage. Sadly, nothing ever came of that. However, when I told Barbara Horgan, Balanchine's right hand, that I'd be moving to Copenhagen after my last performance, she made a mental note. Nearly a year later I was handed a telegram from Barbara before a company class I was teaching at the Royal Danish Ballet, asking me to rehearse *Serenade* and *Theme and Variations* at the Mikhailovsky Theater in St. Petersburg. I never actually prepared for the job.

Q. How do you go working with a new company, particularly one that is not used to the Balanchine style? How do you win dancers over when facing the difficulties of Balanchine's choreography?

A. Funny that you put it that way, because winning them over is often what has to be done. It's more of a seduction, especially in Eastern Europe and in some capital cities that have traditions in ballet older than our country. Balanchine's choreography is deceptively difficult: it looks easy, but when you break things down, its logic and specificity can leave a dancer's vulnerabilities open for all to see. When a leading dancer recognizes his flaws will be front stage and center, I can be met with obstinate resistance, and even worse, suggestions to alter choreography to suit that dancer's guaranteed crowd pleasing tricks. It's awkward at best and a deal breaker at worst. A stager's worst nightmare is that once we get on a plane, the dancers rebel and accommodate their ego by changing tempos and steps to what is comfortable. This behavior means the audience is no longer getting what they paid for, a Balanchine ballet. When the ballet I'm staging is a technical ballet, I offer to teach company classes to augment and bolster the general understanding of how to move in a 20th century classical way. The speed and pliancy of Balanchine ballets takes time and effort; you need classes to build that strength. In some union companies guests aren't allowed to teach for various contractual reasons. Each Balanchine ballet has its singular splendor, and when secure dancers recognize that, they generally rise to the occasion, or they simply do their best. If it's a Stravinsky ballet I spend just as much time easing dancers musical insecurity; if they're intimidated by a complex score they have to be confident when the curtain goes up. So teaching steps and music is very important.

Q. While staging a ballet have you witnessed or experienced any mishaps?

A. Well, in Grand Rapids I made the mistake of showing the prodigal how to climb up and slide down the inclined table, only to slide down onto and sprain (3rd degree) my ankle. As a freelance agent there is NO insurance or workers compensation provided to its répétiteurs by The George Balanchine Trust. We are on our own if we hurt ourselves demonstrating steps or partnering. I pulled my back out in Paris while staging three ballets simultaneously. And in Athens I had to call in sick on my first five days of work because I had an appendicitis attack, and appendectomy. That's a hilarious, near fatal story.

As far as dancers' mishaps, there have been plenty of slips and falls caused by slippery spots on the stage, nerves, or overzealous performers landing face down. I have to say probably the worst experience was in St. Petersburg while staging *Prodigal Son*. Igor Zelensky desperately wanted to dance the son, and no matter how much I tried to convince him otherwise, he and the theater insisted I give him a chance to learn it. There's a fiendishly difficult press lift that the son does with the siren clamped and perched on his neck. Over rehearsing it can seriously damage the son's spine, and in Igor's case the lift put his back into immediate spasm. He had to be flown to a spine specialist in Austria for treatment. He lost six months of work during the height of his career. I hate to think of the money he lost.

Q. What would be your proudest moment as a répétiteur?

A. There have been a few. Staging a ballet at the Mariinsky Theatre where Balanchine first trained and performed was certainly one of the most memorable. To be sitting in the same box the Czars and their families watched the commissioned Tchaikovsky/ Petipa masterpieces brought tears to my eyes. At the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow I watched *Diamonds* performed by both the ballet and orchestra; it sent shivers through my body. Balanchine's ballets danced by Russians in his motherland taught by me was an unimaginable honor for this hick from Sioux Falls. No doubt Mr. B would have had mots justes to guide those dancers in ways I can only imagine, but for me they did his ballets justice, and I'd like to think he would have approved.

Q. You also teach. How would you describe your teaching methods?

A. Like all teachers, our DNA is present in our classes; we combine all of our influences. Balanchine famously said that he would be better known as a teacher rather than a choreographer. Time will tell. Those of us who took his class certainly bring his musical clarity and precision with us in our own way, but I do not teach a "Balanchine class." His class was for us, Balanchine trained dancers, his elite. I have to have a positive effect on who is standing in front of me in respect to their abilities. His principles do apply, but not necessarily his lexicon. Only in company classes is there a chance to work with a higher level of content, and even then the vocabulary may be unfamiliar to those not trained in the SAB line. I have to be true to my beliefs and teach what I know will be most beneficial. Dancers who pay in the vicinity of \$20.00 per class may see themselves as customers, not students. Listen to the NYC subway announcement, we're "customers," and not passengers. Commercial studios are in a constant balancing act to pay their rent. My personal goal is to meet Jennifer Homan's challenge and make sure that classical ballet did not die with Balanchine. The vocabulary Balanchine passed to us was passed to him vis-à-vis Petipa and Petipa's heirs. It deserves constant pruning and devoted care. I love ballet; therefore, besides teaching the classical canon, I want to pass on the joy that accomplishment brings. To answer your question, there is a line in my class that builds a strong core and plumb line in the body. In addition to kinetic alignment, my off barre combinations in the center are often "reversed," which require the brain to work in a different way. Requisite reversals have become passé and therefore are turn offs these days, instead of stimulating challenges. Pilates and yoga have taught me quite a bit personally; they have a subliminal presence in my work to take stress off the joints.

Q. Any choreographic aspirations of your own?

A. NONE! Jerry encouraged me to try, and when I told him how mortified I was at the thought of investing my heart and soul in something that would potentially be crucified, he gave a knowing smile and said, "I understand." To choreograph, you must have something to say.

Q. What's your view of the dance world today and where it's going?

A. So much is happening so quickly, and I can't possibly keep up with it all. It's unclear which ballets choreographed today will have a shelf life and be seen fifty years from now, or even five years from now. There are wonderful dancemakers who seem to catch audience and critics attention for the time being. Not every poet is a Yeats or Angelou, but we have a deep well to draw from, so there's great hope for what's to come.

Q. What can we expect from you in the future?

A. I'm in the service industry. If there's a request for my services, I show up. It's an honor to help people achieve excellence, and if I can assist, it's the greatest mutually fulfilling gift of all.

Photo: Mikhail Logonov