

## Introduction

Many years ago, I asked the late Francis Mason, noted dance critic and historian, if he had any thoughts about me writing my memoir. He discouraged me, saying that I needed a “hook,” which seemed to imply that my life wasn’t interesting enough to attract readers. After all, I hadn’t slept with Balanchine; I hadn’t taken drugs; I was just too “normal.” So I did not write at that time. Then a few years ago, my late husband Dr. Howard Garson and good friends Dr. Peter Liebert and his wife, Mary Ann, began encouraging me to write about my life, and I once again began to consider my memoir. In beginning to write and piece the chapters together, I came to realize that although I may not have the specific “hook” that Francis Mason thought was necessary, my life and career provide a clear lens for understanding George Balanchine’s choreographic practice, as well as the immensity of his influence on his dancers specifically and the dance field more broadly, simply because my career was not clouded by scandal or serious trauma. My performance career did not result in great fame or fortune, but nonetheless it was meaningful on many levels. My life postperformance career traversed through the joys and tribulations of teaching, choreographing, and staging Balanchine works. Although my life and career have had many turns and twists, I have worked in the dance and theater fields for almost seven decades.

I was an actor on Broadway and on television throughout my childhood, and, as one might guess, a parent, in this case my mother, was the driving force behind my career. My first Broadway role was at the age of seven, and I continued acting until high school.

While I was acting professionally as a child, I was also studying at George Balanchine’s School of American Ballet. The skills I developed through acting allowed me to enter New York City Ballet at age nineteen,

with prior knowledge and understanding of performance etiquette, energy, and how to connect to an audience. I was given roles such as Frau Stahlbaum in *The Nutcracker*, the Duchess in *Don Quixote*, and The Wife in *The Concert* (by Jerome Robbins) that allowed me to use my acting skills. These roles, of course, were in addition to the many roles I performed in the huge and vast range of the New York City Ballet repertory.

Balanchine (or Mr. B, as we called him) was a great teacher, and working with him in classes and rehearsals was life-changing. Performing his choreography was a whole other level of artistic education. His ballets are beautiful to appreciate from the observing side, but dancing them is an almost indescribable kind of joy. And *everyone dances* in his choreography, from principals down to corps de ballet, unlike older ballets in which the corps de ballet often acts as a kind of ornament. Although I probably didn't think of it this way when I was in the company, looking back I realize that I was part of an incredibly important artistic movement led by the greatest choreographer of the twentieth century.

My stories overlap with the life stories of many actors, dancers, and choreographers. The connections are endless. This book tells their stories as they intertwine with mine. For instance, I watched the rise and fall of Suzanne Farrell during my years with the company. Suzanne was sixteen when she joined New York City Ballet, just a few months after I did. Balanchine loved the way she moved, and so he made beautiful ballets for her and fell in love with her. When she married another man, he was truly devastated, and that devastation affected us all. Balanchine's affairs with his dancers, who, in several cases, became his wives, can be looked at adversely. I wish to dispel some misperceptions that might exist among students and nondancers concerning his attitude about women.

However, my greatest trial during my years with NYCB was not related to Balanchine's love life but rather to my own inability to maintain my best performance weight. Mr. B was a very patient man. Just as he waited for his dancers to perfect a step that gave them trouble at first, he waited for me to lose weight, which I did, numerous times. He would give me roles, and then I would gain back the weight, and he would take them away. It became a vicious cycle until finally he ran out of patience, which I understood completely. I was musical and loved to dance, and he recognized

that, and so I was rewarded on talent and hard work—but only when I also kept the extra pounds off. I realized ultimately that I was conflicted, that part of me wanted to reach my full potential as a ballet dancer, to be successful, *really* successful as a Balanchine dancer, and part of me wanted to get married and have a child. In my world at that time, the two were not compatible. Mr. B would say, “Have affairs, dear, but don’t get married.” And having children was clearly discouraged. In his own quiet way, he demanded complete allegiance. As he ran out of patience with me, and I ran out of steam as a dancer, I got married, left the company, and had a child.

Through it all: love, marriage, divorce, and death, through career setbacks and incredible opportunities and accomplishments, I have moved through life as a Balanchine dancer. Working for Balanchine, working with an artist of that magnitude through my teens and twenties, shaped me not only as a dancer but as a person, and certainly much later as a teacher. He was a father figure to me, my artistic father. I was the obedient daughter, who wanted approval from the powerful daddy, who always did what she was told and never demanded anything from him. But he gave so much to me. Mr. B chose me as a dancer to enact his visions during the height of his choreographic career, and he molded my understanding of ballet and, even more broadly, artistic expression and how to be a performing artist—the responsibilities and the commitment required.

As a teacher, I am passing on his legacy, and it is through teaching that I have had my largest impact. Hundreds of students have passed through my classes in the Conservatory of Dance at Purchase College over my more than thirty years there, and I have conveyed Balanchine’s legacy with the utmost care. So many teachers contributed to my artistic development, but Balanchine was foremost. I strive to convey his style and technique through my classes and through staging his work. It is through dancing his choreography that I believe students begin truly to understand who he was as a choreographer, as a genius. “Doing” is entirely different from watching or reading about a ballet.

I sent Mr. B an invitation to my wedding in 1971, while I was still performing. In response, he sent me a case of red wine, Nuits-Saint-Georges, and a note that simply said, “Remember me.” As if I could ever forget him.