

## Prologue



ON SUNDAY EVENING, May 4, 1980, a mass of theatergoers, many in formal dress, hurry across the great plaza at Lincoln Center and crowd into the Metropolitan Opera House.

The American Ballet Theatre's spring season at the Met, one of the greatly anticipated events in New York's annual dance calendar, is not scheduled to begin until tomorrow. Tonight is a preview extravaganza celebrating the fortieth anniversary of America's national ballet company (originally called simply Ballet Theatre), which first burst onstage at the Center Theatre in New York City's Rockefeller Center on January 11, 1940, and in two hours established itself as one of the premier ballet companies of the world.

Scores of ABT's most illustrious alumni have streamed into town from all corners of the country and beyond in order to participate, or at least make an appearance, in tonight's gala. As reported in the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*:

This 40th anniversary season is . . . a celebration of personal achievement.

It is the last which will see Lucia Chase and Oliver Smith as company directors, posts they have occupied since 1945. The season also marks the 40 years that Miss Chase has served as the company's founding patron and long-term artistic director. . . . It is only fair to say that this season marks the end of an era.

Inside the Met, the houselights dim and the performance begins with a series of photographs projected on the curtain and a brief narration describing the company's historic debut at the old Center Theatre. A final image shows the four principal dancers—Karen Conrad, Nina Stroganova, Lucia Chase, and William Dollar—who performed that inaugural evening in the opening ballet, *Les Sylphides*.

Now, forty years later, the Met's great gold curtain rises to reveal dancers in the current American Ballet Theatre in the same opening tableau of *Sylphides*, this time with the lead danced by Kevin McKenzie (who in a few years will become artistic director of ABT). For the past four decades, *Les Sylphides* has been the company's signature piece, always meticulously rehearsed by Dimitri Romanoff, an original member of the company and its current regisseur, who tonight stands just offstage in the wings. Meanwhile, out in the audience, Lucia Chase, Agnes de Mille, Antony Tudor, Karen Conrad, Anton Dolin, Annabelle Lyon, Sono Osato, and Donald Saddler—also original members of Ballet Theatre—sit watching and remembering as the fortieth anniversary gala unfolds.

Next onstage are Alicia Alonso and Igor Youskevitch, who during the 1940s and 1950s were perhaps the leading pair of dancers in the world. Tonight they are back together again to dance the adagio from act 2 of *Giselle*. Following Alonso and Youskevitch is another celebrated ABT partnership, Erik Bruhn, the noble Dane, most classical of all male dancers, and Carla Fracci, star of Italy's La Scala. Only a few minutes have passed, and already it is clear that this evening is going to be an epochal event, the kind people will talk about for years.

Next to appear is Cynthia Gregory, who joined ABT in 1965 and two years later was raised to the rank of ballerina. Tonight she is performing the Rose Adagio from *The Sleeping Beauty*. Then a complete switch from Tchaikovsky and a palace ballroom scene to Leonard Bernstein and a Times Square bar, three sailors on shore leave, looking for girls and fun—the ballet *Fancy Free*, introduced thirty-six years ago by Jerome Robbins when he was a young soloist in Ballet Theatre. Tonight two of the three sailors in 1944's initial cast—Robbins and Harold Lang—appear in their original roles. The audience goes wild as the three sailors strut their stuff, each trying to outdo the others in order to impress the two girls they coaxed to accompany them into the bar.

The gala continues, featuring one longtime favorite after another, until

a closing full-company curtain call brings all the ABT alumni out one by one to take their individual bows: Irina Baronova, one of the Ballet Russe's "baby ballerinas" in the early 1930s who led Ballet Theatre in its second year and who remains, nearly a half-century later, the favorite of many ballet devotees; Nora Kaye, ABT's first homegrown superstar and one of ballet's greatest dramatic dancers; Muriel Bentley, who danced fourteen years with the company; Alonso and Youskevitch, who come out onstage still in costume; Anton Dolin, who was the leading male dancer in Ballet Theatre for its first five years; then in quick succession, one after the other, almost faster than the dazzled audience can recognize and respond, out come Antony Tudor, Agnes de Mille, Melissa Hayden, Natalia Makarova, Jerome Robbins, Rudolf Nureyev, Hugh Laing, Ian Gibson, Miriam Golden, Ivan Nagy, Maria Karnilova, Donald Saddler, Ruth Ann Koesun, and Violette Verdy. The applause keeps growing as the audience greets each new face with fresh shouts and whistles and cheers from all over the house.

Nearing the end, the spotlight turns to focus on the company's directors, Lucia Chase and Oliver Smith, who have guided ABT's destiny for the past thirty-five years. Jerome Robbins steps forward to recall, back when he was a young dancer in the company and totally unknown as a choreographer, how Oliver Smith had believed in him and championed his first ballet, *Fancy Free*, which was an instant sensation and launched his career as the most dynamic choreographer/director in American theater.

Then it is Lucia Chase's turn. There is a surprise brief revue in which current ABT dancers reenact roles Lucia has danced in the course of her forty years with the company. Antony Tudor, ABT's choreographer laureate, walks out to present her with an overflowing bouquet of long-stemmed red roses. Agnes de Mille reads a congratulatory telegram from President Jimmy Carter before paying her own tribute: "It is thanks to Lucia's tenacity—Lucia, you know, is nine-tenths granite—that American Ballet Theatre has lasted longer than Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and stands today as a national treasure." Then de Mille, Robbins, Tudor, Smith, and all the others step back and push Lucia Chase out from their midst into center stage.

She stands alone, trim, auburn-haired, erect, and glowing, the diminutive, resolute figure who has been there all four decades from the very beginning of the company and who for the last thirty-five years has directed and safeguarded ABT through its trials and mishaps and grand successes leading up to this fabulous night. She bows several times, then turns and

waves for everyone else to step forward and join her, but no one moves. They all hold back and leave her to stand out there by herself, alone in front of the entire company, past and present, facing the audience, which is now on its feet and cheering as cascades of rose petals are released from high above the stage and come fluttering down on the head of the laughing, teary, indomitable figure of my mother, Lucia Chase.