

Sarasota Ballet's take on Balanchine legacy

By [Carrie Seidman](#), Herald-Tribune
/ Saturday, March 26, 2011

They are the end of the line, the last dancers to have directly worked with George Balanchine, the Russian-born choreographic genius who is credited with making ballet what it is today in America.

And as répétiteurs for the Balanchine Trust — the organization founded to license, preserve and protect Balanchine's vast body of work — Sandra Jennings and **Paul Boos** are two of those who hold the responsibility of teaching his ballets to today's young dancers, who have had neither the relationship with nor the reverence for the man known to his dancers as "Mr. B."

"We're the last generation that actually worked with him," says Jennings of Balanchine, who died in 1983. "His ballets will get more diluted as time goes by. There's a lot of concern about the future."

Both Jennings and **Boos** were in Sarasota recently to stage three Balanchine works — "Divertimento No. 15," "Prodigal Son," and "Who Cares?" — for a "Tribute to Balanchine" program at the Sarasota Opera House next weekend. They recalled, with affection, admiration, awe and amusement, the man they each came to know initially as students at the School of American Ballet (SAB) and later, as dancers with the New York City Ballet (NYCB) company, founded by Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein.

Actually, Jennings had formed an opinion of Balanchine even before meeting him. She was 10 years old when her mother took her to see the NYCB in Boston. She was enthralled.

"I told my mother right then and there, 'I want to dance for the man who made those ballets.' I fell in love with the style and the choreography."

At 13 — all of 4 foot, 11 inches and 57 pounds — she became a student at SAB; four years and four inches later, Balanchine invited her to join the company. From that moment until Balanchine died nine years later, he became her mentor, her role model, her guide and her encourager.

"He was very gentle, and always very, very kind to me," she recalls. "He made us feel like we were a kind of thoroughbred," she says. "We were his dancers, and therefore, we were really special."

Jennings says Balanchine not only taught a demanding company class every day — "32 tendus in each direction" (about 24 more than "normal") — he schooled his dancers in every detail, from how to sew a ribbon on a pointe shoe to how to understand a musical score.

In his sometimes quirky manner, he also let them know that there was definitely a Balanchine way.

"There was an initiation I wasn't aware of," Jennings remembers. "On the first day, he'd say, 'Who taught you that?' and when you said, 'SAB,' he'd say (in a Russian accent), 'Oh, terrible school. Must do something about that. From today on, your education starts; consider your life begins today.'"

But if he was demanding in his standards and attention to detail, he was also extremely generous, Jennings says, throwing lavish parties for the dancers and once even sending Jennings to his personal physician (and paying for it) when she was ill.

Boos, however, says Balanchine's relationship with the men in the company was "a little different."



Paul Boos

"My first experience with him, I was holding a girl the wrong way around her waist and he came and hit my hand away and said, 'How dare you hold her like that! She's a goddess!' " **Boos** recalls. "Another time, I had my foot on a chair in the rehearsal hall and he said, 'How dare you? This is our church, our cathedral.'

"He clearly wanted to teach respect; that was one of his biggest things. He wanted us to know how lucky we were."

Neither was **Boos** as enamored as Jennings at the first sight of the master's choreography. Having grown up in Sioux Falls, S.D., "ballet to me was 'Romeo and Juliet,' 'Swan Lake,' " he says. The first Balanchine program he saw after arriving in New York City consisted of "Episodes," "Bugaku" and "Western Symphonies," all challenging pieces with some difficult music.

"I hated it," **Boos** says. "I thought, who is this Balanchine? I had no understanding of that kind of sophisticated dancing."

Though he admired him greatly, Boos says he never experienced the gentler side of the choreographer and often found his communication style puzzling. In fact, the day he was preparing to go tell Balanchine — who had been brutal on him during rehearsals for a school production — that he ought to just replace him with someone else, turned out to be the very day Balanchine posted his name on the bulletin board, inviting him to take class and join the company.

Apparently that unorthodox approach was used with other male dancers as well, including former American Ballet Theatre star Mikhail Baryshnikov and Helgi Tomasson, now director of the San Francisco Ballet. Both requested to join the company, auditioned and initially heard nothing. Baryshnikov was hopeful when the choreographer invited him to his apartment to talk, but it turned out the talk was only about the best way to iron a shirt. Later, and without warning, the men were notified of their acceptance.

Boos says he came to appreciate and marvel at the Balanchine's genius mind and photographic memory, which allowed him to "remember every scene from every piece of art he'd ever seen."

"When I was a kid, my mother would have certain expectations, and I'd say, 'Only a saint could be that good!' She'd say, 'What's wrong with that?' I felt that way with Balanchine. He was an example of what you try to be. It may not be possible, but why not try to reach what's just out of reach?"

That very attitude is what **Boos** and Jennings hope to cultivate in the young dancers they are now teaching to perpetuate Balanchine's work.

"I come in and teach not only the steps, but the musicality, the style, the technique Balanchine used, how he wanted the body, where on the stage, the whole intention of the ballet," says Jennings. "I talk about how they present themselves. I help them with their hair, their makeup, where the ribbons should be sewn on their pointe shoes to make the foot more flattering. I demand quiet shoes, just like Mr. B.

"Because it's not just about the steps, it's everything."

Boos says he also tries to instill something less tangible.

"I try to help the dancers see what I see in the ballet," he says. "I try to make them love it as much as I do, so they will do the best they can to preserve it. I try to make them feel like custodians and give them a sense of responsibility and ownership."

According to the terms of the agreement designated after Balanchine's death, his works will enter the public domain in another 28 years.

"We worry because there will be an end to the copyright and those ballets will then belong to the world," Jennings says. "You can only hope that what you are passing on will be passed on and that people will care enough to do them authentically."