



## Her Last Tour

At the start of the New York City Ballet's European tour in the last week of August 1956, Tanaquil Le Clercq, a principal dancer, already looked exhausted and perilously thin. She was facing a brutally fast-paced schedule that would prove to be harder than anyone had anticipated. No matter how she felt, Le Clercq kept dancing. She couldn't let the company down. It had no other ballerina like her—tall, yet delicate, with the long limbs of a gazelle. And she was beautiful, with a glow that could warm any audience, onstage or off.

Tanny (the nickname that just about everyone called her) had an unconventional beauty, paired with the aristocratic elegance of a fashion model. In 1953 she had posed for a feature article in *Cosmopolitan*, wearing a bright-pink coat and bending down to try on pointe shoes. Her sleek, intriguing image (captured by top photographers) appeared in a range of magazines, from high fashion to mass market, including *Vogue*, *Town and Country*, *Look*, *Life*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Good Housekeeping*. Who wasn't fascinated by the latest wife of George Balanchine, the world-famous choreographer whose passions fueled and ruled his ballet company?

But by the summer of 1956, her troubled marriage had sapped her energy and appetite. Rumors flew through the dance company that the couple had agreed to split up, although no official announcement had been made.<sup>1</sup>

Everyone knew that she would have preferred not to be on that tour. It was hard to put on a pair of pointe shoes and a smile, matinees and evenings, for adoring fans in thirteen cities over ten weeks when you felt like crawling under a warm duvet with a book. When a company soloist, Barbara Walczak, spoke of her joy at being in Salzburg, Austria, their first stop, Tanny confided, "You know, I didn't want to come. . . . I sense death here."<sup>2</sup>

There were few traces left in Salzburg of World War II, which had ended eleven years before. But Le Clercq still felt uneasy in German-speaking coun-

tries that had been part of Hitler's Third Reich, and the weather didn't help her mood. It was unusually cold and damp for late summer. On August 24, she heard Mozart's *Idomeneo*. The dancers had to wait for the three-hour opera to finish before they could rehearse because they were to perform on the same stage. The rehearsal lasted from 11:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. Worse than the hours were the heavy, monotonous meals of sausages and veal cutlets. "I'm on eggs now," Tanny wrote to a good friend, the pianist Robert "Bobby" Fizdale (half of the celebrated duo Fizdale and Gold).<sup>3</sup>

But she rose to the occasion, as always. The Austrian press praised "the dancing magic of these delightful Americans," the first ballet company to perform at the legendary Salzburg Music Festival. The New York City Ballet was proclaimed the hit of the entire event, and Le Clercq was singled out as one of three dancers who displayed a "rarely found understanding for their art." Her triumph is all the more impressive because she may have been dancing in spite of pain. From Venice, their stop after Vienna and Zurich, she had written "Dearest Bobby" Fizdale that she might not dance for two nights because "I have, not *one*, but *two* infected toes."<sup>4</sup>

The Venice engagement was followed, in rapid succession, by performances in Berlin and Munich. "I miss Italy," Tanny wrote to another close friend, the dancer/choreographer Jerome "Jerry" Robbins. "Germany scares me. Just can't feel the admiration George does. . . . So they are disciplined and work work work— it doesn't seem civilized to me."<sup>5</sup>

Winter seemed to have come early that year. "It is absolutely freezing unbearably cold—and wet . . . we are at the halfway mark—and I don't really want to go to Frankfurt Brussels or Antwerp. . . . Its [*sic*] started to sleet— I've finished breakfast and am sitting in bed under one of those feather quilts still my nose and hands are cold— the *matinée* starts at 4:00 evening at 8:00— Ugh—." She wondered whether they would see snow in Denmark. "I hate cold weather like this. I feel I could stay in bed all day long . . . from Munich to Frankfurt we dance the next day— no day in between. . . . I think this tour is starting to pall— is that a word? I say it but never write it and it looks very strange. I wonder where it comes from a-pall-ing maybe?"<sup>6</sup>

By mid-October, a few weeks after her twenty-seventh birthday, she arrived in France. It had been cold there, too, and now she was enduring a typically rainy fall day in Paris, her birthplace. On the thin airmail paper then commonly used to save postage, she wrote to Jerry Robbins that she would be filmed that Saturday morning, dance a Sunday *matinee*, and then leave for Cologne, Germany, the next day. Tanny felt more at home in France than

Germany, although she had German roots on her father's side. "My German stinks," she informed Jerry with self-mocking humor, "but I tell everyone that my father was born in Carlsbad so they love me— when I'm in France I say I'm French. What an insincere fake I am— love xxxxxT"<sup>7</sup>

She was counting the hours until the tour would be over. The late matinees, a concession to the European tradition of a long and copious midday meal, left little time for rest before evening performances. But the French food and Parisian shops cheered her. "I lost my head today," she confessed in one of many letters she sent to Robbins, almost daily, throughout that tour. "I spent 27,000 francs on perfume and gloves . . . but these are so adorable with embroidered roses— and then there is one pair with a tiny blue flower on the index finger." The perfume was a gift for Tamara Geva, the first of Balanchine's ex-wives, now their neighbor and friend. She had requested "an ounce of something," Tanny wrote, "so I felt generous and got her a *tremendous* bottle."<sup>8</sup>

In 1956, five hundred old French francs equaled about one U.S. dollar. She had spent a bit more than fifty dollars, but that was a substantial chunk of her weekly salary on the tour, which never topped \$225. (Two older principal dancers, Maria Tallchief and André Eglevsky, received far more, most likely to keep them in the company.) The life of a famous ballet dancer may have appeared glamorous from the outside, but they were not paid like Hollywood or Broadway stars.<sup>9</sup>

In a film shot in Paris, *Le Clercq* is in superb form, strutting her way through the ballet, *Western Symphony*, as a high-kicking dance-hall girl in the Wild West of Balanchine's wilder imagination. She wore a ravishing costume by her husband's favorite designer, Russian-born Barbara Karinska (Varvara Jmoudsky). The critic B. H. Haggin had raved about Tanny's hat, "to say nothing of the way she wore it—alone worth the price of admission."<sup>10</sup>

The dancers got no extra pay for being filmed on their only day off in Paris. Tanny had the right to refuse. Thankfully, she didn't. Contemporary audiences around the world can watch, online, her comical, elegant performance in the *Rondo* section of the ballet, aided by her partner, the towering powerhouse Jacques d'Amboise, just twenty-two years old. As she takes a saucy jump backward, *Le Clercq* fluffs up the back of her tutu with both hands. Her practiced smile verges on laughter.

The company could not afford costumes the first time the pair had danced their *pas de deux*, two years earlier, so Balanchine had told them to wear whatever they wished. All the same, they had triumphed at the 1954 premiere.



Tanaquil Le Clercq posed in an arabesque, *Western Symphony*, photo by George Platt Lynes, March 11, 1955. Used with Permission of The George Balanchine Trust and The George Platt Lynes Estate. Choreography by George Balanchine ©The George Balanchine Trust. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Edwin Denby, an influential critic, wrote, “Tanaquil Le Clercq and Jacques d’Amboise were the special heroes of the first night.”<sup>11</sup>

Other great ballerinas appear in the color film, including the principal dancer Diana Adams, but Le Clercq stands out. She flits about the stage like a weightless sprite, prancing, whirling and leaping, her scissor legs slicing great, saucy arcs in the air, her face radiating impish joy, as if to let us in on a joke.

Her swagger makes visible the rhyme of sashay and ballet. She shows no signs of being ill, although she is at her thinnest—sheer muscle, nerves, and bone. But there is nothing thin about her personality. It fills the stage. She seems to soak up all the available light until she's lit from within.<sup>12</sup>

By the time they had arrived at the tour's next stop, Cologne, Le Clercq and d'Amboise both had bronchitis, he recalled. But they had passionate fans in Europe who'd bought tickets far in advance. Nobody else in the ballet company could do the variety of roles that Le Clercq took on—witty, laugh-out-loud comedy, tender, lyric romance, and harrowing tragedy. She *had* to dance. As d'Amboise wrote in his memoir, at the end of their final performance together, they were both wheezing. He hugged her goodbye onstage and flew home for the birth of his first child, skipping a party given for the company by a Mrs. Ellen Few, the wife of the American cultural attaché. Tanny rarely enjoyed these formal occasions and would occasionally play sick to get out of attending one. Not this time. Later, Mrs. Few came to a performance but was not feeling well. Tanny didn't discover, until she met her again the following spring in Warm Springs, Georgia, that their hostess had contracted paralytic polio.<sup>13</sup>

The last week in October, the company left for Copenhagen, where Tanny was eager to explore a shop that Jerry had recommended for its vintage, rare finds. At a rehearsal, the dancers were instructed to bow in unison toward the queen of Denmark in her box at the Royal Opera House, before bowing to the public. Members of the Danish royal family were sure to attend at least one performance.<sup>14</sup>

Le Clercq had to push herself through rehearsals, resisting what she thought might be the start of a flu. But she danced on opening night, Friday, October 26, and throughout the rest of that weekend. Two giants of ballet choreography, George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, had made roles expressly for her. How could she let them and her public down?

On Saturday night, October 27, she put on a short, belted, pale-blue tunic, applied her makeup, tied her pointe shoes, and waited for her entrance. The stage set looked like an enchanted ballet studio, with curtains billowing in the breeze. Robbins had choreographed *Afternoon of a Faun* in 1953 for her face as much as her limbs and torso, especially her big, wide-spaced, changeable eyes, which could seem gray or green or watery blue, depending on the light.

He had imagined how she would stare at the audience while she performed the steps. That was where Robbins had finally decided to place the invisible



Tanaquil Le Clercq, photo by Cris Alexander, ca. 1953. Courtesy of NYCB Archive.

mirror of his imaginary studio, in the “fourth wall” separating the performers and their audience, a brilliant choice. Pretending to watch herself dancing, coolly appraising her own image with beguiling concentration, Le Clercq would captivate everyone watching her.

Robbins had used her unique qualities in the dance—her almost translucent presence, delicate flexibility, dramatic allure, and the long hair that she’d had in 1953. It had been cut four months before the 1956 tour, a snap decision that she’d immediately regretted. Her role required no other adornment. No costumes beyond exercise clothes were needed to portray the elusive nymph and the boy faun who is drawn to her. But in Robbins’s version of the classic Nijinsky ballet, the boy and girl weren’t mythological creatures, just two young dancers discovering themselves, and then each other, as they warmed up and practiced combinations.<sup>15</sup>