

The Lives of Dancers: Marie Sallé to Gelsey Kirkland

At the end of eighth grade, as my family was piling into the car for a two week road-trip from Seattle, Washington to Chautauqua, New York, my mom handed me a copy of Gelsey Kirkland's autobiography *Dancing on my Grave*. I devoured the book over the first few days of the trip, reading it at least once more before we arrived at our destination. It was Gelsey's world of Balanchine and Baryshnikov that inspired me to return to dancing that summer, after a two year hiatus. Having been enrolled at Pacific Northwest Ballet School at the age of eight, I had spent several years training pre-professional before I quit—which I did more out of teenage apathy than real disinterest. But once entranced by Gelsey, in addition to returning to my dance training with the intense focus I had lacked before, I also developed an intense hunger to learn all that I could about ballet. For the next few years, although I spent my afternoons in the ballet studio, I spent most of my other waking moments—on the school bus, in school, at home in bed—absorbed in the ballet culture of New York of the 1970s and 80s.

As my exposure to the ballet repertory increased, my interests broadened and I found myself reading about Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and Marius Petipa's ballets in late Imperial Russia. Later, as the director of the University of Chicago's undergraduate ballet company, I found myself digging through the library for details regarding forgotten plotlines, strange choreographic variants, and background information for program notes. Eventually I found myself writing a thesis on Nijinsky's *L'après-midi d'un faune*, and today I am writing a dissertation on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ballet practices. But the ballet biographies I began with are still closest to my heart. When I lose focus, I return to Gelsey's New York. Over the last fifteen years, this collection has grown and evolved. Although it mainly

contains biographies of ballerinas and a handful of female choreographers, it has grown to contain books on male figures as well, especially those of special importance such as Balanchine, Baryshnikov, and Nureyev. Although my library also contains a great deal of secondary literature on these dancers and their work, I have chosen here to stay as close as possible to my original interest—their lives.

Of great interest to me are both of Kirkland's books, *Dancing on My Grave*, and *The Shape of Love*, the two books that initially drove me to begin the collection. Although the latter is often dismissed because it was less of a sensation than *Dancing on my Grave*, it describes in depth Kirkland's detailed approach to character development in ballets, lending insight to her Stanislavskian staging method. It is also bears personal importance to me, given that I read it for a second time while staging *The Sleeping Beauty*, a ballet Kirkland treats in great detail, and again for Kirkland's acting advice while rehearsing the principal role of Medora in *Le Corsaire*. Additionally, the most recent extension of my collection—the original (and only) editions of the biographies of three eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French ballerinas—is also of special interest. These three books represent the nexus where my academic and personal interests meet. Furthermore, my copy of *Une Danseuse de l'Opéra sous Louis XIV: Mlle Sallé (1707-1756) D'après des documents inédits* is especially noteworthy, for it previously belonged to choreographer and Joffrey Ballet founder Robert Joffrey.

As I continue to build my collection, I hope to focus on filling the gaps in my biographies of American ballerinas. I would also like to extend my collection to include additional early twentieth-century biographies of earlier dancers, as, first of all, many of these dancers have not received biographical treatment since, and second, they provide a unique historical perspective for understanding national culture in France through dance around this time.

Bibliography

1. Kirkland, Gelsey, and Greg Lawrence. 1986. *Dancing on my grave: An autobiography*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. The book that started the collection. Kirkland describes a troubled childhood and adolescence at the School of American Ballet and her subsequent professional career. For some reason, this was the book that re-inspired my love of dance.
2. Kirkland, Gelsey, and Greg Lawrence. 1990. *The Shape of Love*. New York: Doubleday. Post-recovery, Kirkland stages ballets at American and British ballet companies and briefly returns to dancing. I read and reread this book while staging ballets for the first time in college.
3. Farrell, Suzanne, and Toni Bentley. 1990. *Holding on to the air: An autobiography*. New York: Summit Books. This was one of the many biographies of Balanchine ballerinas that I read following *Dancing on my Grave*.
4. Stewart, Edward. 1979. *Ballerina*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. A very overly dramatic fictional ballet biography that came out during the peak of public interest in ballet. At this point in high school, if it was about ballet in New York, I would read it.
5. Bentley, Toni. 2003. *Winter Season: A dancer's journal*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. Bentley describes a difficult season with the New York City Ballet in which she debates whether or not she wants to continue dancing. I read this book for the first time in the month after I stopped pursuing dance as a career and decided to go to college, trying to decide if there was still a place for ballet in my life. During this year, when I spent six weeks in bed recovering from surgery, I read more dance than ever before, using books as a way to live vicariously in the ballet studio.
6. McCann, Colum. 2003. *Dancer: A novel*. New York: Metropolitan Books. Fictional but biographically inspired account of Nureyev's life. A gift from my friend Nina when she learned that I was writing on dance (and that another dancer enjoyed reading dance as much as she did).
7. Fraser, John, and Eve Arnold. 1988. *Private view: Inside Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theatre*. New York: Bantam Books. I read this book incessantly throughout high school and perused the photos even more often. After Kirkland, these were my next role models, and some later became my teachers.
8. Mason, Francis. 1991. *I Remember Balanchine: Recollections of the Ballet Master by Those Who Knew Him*. New York: Doubleday. Memories of Mr. B by, among others, my teacher Melissa Hayden and former PNB directors Kent Stowell and Francia Russell.

9. Teachout, Terry. 2004. *All in the dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine*. Orlando: Harcourt. Balanchine is central to my collection both because I was trained by many of his dancers and because it was his ballerinas that inspired me to start reading dance.
10. De Mille, Agnes. 1952. *Dance to the Piper*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. Autobiography of American modern dance pioneer Agnes de Mille.
11. Easton, Carol. 1996. *No Intermissions: the life of Agnes de Mille*. New York: Da Capo. Biography of Agnes de Mille; a gift from my mother and one of the first modern dance biographies I read as a teenager.
12. Anawalt, Sasha. 1996. *The Joffrey Ballet: Robert Joffrey and the making of an American dance company*. New York: Scribner. Anawalt's history describes the working practices of Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino. As a bonus, the details and personal accounts of Joffrey's Ballets Russes restagings provide choreographic details regarding some of these works, rarely seen live.
13. Cunxin, Li. 2004. *Mao's Last Dancer*. New York: Berkley. Memoir of Chinese dancer who joined Houston Ballet.
14. Brenda Dixon Gottschild. 2012. *Joan Myers Brown & the Audacious Hope of the Black Ballerina*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Signed and dedicated by the author. Biography of founder of Philadanco.
15. Nijinsky, Waslaw, 1995. *Cahiers: Le sentiment*. Translated by Christian Dumais-Lvowski and Galina Pogojeva. Arles: Actes Sud. Nijinsky's unedited journals. These journals were an important source for my BA thesis.
16. Beaumont, Cyril. 1935; 1996. *Michel Fokine and his Ballets*. London: Dance Books. Overview of Michel Fokine's work by important dance historian and critic. Fokine's work *Les Sylphides* was my introduction to the professional ballet repertory.
17. Danilova, Alexandra. 1986. *Choura: The Memoirs of Alexandra Danilova*. New York: Knopf. Memoir of a ballerina who traveled to America with Balanchine and became one of the best known teachers at the School of American Ballet.
18. Nureyev, Rudolf. 1962; 1993. *Nureyev: His Spectacular Early Years: An Autobiography*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. Biography of the Russian star dancer who later headed the Paris Opéra Ballet.
19. Dacier, Emile. 1909. *Une Danseuse de l'Opéra sous Louis XIV: Mlle Sallé (1707-1756) D'après des documents inédits*. Paris: Plon. Biography of pioneering female choreographer of the *ballet d'action*. This book was previously a part of Robert Joffrey's personal collection, and the information "Mary Ann Wells, Ballet Teacher, Seattle" (Mary Ann Wells was indeed one of Joffrey's early teachers) is written inside the front cover.

20. Edmond de Goncourt. 1893. *La Guimard*. Paris: Charpentier. Biography of the famous French eighteenth-century ballerina.
21. Swift, Mary Grace. 1974. *A Loftier Flight: The Life and Accomplishments of Charles-Louis Didelot, Balletmaster*. London: Pitman Publishing. Biography of one of the ballet master primarily responsible for the transmission of the *ballet d'action* to Russia.
22. Auguste Erhard. 1909. *Une Vie de danseuse: Fanny Elssler*. Paris: Plon. Biography of the famous French nineteenth-century ballerina.
23. Terry, Walter. 1954. *Star Performance: The Story of the World's Great Ballerinas*. New York: Doubleday. Brief biographies of dozens of ballerinas from ballet's beginnings through to Native American Balanchine ballerina Maria Tallchief, written by the well-known dance critic.

Wish List

- Hayden, Melissa. 1963. *Melissa Hayden, off stage and on*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday. In addition to falling into my collection of biographies of Balanchine ballerinas, this out of print autobiography was written by one of my high school ballet instructors.
- Pritchard, Jane. 2013. *Anna Pavlova: Twentieth Century Ballerina*. London: Booth-Clibborn. This recent biography would help fill a gap in my early twentieth-century Russians in America collection.
- Mathilda Kschessinska. 1960. *Dancing in Petersburg: The Memoirs of Kschessinska*. London: Dance Books. Kschessinska's book provides an important look at the last remnants of the Russian Imperial Ballet and will help to strengthen the Russian component of my collection.
- Petipa, Marius., ed. Lillian Moore. 1958. *Russian Ballet Master: The Memoirs of Marius Petipa*. London: Dance Books. Petipa is also a critical hole in my collection, especially given the necessity of understanding Petipa's work to fully appreciate early twentieth-century experiments in context.
- Karsavina, Tamara. 1931. *Les souvenirs de Tamara Karsavina. Ballets Russes*. Paris: Plon. This later Éditions Plon biography would be an interesting addition to the collection, as it demonstrates the changes in the tastes of the Parisian reading public a few decades into the century—and the popularity of Russian dancers at this time!
- Vaillat, Léandre. 1942. *La Taglioni ou la Vie d'une danseuse*. Paris: Albin Michel. Marie Taglioni, one of the most famous nineteenth-century ballerinas, is not adequately present in my collection, and this French language biography, in conjunction with the biography noted below by the famous critic Levinson, would help to fill this gap.

Levinson, André, and Cyril Beaumont. 1930. *Marie Taglioni*. London: Gollancz.