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Author(s): Ann Daly

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The Balanchine Woman

Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers

Ann Daly

“Man is a better cook, a better painter, a better musician, composer. Everything is man—sports—everything. Man is stronger, faster. Why? Because we have muscles, and we’re made that way. And woman accepts this. It is her business to accept. She knows what’s beautiful. Men are great poets, because they have to write beautiful poetry for women—odes to a beautiful woman. Woman accepts the beautiful poetry. You see, man is the servant—a good servant. In ballet, however, woman is first. Everywhere else man is first. But in ballet, it’s the woman. All my life I have dedicated my art to her.”

—George Balanchine (Gruen 1976:284)

When people say that “Balanchine glorified Woman,” it is generally considered a laudable accomplishment. But in an age of backlash against feminism, when women’s efforts toward progressive social change are losing ground to blithe conservatism, “glorification” smacks of regressive sexual politics. Though artists and scholars in art, film, and theatre have been deconstructing representations of “Woman” for 15 years, such work is rarely found in Western theatrical dance. The issues surrounding the ballerina as a cultural icon of femininity have been left virtually unexplored in print and met with impatient, if polite, disinterest in most public discussions.¹

If the ballerina has been only a passing subject of critical feminist thinking, the Balanchine ballerina has been strictly off-limits. During his life, Balanchine was enveloped by a mythology that ascribed to him near-mystical inspiration, and now, four years after his death, Balanchine’s legacy is generally considered sacrosanct. Yet Balanchine’s statements about his idealized “Woman” openly declared their patriarchal foundations. Familiar themes emerge: Woman is naturally inferior in matters requiring action and imagination. Woman obligingly accepts her lowly place. Woman is an object of beauty and desire. Woman is first in ballet by default, because she is more beautiful than the opposite gender.

The Balanchine ballerina is not simply an innocuous, isolated theatrical image. As much as Twiggy or Marilyn Monroe, she is an American icon.

When, as in these cases, an artificial construction takes on a “natural” appearance, ideal representations (Woman) instead of realities (women) set standards for everyday life (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:10). An iconographic hangover from the 19th century, the Balanchine ballerina now serves as a powerful but regressive model in a social milieu where women are struggling to claim their own voices.

Balanchine’s choreographic framing of Woman came up briefly at the Dance Critics’ Association (DCA) seminar on *The Four Temperaments* (1946) on 25 January 1985. During one session, former New York City Ballet dancer Suki Schorer narrated a movement analysis of her role in the third theme pas de deux while two students from the School of American Ballet demonstrated.

She told the audience early on that the man “is manipulating [the ballerina]—controlling her.” At one point, he lifts her straight up and sets her on the floor on one pointe, her free leg crossed over the bent, supporting leg. She looks as if she is perched in an invisible chair. With one hand he grasps his ballerina’s upstretched arm like the throat of a cello; then he pulls on her free arm, spinning her repeatedly. “You see the boy totally controlling the girl,” Schorer commented. “He opens her arm [to the] side and then puts her arm in front. He’s doing her port de bras. [. . .] The boy should appear then to be strumming—playing—some sort of harp or cello. The girl is like an instrument.”

During the later critics’ panel, a member of the audience commented that she found the ballet somewhat misogynistic. Of the five panel members, only the two men responded. “I don’t think there’s any misogyny in Balanchine whatsoever,” said David Daniel, a *New York Review of Books* staff member. “Whenever he has a man manipulate a woman it is pure metaphor.”

Critic Robert Greskovic added that:

What happens in those three themes, for me, is that man’s support is allowing this woman to be more powerful, more open, and in my sense of looking at it more beautiful than she could be by herself because she has this [. . .] human ballet barre—I don’t care what you call it. That man shows her in four arabesques that she couldn’t do by herself, and each one is more powerful than the next because of his assistance or whatever you want to call it—manipulation.

“Nor is there any indication in a Balanchine ballet that a man is making a woman do anything that she doesn’t want to do,” Daniel concluded.

The gap between the choreography and the male rhetoric deserves investigation. The third theme of *The Four Temperaments* is but a few minutes in the many hours of Balanchine’s repertory, but it is an emblematic starting point for a feminist discourse on ballet. If Balanchine did “glorify Woman,” the question remains: whose idea of Woman is she?

Like the Madison Avenue model, Playboy centerfold, or Hollywood bombshell, Balanchine’s ballerina is part of a “culture [that] is deeply committed to myths of demarcated sex differences, called ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ which in turn revolve first on a complex [male] gaze apparatus and second on dominance-submission patterns. This positioning of two sex genders in representation clearly privileges the male” (Kaplan 1983:29).² The same questions E. Ann Kaplan asks about the cinema can be used to probe the Balanchine ballerina. In the third theme of *The Four Temperaments*, how is Woman represented? In a dance form that Balan-

chine called an instant love story, whose desire is being played out? Who occupies the position of privilege?

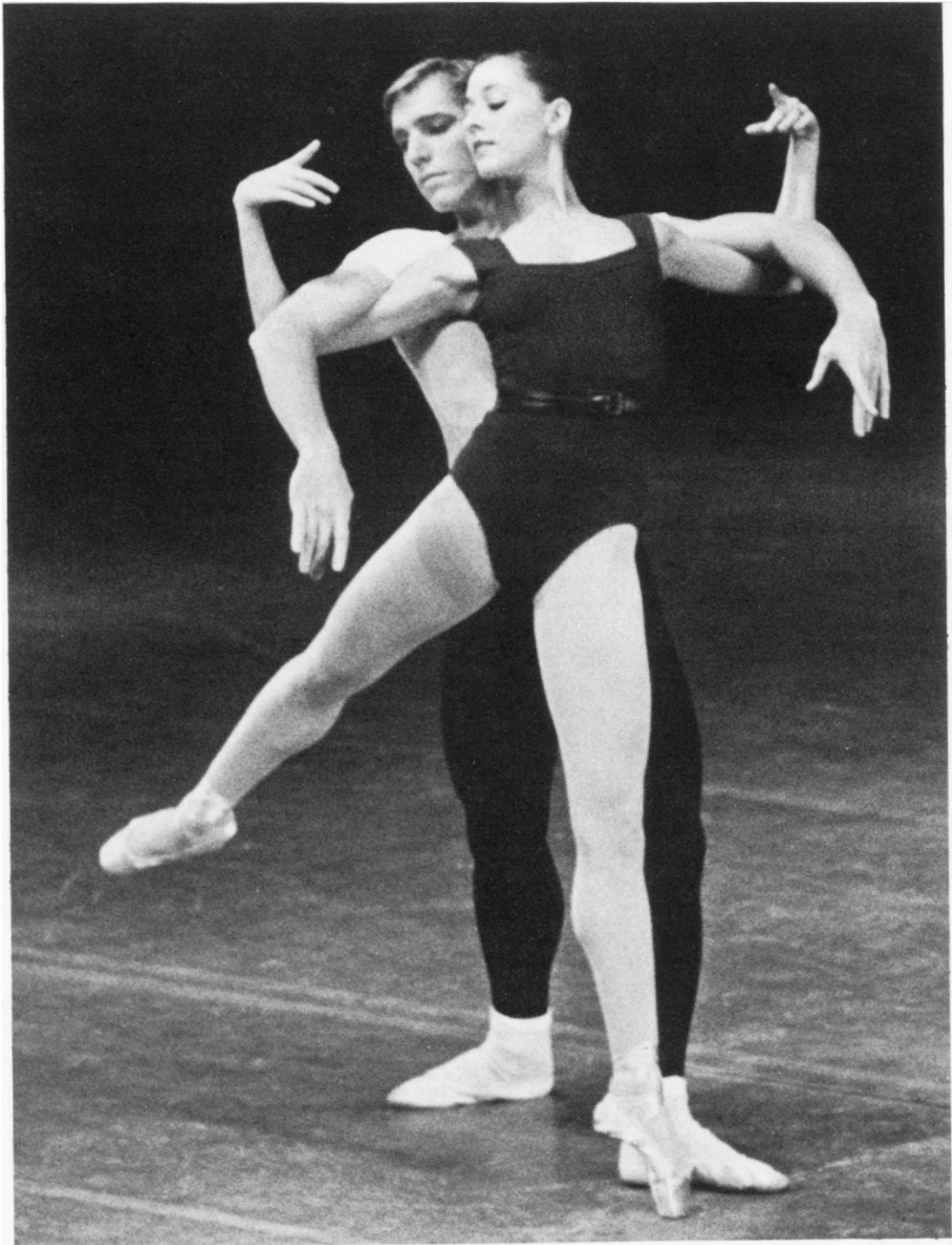
Balanchine choreographed *The Four Temperaments* to Paul Hindemith's 1940 *Theme with Four Variations (According to the Four Temperaments)*. The ballet is not so much about the four humors as it is about the sometimes sweet, sometimes plaintive music, featuring the comings and goings of piano and strings. The score begins with three themes, each represented by a pas de deux; the subsequent variations are "Melancholic," "Sanguinic," "Phlegmatic," and "Choleric." This was the first of Balanchine's strain of so-called "modern ballets," which, though rooted in the classical vocabulary, inverted it, stretching it beyond the boundaries of conventional "good taste."

The third theme is adagio—a man and woman dancing together in a slow tempo. Its gender system is the traditional one "in which girls perform, supported by male partners" (Kirstein 1983:296). The couple enters together, and, after a brief foray by the ballerina, the danseur puts her through an extraordinary sequence of precarious moves and off-kilter positions that render her totally vulnerable to his control. It is as if the man were experimenting with how far he could pull the ballerina off her own balance and still be performing classical ballet. The extreme to which the third theme exemplifies what a ballerina can look like with the support of her partner makes it an archetypal pas de deux.

A recurring motif is the arabesque, created and used in quite unconventional ways. The danseur lays the ballerina in arabesque against his leaned-back body (plate 1) or swings her around on the pivot of her supporting foot. As soon as an arabesque is formed or even before it is fully formed, the man pulls, lifts, or thrusts the ballerina into another phrase. However innovative the arabesques are, they still serve the traditional purpose of focusing on the ballerina's leg. The emphasis on the manipulated weight of the ballerina—passive weight, counterweight, displaced weight, the compression of balanced weight, no weight—forces a focus onto the woman's support system: her legs. They are constantly drawn in and then extended outward, further intensifying the visual impact of her dynamic line. And as the couple exits, the man carrying the woman, she reverently unfolds her legs forward, as if she's rolling out a red carpet for her exquisitely arched feet. Displaying the line of her body, artificially elongated by her toe shoes, is the goal of their joint venture.

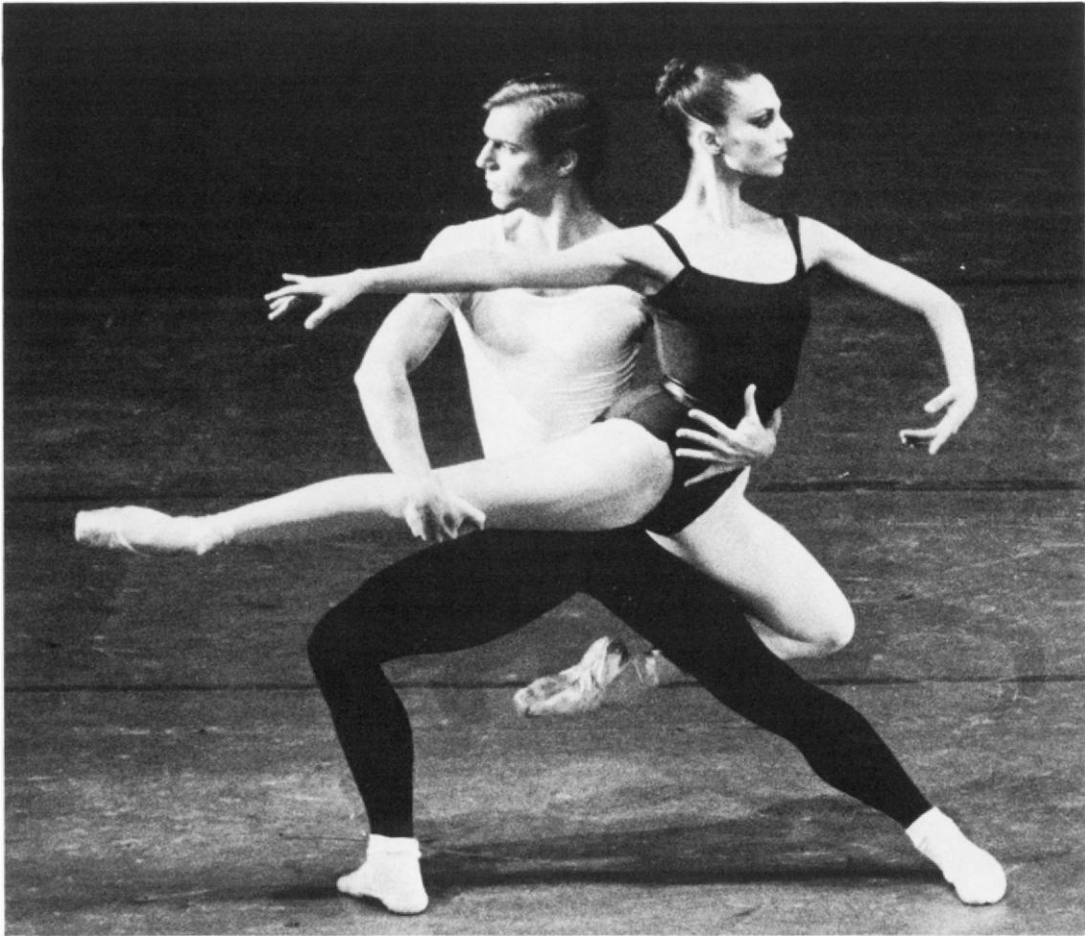
It is usually assumed that because Balanchine created so many more starring roles for women than men that the ballerina is therefore the dominant figure. But it is not enough to observe that the ballerina is of primary interest; it must be asked how the choreography positions her within the interaction. In *Temperaments'* third theme, the ballerina is the center of attention because she is the one being displayed. The "feminine" passivity which marks this display is a low status activity in American culture; action is valued as "masculine" for its strength and self-assertiveness. In paintings, in films, in beauty pageants, in advertisements, women are constructed as to-be-looked-at; the men are the lookers, the voyeurs . . . the possessors. Men, on the other hand, are constructed as the doers in films, in television commercials, in sports, in politics, in business. That's why men who model are often seen as being "effeminate." As John Berger wrote, "men act and women appear" (1973:47).

The Romantic ballerina—an important forerunner of the Balanchine ballerina—is similarly seen as dominant because of her legendary celebrity. Both Erik Aschengreen and John Chapman have debunked this myth.



1. Lisa Hess and Kipling Houston: emphasizing the lines of the ballerina's legs. (Photo by Paul Kolnik; courtesy of the New York City Ballet)

Only superficially, Aschengreen argues, did the Romantic ballet in France belong to the ballerinas; rather, Romantic ballet was the expression of a masculine society's desires. "Both *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* are named for the leading female characters, but the heroes, James and Albert [Albrecht], bear the problems of the ballets" (1974:30). They bear the problems, and they make the choices: they act, while the heroines are acted upon. In *La Sylphide*, for example, James loves, and the Sylphide is loved; James rejects, and Effie is rejected.



2. Balanchine's *Woman* is fast, precise, impassive. Pictured are Stephanie Saland and Kipling Houston. (Photo by Paul Kolnik; courtesy of the New York City Ballet)

Chapman writes about the paradox in which the Romantic ballerina was adored at the same time both she and her stage persona occupied a low status within the social order:

The owned woman, the slave girl, and the harem girl occurred with great frequency in ballet and painting, reflecting the female's position in Parisian society. [. . .] Perhaps just as erotic as the harem girl was the supernatural spirit [. . .] and she was as free for the taking. [. . .] Yet the taking was not always so easy, at least on the Opera stage, where wilis lured men to their dooms and sylphs eluded the most eager grasp. The challenge and danger of the seductive femme fatale only heightened the erotic stimulation. Ballet was well suited to support this image of the female. On the stage real women, as slave girls, spirits or adventuresses, revealed themselves to the hungry eyes of the viewer. Off stage in the foyer de la danse, the wealthiest and most influential could mingle with the dancers in highly elegant surroundings. From this sophisticated market-place the rich buyers selected their mistresses. [. . .] Thus the female who was elevated to the position of a goddess was demeaned to the status of a possession, a sexual object (1978:35).

The ballerina in the third theme of *The Four Temperaments* is a blend of the Romantic ballerina's enticing elusiveness and the contemporary

American woman. Arlene Croce writes that “in Balanchine the ballerina is unattainable simply because she is woman, not because she’s a supernatural or enchanted being” (1979:127).³ She is specifically a white, heterosexual American Woman: fast, precise, impassive. These qualities, exemplified in her modern technical prowess, seduce the male gaze, but the titillating danger—the threat—of her self-sufficient virtuosity is tamed by her submissive role within the interaction. Much as the Romantic ballerina was a “beautiful danger” (Aschengren 1974) because of her narrative association with the erotic and the demonic, the third theme ballerina is a dualistic construction whose “danger” lies in the unattainable Otherness of her “daredevil” technique. And if she is feisty, her surrender is all the more delicious.

In the third theme, the ballerina does momentarily assert herself. After the danseur whirls her posed body seven times on the balance of one pointe, she bursts upward and turns triumphantly, in a split second. So when she does surrender, it is all the more oppressive. For instance, after a bit of typical Balanchine play with the presentation of hands and the intertwining of arms, the ballerina’s arms are crossed over her chest, and her partner holds her hands from behind, like reins. Figuratively and literally, the man has the controlling hand. According to Schorer:

The boy is lowering her arms so that she has to go to the floor, and she goes into a fetal position. It’s like he’s wrapped her up, and now by pulling her arms down she has to go into this teeny ball or form. [. . .] About] the next step [in which she extricates

3. *The third theme ballerina reveals her feminine charms. Pictured are Lisa Hess and Kipling Houston. (Photo by Steven Caras; courtesy of the New York City Ballet)*



herself from this bind], Mr. B. always said, "It should look like a struggle." From here she has to get her leg out, followed by hips, arms, and the last thing is her head: to "get born," so to speak. She should be a little bit lower and sort of almost awkward, struggling—but in a graceful way.

Struggling is not "feminine," but Balanchine's ballerina makes it so because Balanchine has choreographed it to emphasize the extension of her leg as she steps out of her cocoon. This episode, like the entire *pas de deux*, has violent undertones. They have to do not only with the physical extreme to which Balanchine stretches the classical vocabulary and the ballerina's body, but also with its sadomasochistic pattern: man manipulates powerless woman.

The erotic undercurrent in the theme surfaces when the ballerina's arabesques shoot between her partner's legs. In another sequence, the ballerina ends up in an elegant sitting position, with bent knees properly together and on her toes. Before repeating the phrase, she briefly looks at him, then coyly lowers her gaze and cocks her head as she frames the sinuous curve of her face with an open palm. Like the Romantic image of the female and the image of geisha girl in Japanese prints, she is revealing her feminine charms in a demure yet provocative way.

The Balanchine ballerina does have control over her body in the sense that she is a technical dynamo, but a distinction must be made between the athleticism and virtuosity of the steps and the worldview that the choreography expresses. Kirstein says:

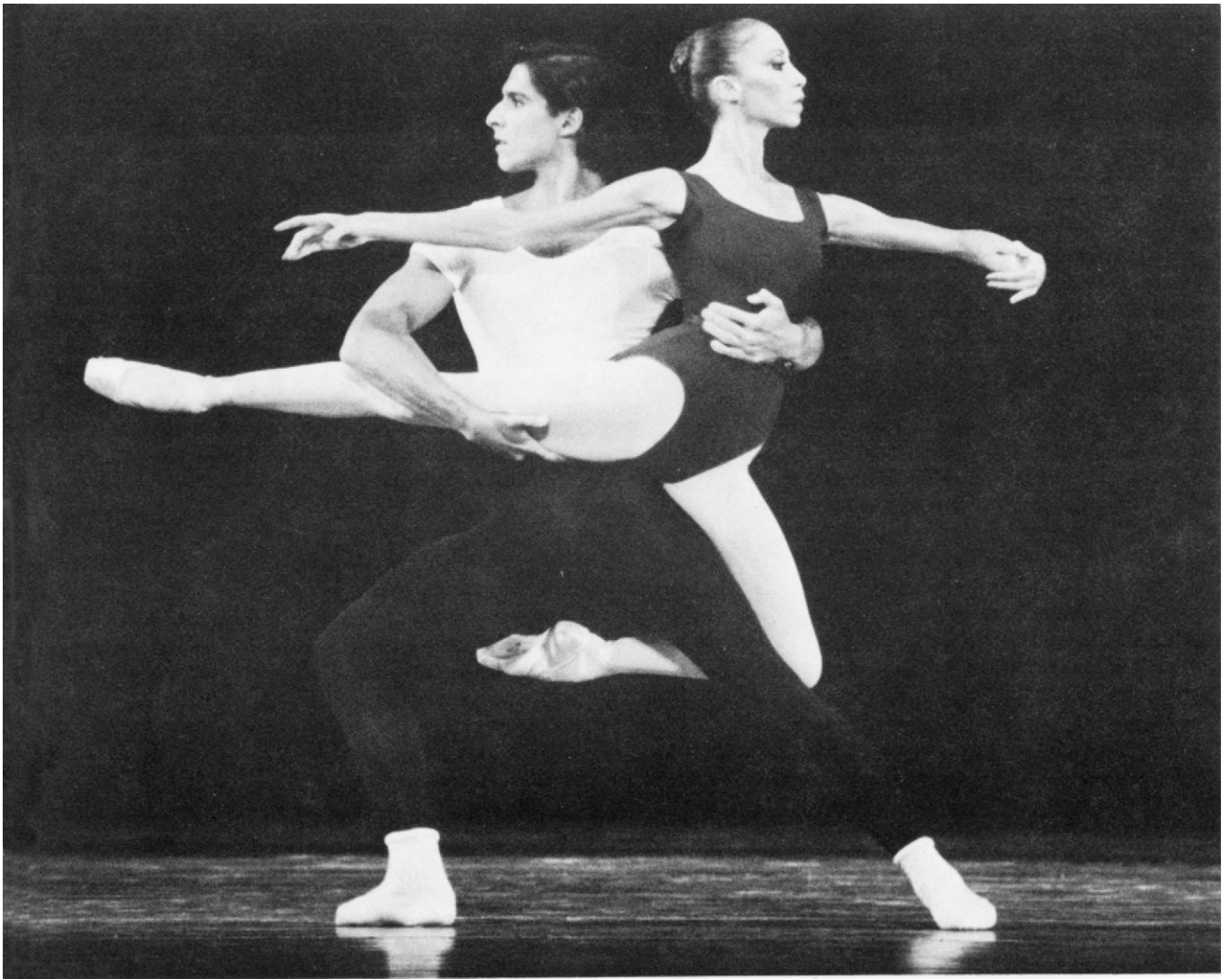
Balanchine has been responsible for a philosophy that has treated girls as if they were as athletic as their brothers. He has proved that they can be fiery hummingbirds rather than dying swans, with the capacity of channel swimmers (1983:114).

But why is a channel swimmer required for the part of a hummingbird, fiery or otherwise?

In the third theme, the manipulated ballerina looks less like a dominant dynamo than a submissive instrument, both literally and figuratively. Her partner is always the one who leads, initiates, maps out the territory, subsumes her space into his, and handles her waist, armpits, and thighs. She never touches him in the same way: she does not initiate the moves. Metaphorically, she makes no movement of her own; her position is contingent on the manipulations of her partner.

By arranging and rearranging the ballerina's body, the man (first the choreographer, then the partner, and voyeuristically the male-constructed spectator) creates the beauty he longs for. Croce says that "like Petipa's, his [Balanchine's] ballets are more likely to be expressed from the man's point of view, and he has used the unemotional style of American ballerinas as an object, a created effect" (1982:277).⁴ In the third theme, that objectified, impassive style renders the woman a prop in perversely exquisity imagery. She is a bell to be swung to and fro, a figurine to be shown left and right (plate 4), or an instrument to be strummed. In what Schorer called the "drag step," the man literally carries the ballerina on his back. Her legs are lifeless, following after her like limp paws.

As "abstract" as the third theme may be, it is rooted in the very concrete, very familiar code of chivalry. The chivalric tradition gives rise to the rhetoric that a woman is "more powerful, more open and [. . .] more



beautiful than she could [be] by herself because she has this [. . .] man,” as Greskovic put it at the DCA seminar. Edward Villella, one of Balanchine’s greatest male dancers, makes implicit reference to the chivalric code when he explains why he does not feel subordinate to his women partners:

My presenting the ballerina gives me great pleasure and I find it a very masculine thing to do. It’s very masculine to hold a door for a woman or to take her elbow to help her across the street. The male dancer does the same kind of thing. We take the woman’s arm and we take her waist, we lift her and present her. It’s a social as well as a balletic tradition (Birdwhistell et al. 1969:47).

Rather than glorifying women, chivalry has been linked to openly subordinating attitudes toward women (Nadler and Morrow 1959). Masculine deference such as Villella describes is false, Nadler and Morrow point out, “because it is accorded to women only insofar as they subordinate themselves to a narrow stereotype, and remain ‘properly’ submissive” (1959:119). Women are accorded superficial amenities and ritual etiquettes provided that in important matters they “keep their place” (1959:114). Positioning women as needy and “deserving” of male assistance, chivalry casts her as “feminine” against the privileged patriarchal “masculine.”

4. Lisa Jackson and Afshin Mofid: woman as prop in perversely exquisite imagery. (Photo by Paul Kolnik; courtesy of the New York City Ballet)

Preventing women from venturing out on their own in the name of chivalry precludes women from acquiring knowledge and capability and, therefore, power (Fox 1977). Power and prestige accrue to the men.

In the third theme, immediately following the couple's entrance, the woman ventures out on her own by carving out a big chunk of the stage space as she makes a semicircular path toward a back corner. The ballerina reaches toward a place in the distance, only to be pulled back in by her cavalier, who then restricts her to much smaller portions of floor space. According to Schorer: "It really looks like the boy takes her to make her stop." From then on, he succeeds in keeping her within arm's reach.

Pointe work often frames the ballerina as needy of her partner's help. In the third theme, the danseur is the upright, steadying force for the ballerina as he pulls her off-balance or positions her precariously on one pointe. This movement motif starts with their very entrance. Self-assured and impenetrable, the danseur moves sideways toward center stage with his arms broadly extended in a "T," stepping quickly up on half pointe and then descending squarely on his heels. When the ballerina follows suit, she steps laterally on both pointes in front of him, but then she gently lunges sideways off pointe, with her arms tilting. He is linear and stable; she is curvaceous and inconstant.

The male door-opening ceremony to which Vilella compares partnering a ballerina is a notorious reinforcement of gender asymmetry. Laurel Richardson Walum underlines the importance of this social ritual as a means of perpetuating patriarchal order:

The door ceremony, then, reaffirms for both sexes their sense of gender-identity, of being a "masculine" or "feminine" person. It is not accidentally structured. In a very profound way the simple ceremony daily makes a reality of the moral perspectives of their culture: the ideology of patriarchy. These virtues of "masculinity" are precisely those which are the dominant values of the culture: aggression, efficacy, authority, prowess, and independence. And these virtues are assigned to the dominant group, the males (cf. Millet, 1970:23-58). Opening a door for a woman, presumably only a simple, common courtesy, is also a political act, an act which affirms a patriarchal ideology (Walum 1974:510).

Ballet is one of our culture's most powerful models of patriarchal ceremony. In the third theme, Balanchine sharply demarcates "feminine" and "masculine" behavior. Though the ballerina displays her beauty, power is associated with the masculine values of authority, strength, and independence which her partner, the manipulator, demonstrates. And by her compliance, she ratifies her subordination. The cultural model that Daniel passed off at the DCA seminar as harmless, "pure metaphor" in fact perpetuates male dominance, and the hegemonous result is women co-constituting their own oppression. As Daniel pointed out, Balanchine's ballerinas don't do anything they don't want to: they've bought into the system. Suzanne Farrell, Balanchine's most perfect "creation," once said that:

I'd kill myself for a man, but I ain't going to kill myself for a woman. I think it works well that way also. It's not that a woman couldn't . . . not that a woman couldn't be president, but I think it works better if it's a man with a very powerful woman behind him (Garske 1983:22).

Balanchine glorified Woman because her Beauty pleased him, pleased the cavalier, and pleased the spectators' male gaze. The choreographer made no secret that his ballets were created for the male point of view:

"The principle of classical ballet is woman," he said in his tiny backstage office during the second act of *Jewels*. "The woman is queen. Maybe women come to watch men dance, but I'm a man. [. . .] The woman's function is to fascinate men" (Lewis 1976:45).

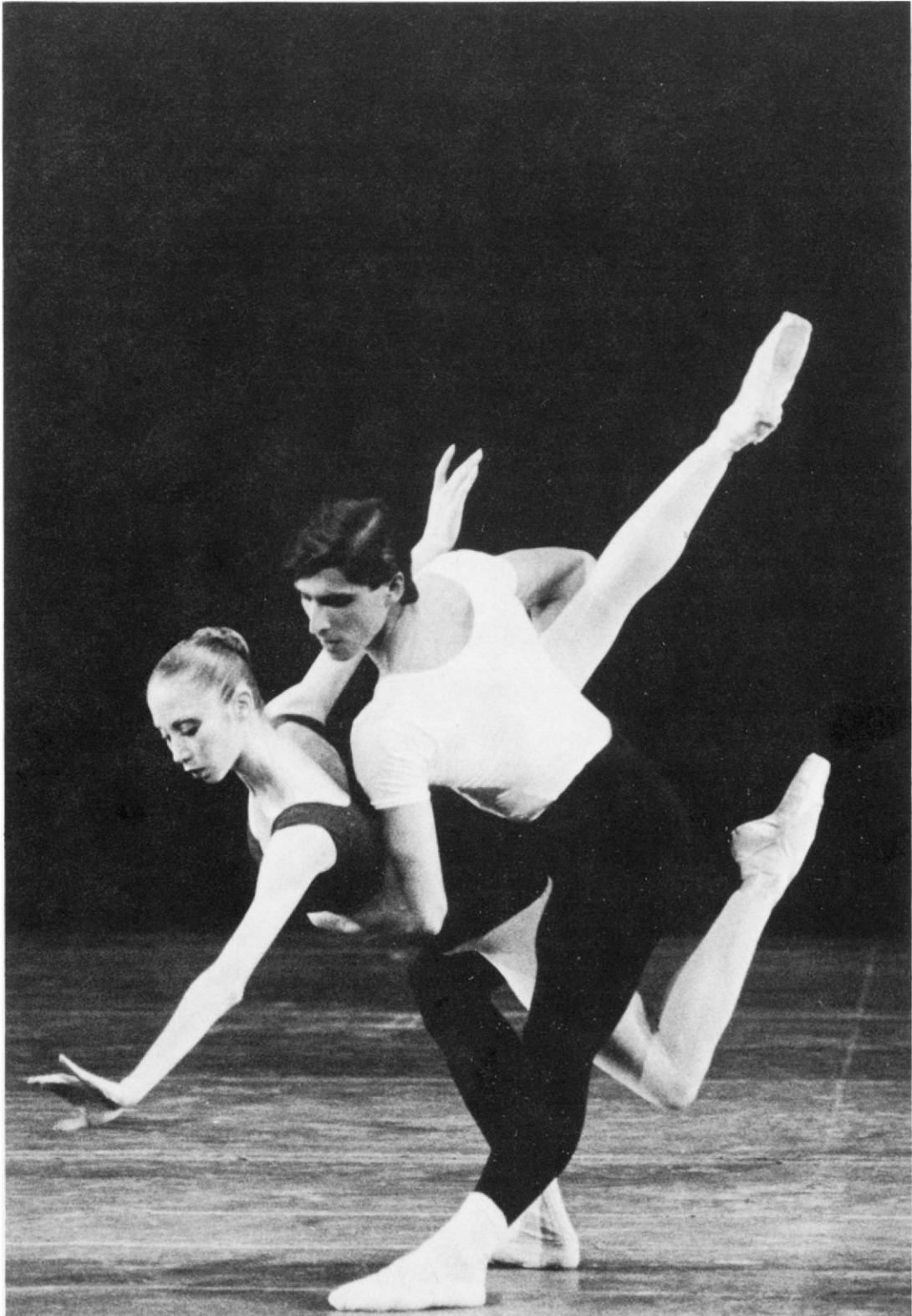
Balanchine was a man who liked to watch women. He choreographed representations of Woman which conformed to his male idea of what she should be. In the third theme of *The Four Temperaments*, the ballerina is not represented as a subject; rather, she is Woman as object of male desire. This pas de deux may be an archetypal courtship, but the desire expressed by their relationship belongs only to the man. About her own desire, the compliant third theme ballerina is silent.

All this is not to single out Balanchine; rather, it is to show that, despite the "ballet is woman" rhetoric, the representational form in which Balanchine worked is rooted in an ideology which denies women their own agency. No matter what the specific steps, no matter what the choreographic style, the interaction structure, pointe work, and movement style of classical ballet portrays women as objects of male desire rather than as agents of their own desire (like the woman in "The Unanswered Question" portion of Balanchine's *Ivesiana*, 1954). The only way a woman can be truly assertive and independent, from that male point of view, is as a venomous femme fatale (like the Siren in Balanchine's *The Prodigal Son*, 1929).

The question arises: can women ever represent themselves in classical ballet? During the New York City Ballet's Spring 1986 season, Merrill Ashley danced the adagio in Balanchine's *Symphony in C* (1947) so assuredly and so bravely that she literally and figuratively left her partner behind. Even when a spitfire ballerina like Ashley does manage to transcend her choreographic frame, she is still seen against the model of the chivalric pas de deux. Her autonomy in the *Symphony in C* adagio emerged in spite of the choreography rather than because of it—Woman as the to-be-looked-at Other remains the norm. As long as classical ballet prescribes Woman as a lightweight creature on pointe and men as her supporters/lifters, women will never represent themselves on the ballet stage.

Some argue that, because ballerinas are smaller and lighter than dancers, they are biologically determined to be the supported rather than the supporter. The argument's premise is faulty, for, as Suzanne Gordon graphically described in *Off Balance* (1983), the ethereal look is not an anatomical given. Many aspiring ballerinas practically starve themselves to achieve the ballerina image, turning into anorexics and bulimics in the process. Besides, Senta Driver and the contact improvisation dancers (Novack 1986) have demonstrated that actual weight has relatively little to do with the ability to lift someone. Lifting and supporting are much more a matter of *how* a dancer uses her/his weight, of placement, and of timing (Daly 1987b; Laws 1984). And, of course, there is no biological reason for the exclusion of men from pointe work.

But if pointe work, support systems, and weight deployment were shared among individuals rather than divided between genders, the form would no longer be classical ballet. Ballet, as it has been molded since the



arrival of the professional female dancer and even before, is based on dichotomized gender difference and, hence, dominance (Daly 1987a). Martha Graham's very early works created a radical vision of strength for women, but today's modern dance is just as gender-dichotomized as ballet. A totally new way of dancing and choreographic form—if that is possible to imagine within the framework of patriarchy—is needed in order to encode a gender-multiple dance. In his effort to verbalize this dream of a future without gender asymmetry, Jacques Derrida talks about “the desire [. . .] to invent incalculable choreographies”:

[. . .] What if we were to approach here [. . .] the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? [. . .] As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each “individual,” whether he be classified as “man” or as “woman” according to the criteria of usage. [. . .] Then too, I ask you, what kind of a dance would there be, or would there be one at all, if the sexes were not exchanged according to rhythms that vary considerably? (Derrida and McDonald 1982:76)

Until that dance is created—if it ever is—the solution is not to abolish classical ballet; rather, the only chance of seeing “incalculable choreographies” hinges on a concomitant change in the audience. We must learn to look critically: past the chivalric rhetoric to the underlying ideology. Twenty-three years ago Ray Birdwhistell argued that, as a weakly dimorphic species, human beings express a constructed gender dichotomy at the level of movement, body position, and expressive behavior “which can be variably exploited for the division of labor” (1970:46). The subtleties of movement as a regulator of social order have been explored in the social sciences (Schefflen 1972, 1974), and the same can and should be done in dance. To begin with, critics, practitioners, and scholars have got to recognize ballet as a cultural institution that represents and thus inscribes gender behavior in everyday life. Gender imaging must become as important a subject of discourse as the ubiquitous cataloging of style and technique. Otherwise, our channel swimmers will forever remain hummingbirds.

Notes

1. My thanks to Kate Davy and Debra Sowell for helping me formulate my argument and to the Dance Critics Association for the loan of video and audio tapes from its 1985 seminar on *The Four Temperaments*.
2. The pivotal concept of the “male gaze” arises from an examination of the structure of representation, in which the position of the spectator (the gazer) is encoded. Kaplan wrote: “The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the ‘masculine’ position” (1983:30). Thus, women, too, under patriarchy partake in the acculturated male gaze.
3. and 4. Though I make use of Croce's observations for a feminist critique of Balanchine's ballerina, Croce concludes that “for Balanchine it is the man who sees and follows and it is the woman who acts and guides” (1979:126).

5. *Lisa Jackson and Afshin Mofid: an archetypal courtship.* (Photo by Steven Caras; courtesy of the New York City Ballet)

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Ann Daly is TDR's managing editor. She writes dance criticism for Ballet International, High Performance, and Prospect Press and is working toward a doctorate in Performance Studies at New York University.