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RUTHANNA BORIS (1917–2007)

BORN IN Brooklyn, Ruthanna Boris trained at the Metropolitan Opera School of Ballet with Giuseppe Bonfiglio, Margaret Curtis, and Rosina Galli. She also studied modern dance in the studios of Martha Graham, Humphrey–Weidman, and Hanya Holm and was one of the first students at the School of American Ballet, under the all-seeing eye of George Balanchine. She danced with his American Ballet and with Lincoln Kirstein's Ballet Caravan; became a principal dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, where she began to choreograph; became a prima ballerina with the Metropolitan Opera; and served as a choreographer with the young New York City Ballet, where her works included her most popular ballet, *Cakewalk*, which had a second life a decade or so later with the Joffrey Ballet.

Boris's performing career was cut short by arthritis in the late 1950s, when she became a pioneer in undergoing what would be the first of three double hip replacements. She became interested in dance as a therapeutic endeavor, studying with and writing about Marian Chace, the founder of the American Dance Therapy Association, and studying psychology and therapy at the University of Washington, in Seattle. At UW, as an adjunct professor, Boris taught dance in the 1980s.

Even so, her early commitment to Balanchine as teacher, creator of genius, and intuitive psychologist permeated her conversations with colleagues up to the last months of her life. Her unpublished memoir, which includes extensive sections on Balanchine and Chace, is in the collection of the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center.

I Remember Balanchine

I WAS in the original *Serenade* in 1934; years later, for Toumanova, Balanchine made one big role out of all the smaller parts. Toumanova

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did the first and second entrance. There was only another person when the adagio began, when the Angel came in. Ballet Russe got that version, too, and Danilova danced it that way. When I joined Ballet Russe I wanted to dance that role because I identified with *Serenade*. And when I did finally dance it, I felt more and more strongly that it showed a pattern in Balanchine's life: a figure comes in and all the configurations change. That figure initiates the change but does not participate in it. Then, finally, she does the finale looking for her place, and the whole group turns away. In the end she's the one that goes to heaven. I knew by then that Balanchine had had tuberculosis. He said to me once, "You know, I am really a dead man. I was supposed to die and I didn't, and so now everything I do is second chance. That is why I enjoy every day. I don't look back. I don't look forward. Only now."

He started *Serenade* on a nice sunny day. There were seventeen girls in class. "Today I think I'll make a little something," he announced. He excused the gentlemen and started putting girls in place and standing back to see what it looked like. Annabelle Lyon and I were the two smallest, and we already knew that he liked tall ballerinas. He took forever to arrange everyone; he wanted all his girls to show. He placed Kathryn MULLOWNY, Heidi VOSSELER, Holly HOWARD, until finally Annabelle and I were the only two left, standing across from each other. Her face told me what I felt: "Oh, God, we're too small; we're going to be the understudies." But then he jumped up on the bench and summoned us: "Ruthanna, Bella." We came running and he put her in front on stage left and me on stage right. "Like hungry birds in the nest," he told me later. We were starving for steps.

He was looking for a way to begin. He started talking about Germany. "I was there with Diaghilev. There is an awful man there [Hitler]. He looks like me but he has mustache. The people know him, they love him. When they see him, all people do like that for him." I still didn't know who Mr. Hitler was. "I am not such an awful man," Balanchine continued, "and I don't have mustache. So maybe for me you put together this. Your hand is high, and then falls down and thrusts forward."

I adored Balanchine. I waltzed up to him when I was fifteen and said, "Mr. Balanchine, I want to be a choreographer like you. How do you do it?" He replied, "I can't tell you how you will do it because

I am not you and I don't know how I do it. I don't think I am even yet choreographer. I make some steps for my friends. They are nice. Sometimes it's all right. But I will tell you what you have to do. You have to be very good dancer yourself. I didn't say famous, I said good. You have to know how dancers feel. You will never know unless you have done it. Then you have to know music very well." He went on and on about that. "Then you have to look everywhere, everything, all the time. Look at the grass in the concrete when it's broken, children and little dogs, and the ceiling and the roof. Your eyes is camera and your brain is a file cabinet."

When he was choreographing one ballet, he put us all on our knees a long time. "Well, you know, when I began I was dry," he explained. "I didn't have idea. And I had twelve pages of awful music. I didn't know what to do. I go in studio and I sit. I watch dancers. They put leg on barre and I get idea. But I look and I think of that awful music, what will I do, and I have to put them off. And mind open and picture come suddenly of that man on Broadway, with wheels, with pencils." He was referring to a World War I veteran who had no legs, who used to sit on a skateboard on Broadway. "He was one of the first people I meet in America," Balanchine told us. "When I saw this man without legs, I put all on your knees and I can begin."

I never knew anybody who trusted his unconscious and was able to follow it through as much as he. I had millions of little examples of how that happened, one when he made *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. It was done in a great hurry. Balanchine kept saying, "I have a nice little pas de trois for you and Danielian and Nikita Talin." Berman designed a Columbine costume, with curls and a hat, but Balanchine hadn't yet made any choreography. I kept saying, "But Mr. B!" He reassured me. "You learn very fast. I will do for you." About a day and a half before the premiere, he finally got around to it after a performance one night. Nikita was Pierrot and Leon was Harlequin. We came in with three little screens and put them down and danced. The idea was they both wanted me and he made a big promenade where Leon had my hand and Nikita was pulling my foot. Balanchine put it together very fast; finally he came to the end. It was about two o'clock in the morning by then. "I have to make finale. But I am so tired I could kill myself." And so he had us set up our little screens. I was in the middle and Leon came up from behind his screen and approached me. I said, "No," and

he killed himself and disappeared. Nikita came up and I told him, "No," too. He went down behind his screen. I ran around, they were both dead, so I killed myself too, and that's the way it ended.

After class one day Balanchine said, "I want to talk to you. I think you have to start to teach." "Oh, no," I protested. "I will never be a dancing teacher. I'm going to do *Swan Lake* and then I'm going to die." "You have gift," he said. "You will be good teacher. I will give you the most easy class." He gave me the advanced professional class, which was comprised of all my friends. For a week I came wearing a different chiffon every day and carried on like an idiot. Balanchine sat on the bench and wiggled his nose and batted his eyebrows and eyelashes. He didn't say a word, however, until after class on Friday. "You don't get salary this week because you didn't teach one class. You performed for them. You make nice choreography. I will steal your steps, a little bit. But you didn't teach." He pointed to the bench. "Until you can sit there and let them find, you are not teaching. You have to look, not do yourself, or they will only copy you. They are good dancers. They know everything. What would you like to see them do different than they do?" "Number one," I said, "I cannot stand the way they look in the mirror. They spend the whole class there." "What else?" he prompted me. "They don't run very well, particularly the women in their toe shoes. They make too much noise and they don't move." "Well, then you have something to teach. Do."

The next lesson I turned everyone away from the mirror and started them running, everywhere and every possible way and configuration. While I was doing that Mr. Vladimiroff arrived on the balcony to watch. Eugenie Ouroussow came in next. Then Mr. Oboukhoff. When I came out, Miss Ouroussow said, "Come into the office. I need to talk to you. Mr. Vladimiroff has complained that you are breaking tradition. The class is only running. They are not doing *enchaînement*." She told me Mr. Balanchine was waiting for me. He asked how it went and I told him, "We're beginning to break some ground. I'd like to do it again tomorrow." "Good," he said and walked out. As I walked out Mr. Oboukhoff hit me on the back and congratulated me. It was only Vladimiroff who made the scandal, but to keep him happy they called me into the office with Balanchine congratulating me in private. Balanchine told me, "You know, when I am dry I go to Oboukhoff's class and take it with my eyes. And I am full. He is such a choreographer."

Balanchine used to ask him to do a ballet, but he never would. “No, too sad, too sad.”

After I retired from dancing, I was sitting on the bench with Balanchine at the School of American Ballet while he rehearsed. As they were working, he said to me, “You know, those men in Tibet up in the mountains. They sit nude in the cave and they drink only water through straw and they think very pure thoughts.” I said, “Yes, the Tibetan monks. The lamas.” He said, “Yes. You know, that is what I should become. I would be with them.” And then he looked around and said, “But unfortunately, I like butterflies.”

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