

The Pre-Professional Dance Company affiliated with the Academy of Ballet

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A Tale of Two Pedagogues
by Valerie Diamond

Two Russian-born icons of ballet in the Twentieth Century are the stars of two recent books. The first, *Vaganova Today: The Preservation of Pedagogical Tradition* by Catherine E. Pawlick (University of Florida Press 2011), tells the tale of Agrippina Vaganova (1879-1951) who wasn't even quite a star of the Mariinsky (later Kirov) Theater but nevertheless was almost single-handedly responsible for preserving and codifying the Russia system of ballet through two World Wars and the Russian Revolution. A former dancer, Pawlick, who acknowledges the contributions to her book of our very own Mary Ellen Hunt, traveled to Russia to study and write the Vaganova book. The second book, *I Was a Dancer: A Memoir*, by Jacques d'Amboise (Alfred A. Knopf 2011) is an autobiography of sorts but at its best provides a revealing glimpse into the inner workings and muses of George Balanchine (1904-1983), one of the world's best known choreographers, who, like Vaganova, was trained at the Imperial School of Ballet in St. Petersburg. Although neither of these two Russians is particularly known for their own dancing, as the authors explain, each had a tremendous influence on the ballet that we know and appreciate today.

Pawlick's book starts with Vaganova's life as a dancer. After graduating from the Imperial Ballet School in 1897, Vaganova joined the Mariinsky Theater, where she had a lackluster career and was promoted to ballerina months before her retirement in 1915. Pawlick suggests that Vaganova's lack of success as a dancer was due to political intrigue and not to a lack of technique, as she excelled in a lightness of jump but was somewhat lacking in emotion. (Cont'd on page 3.)

Calendar...

Holiday Party!
December 10, 2011
3:00 - 6:00 p.m.
Join us for a special performance, refreshments, and even carolers.

Chamberdance June 2012
Performance: June 9 and 10
at Fort Mason Center's Cowell Theater

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Sarah Blodgett Interview by Mary Ellen Hunt

Dancer, singer, actress, the multitalented Sarah Blodgett is a true triple threat. Since graduating from University of San Francisco -- Sarah studied Business and Marketing -- she moved to New York, where she's pursuing her dream of a career in musical theater, and wound up on a whirlwind tour of the U.S. and Canada with The Music Man. And if she hadn't had enough time on a bus, Sarah recently took a trip to Wolf Trap to see fellow Chamberdance alums -- and former Ballet West colleagues -- Beau Pearson and Aidan Diskin performing.

Q. So tell me what you've been up to since moving to the East Coast.

A. Well, I moved out here in November of 2009 after finishing with Ballet West. I started auditioning and there were lots of good things that happened, but it did take a while. I went on a whim to a Connecticut Ballet audition, just because I saw a posting for it. It was a long audition, but afterwards I really thought nothing of it and went to Europe. But then two weeks later, while I was in Europe I checked my email and I had four emails from them saying, "What happened? Why haven't you called us back?" [She laughs.] So I sent them an email and explained, and wound up doing a season with them, dancing in *Coppelia* and *Nutcracker*, which was an interesting experience.

That contract ended in December and during that time I had continued auditioning as much as possible and I had auditioned for the tour of *The Music Man*. Two weeks later I got a call--I knew it was them, because the call came from Virginia where they were headquartered--and I thought "Great! I

booked the show!" But then they told me, "Well, actually, you didn't book it, but we'd like you to do our commercial." I guess someone couldn't come to be in the commercial. So I did it because I thought, well, it can't hurt, but I didn't expect anything to come from it. But on a random Monday in February they called me and said, "What are you doing and could you hypothetically join the tour within 24 hours?" They were in Palm Beach, Florida. So, I did indeed leave in 24 hours--it was a whirlwind, but a great experience because we went all over the place.

Q. And can you talk a little bit about life on tour?

A. The tour ended in May, so I did February through May and they did 90 cities across the U.S. and Canada, of which I probably performed in 65 of them. It was a cool experience, because every night the show was different. For one of the numbers I probably switched between five different tracks [roles] depending on how big the stage was or how much set piece we had. Because the stages were all different sizes, sometimes we had more set, less set, more space, less marleys, just depending on the situation. Some theaters were beautiful five thousand-seat theaters and then one day in Texas we performed in an arena where they had auctioned off cattle the day before! It was a complete variety of every circumstance you could ever think of!

Then I came back in May, and there was another audition for another production of *The Music Man* here in the city, and I thought, "What the heck--I'll go." And I booked that one --so I did it again, but all different choreography. So I've been doing *The Music Man* since February, though now that is done, so hopefully now I'll book something, but hopefully not *The Music Man*! Although I wouldn't turn it down...

Q. Do you keep up with ballet classes still?

A. Yes, as much as possible, because I feel like I owe it to myself to stay in shape. It's actually surprising how many times I'll go to a theater audition and they'll do a ballet class cut first. Even for chorus line, they cut people who aren't up to par and they'll say, "The reason you're getting cut today is because you need to get to ballet class."

And I don't think I've deemed myself completely done with ballet--I may go back at some point and decide that's where I want to focus again. I go back and forth--I like to keep my options open.

Q. What do you feel like you gained from your time with Chamberdance?

A. I think that of course performing with Chamberdance was really good experience, but the ability to pick up choreography and having to learn it quickly is so valuable, just because that's what I have to do every day. Also I feel like I learned how to work with choreographers--how to emulate what they're looking for you to do in their respective style, whether it be contemporary or Broadway or whatever. And then too, I learned to take corrections and work with them. Sometimes, even in auditions, they'll try to correct you just to see how you work, so I feel like that was an important lesson as well.

Frankly, I probably wouldn't be where I am if I hadn't been part of Chamberdance. I don't think I would have realized that dance as a profession was a possibility for me. It just had never occurred to me that I could have a job as a dancer, and now... here I am. ✨



A Tale of Two Pedagogues (cont.)

On the eve of the Russian revolution and the first World War, while Balanchine and other dancers moved West, Vaganova stayed in Russia “along with those in the intelligentsia who accepted the revolution and believed in Russia’s Communist future.” By 1921, Vaganova was working as a pedagogue at the Leningrad Choreographic Academy (formerly the Imperial Ballet School). Although the everyday meaning of the word “pedagogue” can have negative connotations, here and in the world of ballet generally, pedagogue refers to a teacher/coach of high standing or noted technique.

Landing in her position at the Academy due to the departures of others, Vaganova seized the opportunity and set about developing a pedagogical method that codified classical technique into “the first established Russian system of ballet training.” Focusing on the use of the whole body, port de bras, harmony of movement, and an analytical approach to step sequence, Vaganova’s system became the epitome of Russian ballet technique. As Pawlick describes it, Vaganova had tremendous drive and the ability to be everywhere at once. These skills allowed her to become a great teacher as well as Artistic Director of the Kirov Ballet and author of “Basic Principles of Classical Ballet” (1933), a standard textbook for any ballet course.

Pawlick’s book breaks down when it moves beyond Vaganova’s personal history into a discussion of the pedagogical tradition following Vaganova’s death in 1951. Although she hints at the historical and political climate that allowed the Russian system of dance to flourish almost in a vacuum only to be brought to a crisis moment after the fall of the Communists, Pawlick is not quite able to weave together the various pieces of history and politics with the interviews of present-day pedagogues to bring meaningful insight to the struggle to preserve Vaganova’s pedagogical methods in today’s world.

Nevertheless, the book conveys the tremendous respect and admiration that present-day teachers and dancers of the Russian tradition have for Vaganova and her methods, and one is left with a sense that Vaganova’s decision to approach dance technique in a systematic way has meaning and influence for all forms of dance beyond the Russian technique that she recorded.

Balanchine’s influence, like Vaganova’s, is felt in forms of dance beyond the dances that he himself created, as is evident by the discussion of Balanchine contained in d’Amboise’s book. Balanchine and his obsessions, methods, and muses inhabit nearly every page of d’Amboise’s light-hearted and sometimes goofy book. Clearly no other person in the dance world captured d’Amboise’s imagination and loyalty as did Balanchine (although d’Amboise has some interesting things to say about Lincoln Kirstein as well). Sprinkled throughout d’Amboise’s books are his reminiscences of Balanchine, as well as an overview of Balanchine’s life from his departure from Russia in the 1920s (as part of a Soviet troupe), to the establishment of the School of American Ballet and New York City Ballet in the 1940’s, NYCB’s historic tour of the Soviet Union in the 1960s, the development of such classics as *Agon*, *Symphony in C*, *Don Quixote*, and *Who Cares?*, then to Balanchine’s death in 1983, and, finally, to what’s happened to Balanchine’s works thereafter.

D’Amboise explains that he first encountered Balanchine as a student at SAB in the 1940s and he describes Balanchine as “the greatest teacher of them all” (I’m not sure Vaganova’s students would agree). According to d’Amboise, Balanchine taught that students should learn the steps in class but practice them repeatedly on their own to develop speed and strength. This virtuosity, according to Balanchine, is what could take a dancer beyond technique to become an artist driven by “divine forces.” D’Amboise tells us that Balanchine constantly analyzed movement and changed his technique as he experimented. In this respect, Balanchine’s approach to dance is very different than Vaganova’s. Balanchine did not hesitate to modify his teachings and choreography to better fit the dancers, as d’Amboise explains throughout the book, perhaps to ensure that the “divine forces” were in alignment with the dance.

D’Amboise’s book is full of anecdotes about Balanchine’s obsessions with various female dancers over the years. According to d’Amboise, “when Balanchine did a ballet for one of his muses, he did not want to be bothered with anyone.” The book describes in great length Balanchine’s fascination with Diana Adams, a reluctant performer, and with Suzanne Farrell. As to Farrell, d’Amboise says Balanchine gave “more and more, and she accepted it as if it were her due.” The result of these obsessions (and the many others described in d’Amboise book) is a flowering of choreographic gems crafted by Balanchine to profile each women’s strengths.

Despite Balanchine’s obsessions, d’Amboise explains that Balanchine never liked it if his dancers became more famous than his dance. Apparently, Balanchine took more than a few ballets off the performance schedule if the dancers

A Tale of Two Pedagogues (cont.)

became too star-like in the ballet. As d'Amboise explains, "the true essence of Balanchine is not his supreme choreographic skills; instead it is found in a subtle and mysterious presence that seems to permeate his ballets and is part of the makeup of the artist himself." In some sense, Balanchine seemed aware of this quality and took steps to ensure that his dances reigned supreme.

Although contemporaries in some sense, Balanchine and Vaganova had very different lives and contributed in different ways to the development of Russian ballet. Vaganova preserved the teachings of the past and created a method for the systematic teaching of dance technique. It is yet to be seen if this technique can survive beyond the generation of pedagogues she trained. Balanchine used his Russian roots as a foundation for changes to dance and to dance technique in America. He saw dance technique as a means to accomplish his very personal dances, rather than to develop dancers. It will be interesting to see how his dances change as his presence dissipates. ✨

IDOLS by Richard Gibson

Like most young aspiring dancers, I had my idols. I cut their pictures from dance magazines to hang on my wall and dreamed of being like them someday. They were my inspirations.

Erik Bruhn was, in my eyes and most others, as close to perfection as one could be. I remember the first time I saw him in the early or mid 1950s. He was dancing in a ballet called, "Design for Strings" by John Taras. His dancing was so pure, simple, and understated. Nothing was sold to the audience. I saw in him the value of economy. He had such a "loud stillness."

Another idol was Margot Fonteyn. I also remember my first glimpse of her. It, too, was in the early 1950s. I will never forget her descending the stairs to do her first variation in "Sleeping Beauty." She didn't need to do the variation; just her beaming presence as she came down the stairs made me her slave. Along with Galina Ulanova, she had one of the most expressive backs I have ever seen. And those huge, black diamond eyes!

And then there was Violette Verdy. I recall the shock of her brilliant, shining aura the first time I saw her, which was as the Sugar Plum Fairy in "The Nutcracker." She truly glowed. It was like an electric energy emanating from her. But, again, like Fonteyn and Bruhn, her dancing was notable for its simplicity.

Another quality shared by my three idols was a musicality, which was multidimensional, heart pulling, thrilling.

Amazingly, I eventually found myself in class alongside those dancers – a colleague. I was always sure to do barre on the wall opposite of Erik, facing him so that I could feel his musicality and learn from his immaculate presentation. In the center, I would work in a different group from his, again, so that I could observe and learn from him. In those classes, I remember Margot and Violette for their simplicity and for having, to my surprise, the same struggles as the rest of us mere mortals.

Even more amazingly, I eventually had all three of my early idols as students in classes that I taught. I can never measure how much I learned by having those supremely unique artists in my classes. They were all music lessons for me. Each, in his or her own way, revealed to me what was truly important beyond mere technique in a dancer/artist.

I will add that even after their being exposed in the glaring lights of my classroom, revealing to me their weaknesses and flaws, they remain to this day, my idols. ✨



Erik Bruhn



Violette Verdy



Margot Fonteyn



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Chamberdance is a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation. All donations to the company are tax-deductible and support these young dancers by providing full or partial tuition assistance for one dance season at the Academy of Ballet.

EVERY DONATION COUNTS!