

# A BEAUTIFUL TIME FOR DANCERS

*Reflections on a Golden Age, 1970–1976*



GEORGE GELLES

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The 1970s were a Golden Age of American dance. Spurred by the opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and supported most notably by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation, dance flourished nationwide as never before and, arguably, never since.

Myriad styles of ballet and modern dance attracted audiences of unparalleled enthusiasm. This was an era of George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, and Antony Tudor in their prime and an age of American virtuosic dancers, such as Patricia McBride, Suzanne Farrell, Gelsey Kirkland, Helgi Tomasson, Edward Villella, and Jacques d'Amboise, as well as superstars groomed overseas, such as Natalia Makarova, Rudolf Nureyev, and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

*A Beautiful Time for Dancers* presents 138 reviews, interviews, and critical assessments written by George Gelles for the *Washington Star* between 1970 and 1976, as well as rarely seen photographs of choreographers and dancers in performance, in rehearsal, and backstage, capturing a truly extraordinary period of creativity in America.



A BEAUTIFUL TIME  
FOR DANCERS



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GEORGE GELLES

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FRONTISPIECE Patricia McBride and Conrad Ludlow after performing in the New  
York City Ballet production of George Balanchine's *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*, 1966.  
Photo: Martha Swope / © The New York Public Library.

For Franny and Clark,  
the next generation,  
and of course for Christine—  
sources of manifold pleasures





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## *Foreword*

Upon opening this book, the reader will enter the world of concert dance at a very special time in its history, particularly in America. The figures and dances from the 1970s described in this collection form some of the most indelible images in ballet and modern dance up to the present moment. Fortunately, George Gelles was able to capture many of the era's significant performances through his astute and lively writing. How lucky we are to have this intelligent record of an art form that can both baffle and enchant.

Dance historian Nancy Reynolds has called the mid-twentieth century "ballet's high tide," but the 1970s, in particular, was a fertile decade for modern dance in the United States and Europe, especially in Germany. Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal, with its elaborate stage sets and expressionist approach, provided a sharp contrast to the stripped-down, playful American experimentation coming out of the Judson Church period. Second-generation choreographer Martha Graham was still active, and Merce Cunningham and other third-generation dance makers were combining genres and approaches to create new vocabularies of movement. The influx of Russian defectors such as Natalia Makarova and, later, Mikhail Baryshnikov was giving American ballet a gloss of international glamour. The celebrity of the Nureyev-Fonteyn partnership brought ballet into spheres beyond balletomanes and dancers. At the same time, Balanchine continued to succeed at the New York City Ballet, with highlights such as the 1972 Stravinsky Festival; and the American Ballet Theatre expanded into an international company.

Gelles' perspective from the nation's capital while writing for the *Washington Star* provided him with a ringside seat from which to view all the major troupes passing through on a regular basis, as well as some of the

*Foreword*

smaller local ones. The opening of the Kennedy Center and its designation as the second home of ABT were certainly fortunate developments. Government grants offered stability to always-vulnerable arts organizations, big and small, and allowed them to tour. Gelles was granted interviews with high-profile figures, most of whom have remained luminaries of dance into the twenty-first century. As a musician and music critic, he was especially sensitive to that most important sister art, dance: his commitment to reportage for the dance viewer is apparent in his lucid and witty style. He possesses the rare gift of clear movement description, in part fortified by his study of Laban theory. The scope of work he viewed during his tenure at the *Star* is wide and deep.

Shortly after I moved to Santa Barbara and contacted Gelles through a mutual friend who knew that George had been considering publishing his reviews, I read these pieces with great pleasure and a pinch of envy. I was sure they would be appreciated by other people who loved dance and good dance writing. Revisiting that era of dance brought me back to an intense time in my personal history as a dancer in New York, where, at the age of 17, I had gone to study ballet at the Joffrey school and later as a Harkness Ballet Trainee. I went on to dance at a theater in Germany and eventually returned to the United States and transitioned to modern dance throughout the 1980s. As a professor of dance for almost 30 years, I developed an interest in history, wrote two books with colleagues, made dances, and taught ballet. One of my courses centered on Balanchine, who holds a special place in my heart.

Gelles' project not only afforded me a wonderful reading experience, but it also brought George and me together for many animated discussions and mutual celebrations of all that great dance! Marcia B. Siegel has lamented that the field of dance "lacks infrastructure." This volume serves as further armature toward the enlargement of dance and dance writing, and what a delight it is that we now have it in our hands.

*Melanie Bales*  
*March 2017*

## Preface

Terpsichore seduced me as I entered my teens.

As it surely was true for tens of thousands of children in and around Manhattan, a cultural rite of passage was to be taken by one's parents to *The Nutcracker*. George Balanchine set Tchaikovsky's score for his New York City Ballet in 1952, when it premiered at the City Center for Music and Drama, a former Mecca Temple and meeting place for the fraternal order of Shriners on West 55th Street. To a child's eye, the auditorium—neo-Moorish and adorned with exotic tile and murals—exuded a whiff of the exotic. It promised not merely an event, but also an occasion.

And Balanchine's *Nutcracker* was an occasion, indeed. Despite the *New York Times* critic John Martin dismissively reviewing its premiere, the first full-length production Balanchine made for the City Ballet was, and remains, a landmark success as well as an enduring, endearing introduction for the young to the dance. Its winning intimacy draws you into a family's Yuletide festivities and then sends you soaring to realms of rich imagination.

I'm looking at a souvenir program from around the time of my first encounter with the City Ballet, and it's an extraordinary document. A portfolio of photographs by George Platt Lynes on its covers, front and back, show three dancers, two women and a man, in poses, I believe, from Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco*, but their silhouettes are strikingly color-reversed—white showing black; black showing white. Between the covers are portraits from what now must be acknowledged as a golden age—solo dancers shown costumed in signature roles. Among them are Maria Tallchief, André Eglevsky, Janet Reed, Nora Kaye, Jerome Robbins, Nicholas Magallanes, Tanaquil Le Clercq, Francisco Moncion, Diana Adams, Hugh Laing, Patricia Wilde, Herbert Bliss, Todd Bolender, Yvonne Mounsey, Frank Hobi, Roy Tobias,



## Preface

Jacques d'Amboise, Jillana, and, of course, George Balanchine. Then comes a selection of production photos and pictures of the corps de ballet, all depicted with Lynes' idiosyncratic, suggestive sensibility.

The seven-week season's repertory was rich. As well as *The Nutcracker* by Balanchine, the company presented his *Bourrée Fantasque*, *Concerto Barocco*, *Scotch Symphony*, *Swan Lake*, *Tyl Ulenspiegel*, *Metamorphoses*, *Prodigal Son*, *Orpheus*, *Firebird*, *La Valse*, *Opus 34*, *Serenade*, and *Symphony in C*. Works by Jerome Robbins were *Age of Anxiety*, *The Cage*, *Interplay*, *Fanfare*, *Afternoon of a Faun*, and *Pied Piper*. Frederick Ashton's *Illuminations* and *Picnic at Tintagel* also were performed, as was Ruthanna Boris' *Cakewalk*.

I'm naming names and pieces to give an idea of how all-absorbing this world was in an era before professional ballet became big business. With its musical kaleidoscope of different schools and styles, its scenic panoply, and, best of all, its movements and gestures, which knitted together these various strands into experiences more formidable than those of its component parts alone, this was a world of dance with real substance, serious and sophisticated. It was an era just before Balanchine and the City Ballet forged their signature style, and although I wasn't aware of it at the time, there was a significant exchange of artists and repertory between the City Ballet and the American Ballet Theatre. When Patricia McBride and I discussed her work in 1976, she said, "We're in a beautiful time for dancers."

For a child already bewitched by music—Euterpe got to me before Terpsichore, and I spent my teens as a fledgling French hornist, studying first at Juilliard Prep and then with James Chambers, of the New York Philharmonic—this was a land beyond enchantment.

The names of many of the artists cited above are now hallowed and reflect pinnacles of American ballet. Yet in the mid-1950s, before their history was written, they were not yet blessed or burdened by fame. Occupying a corner of a local performing arts culture that included a world-class opera and symphony orchestra and a vibrant theater scene, where Broadway musicals played next door to dramatic masterworks, the City Ballet was not yet acknowledged as a national, or international, treasure. It was simply the home team.

With works by Balanchine and performances by his dancers as my lode-stars, I began to learn as much as I could about this sister art. Since dance is inherently evanescent, I knew there was much to absorb; I had to see everything, read everything, and speak with everyone, from choreographers

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