

Review

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James Steichen, *Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), ISBN: 978-0-19-060741-8.

Apart from those devoted to political power couples, scholarly books with two (and only two) protagonists are relatively hard to come by. While this is not the primary virtue of James Steichen's *Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise*, it is one of the many things that makes the book important for understanding the ways in which artistic development during the period in question (1933–40) thrived on tension – interpersonal, international, sexual and otherwise. Neither an institutional history nor a 'great man' biography, the book straddles genres in a way reminiscent of George Balanchine's own activities – moving between ballet, modern dance, Broadway and the Hollywood musical – tackling some of the same challenges and reaping some of the same rewards. For those who know Lincoln Kirstein chiefly for his shepherding of Americanist ballet both at home and abroad, this book provides a detailed contextualization, emphasizing stylistic diversity and administrative versatility.¹ And for those who associate Balanchine primarily with his latter-day Stravinsky collaborations, it offers an intricate pre-history and a number of on-point correctives.

While Kirstein dominates the footnotes, with new source material drawn extensively from the impresario's diaries and personal papers, Balanchine looms larger in the text, for it is his glossy history that Steichen most obviously revises. Though uniformly persuasive, many of these revisions will prove more crucial for dance specialists than for other readers. For example, Steichen makes plain that *Serenade*, perpetually touted as Balanchine's 'first ballet in America', was not actually presented at the initial public performances of the fledgling American Ballet, founded by Kirstein and Balanchine in 1934; moreover, he argues delightfully that parts of the supposedly austere *Serenade* (to music by Tchaikovsky) were intentionally and effectively funny for its original audience (56, 79). Steichen's rehabilitation of noted dance critic John Martin as a thoughtful observer rather than a modern-dance partisan should also be taken to heart. Scholars working outside of dance will find much of Steichen's study useful when discussing modernism and its historiography, particularly the cross-fertilization of 'high' and 'low', the mixed messaging of (neo)classical nationalism and, albeit to a lesser extent, questions of race and appropriation.

1 See, among others, Elizabeth Bergman Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland in the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Jennifer L. Campbell, 'Shaping Solidarity: Music, Diplomacy, and Inter-American Relations, 1936–1946' (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2010).

Given Balanchine's and Kirstein's distinguished roster of composer-collaborators, musicologists may find it disappointing that Steichen's primary source material offers only tantalizing hints about musical matters. We learn, for example, that Kirstein and Balanchine probably 'did not especially care for [Milhaud's] score for *Dreams*' (37); that the exercises Balanchine assigned his dancers involved 'tricky' rhythms (61–2); and that Kay Swift's score for the football-themed ballet eventually titled *Alma Mater* 'was better than anyone had anticipated' (48). Contemporary critics sometimes opened windows onto the musical material, but Steichen's text only allows for quick glances, often because the materials are missing that would allow for documented connections between musical and physical gesture. One might wish for more speculation about what the dancers heard and how it affected their movements, but Steichen is consistent and judicious in letting critics have their say. If there are too many paragraphs showing just how mixed these reviews were, such passages are saved from hodgepodge by the author's deft writing and welcome wit.

Steichen's ten chapters are organized strictly according to chronology, which is both a boon and at times a frustration of the forests-and-trees variety. Embraced by bare-bones titles (e.g., 'Chapter 1: 1933') that serve as helpful guideposts, the chronology is set forth with narrative seams fully on display in the practical manner of a desktop calendar or patchwork quilt. For this reader, some passages were overabundantly detailed – the weather reports for outdoor performances, for instance, or the microhistory of Balanchine's various ailments. Even the data of ballet company tours, clearly crucial to have in full, might have been handled not (or not only) in prose but with charts, or graphs, or maps that could support meaningful comparisons from year to year, making it easier to see the waxing and waning of funds and ambition. While undoubtedly difficult to manage, a thematic focus would have allowed for some interesting chapters on genre, race, class, gender and sexuality – chapters for which Steichen's book provides plenty of raw material.

Steichen's story starts with the post-Diaghilev free-for-all of the ballet world in the 1930s, with Kirstein and his efforts to find a choreographer sympathetic to the idea of a School of American Ballet. Following in the footsteps of scholars such as Lynn Garafola, Mark Franko and Elizabeth Kendall, Steichen succeeds in peeling back the adulatory or self-aggrandizing reminiscences of participants in the scene to give us a picture that is at once clearer and messier than the received wisdom. In Steichen's words, 'This new history of the origins of the Balanchine–Kirstein enterprise is not attuned to its triumphant teleology and culmination [in the New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet] but rather seeks to understand its missteps, overlooked achievements, and unsung heroes' (11). Accordingly, Steichen examines the centrifugal forces that threatened the Balanchine–Kirstein enterprise from the outset, most notably the friction between the institutional needs of a school (championed by Kirstein and by Vladimir Dimitriev, Balanchine's friend and business manager) and the allure of a fully professional dance company, clearly Balanchine's priority and also the chief interest of Kirstein's financial backer Edward Warburg. Equally potent is the well-documented reminder that the Balanchine who came to the United States in 1933 was not the neoclassical paragon of the 1940s and 1950s. Instead, Balanchine arrived with a reputation 'as an experimental modernist with a penchant

for the idiosyncratic and bizarre' (58). As later chapters attest, the choreographer first extended his notoriety not by moving in the direction of *Concerto Barocco* (1941; music by J. S. Bach) or *The Four Temperaments* (1946; music by Hindemith), but by adopting and adapting American popular dance forms in his work for Broadway and later Hollywood.

Crafting a coherent chronology for the Balanchine–Kirstein enterprise is no mean feat – not just because of the complexity of the founding figures, but also because of the proliferation of scenes and institutions in which they moved. The American Ballet's tenure as the resident dance ensemble at the Metropolitan Opera House began in the fall of 1935 and came to an abrupt end in April 1938. As Steichen observes, the company's stint at the Met has typically 'been construed as an unfortunate detour at best or a Babylonian captivity at worst', during which 'Balanchine's choreographic contributions to the opera attracted attention mostly when they invited critical comment or controversy and were otherwise greeted with indifference' (103). Steichen's detailed account of how the American Ballet got the job (like his later discussion of the impresario's attempts to get his signature Ballet Caravan picked up by NBC) offers a potent reminder of Kirstein's wealth and family connections – a corrective to the image Kirstein embraced in his leftist manifesto *Blast at Ballet*, self-published in 1938.² In the end, Balanchine's provocative choreography proved a poor fit for the stable of war horses trotted out by the Met and, Steichen argues, the company was 'losing as much in institutional identity and vitality as it gained from the bigger audiences and larger platform' (149). Nevertheless, the Met engagement brought with it marketable prestige and some unusual performance opportunities on 'mixed bill opera evenings' that featured American Ballet productions as curtain openers, intermezzos or complements to shorter operatic fare. The culmination of the American Ballet's Met career was undoubtedly the Stravinsky Festival of April 1937, which Steichen calls 'virtually critic-proof in its conception and execution', in part thanks to the renowned composer's 'presence on the podium' conducting the New York Philharmonic (156). The festival featured *Apollon Musagète* (later *Apollo*), *The Card Party* and a revival of *Le Baiser de la Fée*, laying the groundwork for Balanchine's future Stravinsky collaborations, including *Orpheus* (1948) and *Agon* (1957).³

While the American Ballet was still tethered to the Met, Kirstein began assembling his offshoot ensemble Ballet Caravan in 1936, which at first necessitated the splitting up of the parent company's dancers into resident and touring ensembles. Although it took some time for Ballet Caravan's 'regionalist and politically activist' aims to coalesce (127–8), from the start it gave its young dancer-choreographers a chance to get out from under Balanchine's shadow, touring via 'a heterogeneous itinerary of colleges, civic auditoriums, movie theaters, and other popular and private venues' (131) and creating original works for 'newly composed music by leading American musical talents' (189–90).⁴ Among these talents were Paul Bowles, Henry

2 Lincoln Kirstein, *Blast at Ballet: A Corrective for the American Audience* (New York: Marstin Press, 1938); see also Lynn Garafola, 'Lincoln Kirstein, Modern Dance, and the Left: The Genesis of an American Ballet', *Dance Research* 23/1 (2005), 18–35.

3 See Stephanie Jordan, *Stravinsky Dances: Re-Visions across a Century* (London: Dance Books, 2007), and Charles Joseph, *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

4 See also James Steichen, 'The American Ballet's Caravan', *Dance Research Journal* 47/1 (2015), 69–94.

Brant, Elliott Carter and, of course, Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland, whose *Filling Station* (1937) and *Billy the Kid* represent the only two pieces of the Ballet Caravan repertory that have been performed after the company's demise in 1940. Although the reviews that Steichen cites refer to the musical component only in passing, his research uncovers some fascinating collaborations: the multinational *Folk Dance*, which dancer Douglas Coudy set to the music of Emmanuel Chabrier; Robert McBride's 'jazzily amusing' score for Erick Hawkins's balletic *Show Piece*; and the 'potpourri' of styles in Paul Bowles and Eugene Loring's *Yankee Clipper*. The biggest surprise is saved for last: the Ballet Caravan's improbable swan song in residence at the Ford Motor Company's Pavilion at the 1940 World's Fair. 'For almost six months', Steichen informs us, 'the Caravan appeared twelve times a day in a ballet called *A Thousand Times Neigh*, which recounted the history of the automobile from the perspective of its protagonist Dobbin the horse, portrayed by two male dancers in a single costume' (225). Conceived by industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague, with a 'vivacious, amusing, and unpretentious' score by Tom Bennett of NBC and 'fresh' choreography by William Dollar, *A Thousand Times Neigh* likely set some kind of a record for American ballet spectatorship, in addition to being 'the first ballet to be sponsored by a corporate patron and the first ballet danced to recorded music' (227).

While Kirstein was travelling with the Caravan, Balanchine was making inroads into musical theatre and film, which intensified after his marriage to the glamorous Vera Zorina. Balanchine's initial approach to Broadway came courtesy of the Ziegfeld Follies in January 1936, but it was his first two shows for Rodgers and Hart, *On Your Toes* (1936) and *Babes in Arms* (1937), that really solidified his credentials.⁵ Steichen argues persuasively – and this is perhaps the main takeaway of the book as a whole – that these efforts should not be understood as an 'inconsequential idyll' or worse as 'unwilling seduction into the world of popular celebrity'. Rather, Balanchine on Broadway was redefining the core mission of making ballet for the masses, with 'thoughtful and ambitious ideas about how to bring ballet to wider audiences on both stage and screen' (168–9).

In addition to preserving his choreography and distinctive 'dance cinematography' for all to see, Balanchine's movie musicals allow audiences today their own points of entry into the intricate intersections of genre and race that characterized the 1930s. *On Your Toes* features duelling tap dancers and ballerinas and a self-referential send-up of orientalist fare; *Babes in Arms* mobilizes a 'racially diverse cast of young tap stars' (151) headlined by the Nicholas Brothers; and *I Married an Angel* (1938, Rodgers and Hart) sports a surreal ballet satire alluding to the Rockettes, 'Ted Fawn' and *Snow White* in quick succession. Most notable is *Cabin in the Sky* (1940), the landmark, all-black production featuring Ethel Waters and the Katherine Dunham dance company. Balanchine directed and received 'sole credit for the choreography', even though the dances 'were created collaboratively with Dunham and her dancers'. Noting that Dunham shared Balanchine's avant-garde sensibility, Steichen calls the show 'a particularly rich site of debate over questions of cultural appropriation, race and aesthetics, and

5 James Steichen, 'Balanchine's "Bach Ballet" and the Dances of *On Your Toes*', *Journal of Musicology* 35 (2018), 267–93 treats the impact of Broadway tap dancers, particularly Paul Draper, on later ballets such as *Concerto Barocco*.

creative ownership in the wider history of Broadway as well as Balanchine's own work with black dance and dancers' (232). These are questions that, thanks to Steichen (and the related work of Sally Banes), can now cast more appropriate light and shadow on Balanchine's subsequent career.⁶

Of all the performing arts, dance may be the most difficult to reconstruct. This is true, too, for the metaphorical dance between Kirstein and Balanchine, requiring the artful stitching together of memoirs, diaries, correspondence, newspaper reviews and occasional photographs. Steichen connects the dots, reads between the lines and offers up what should become the standard account of the complex personal and institutional dynamics that drove the Balanchine–Kirstein enterprise. Yet as he himself points out, the real connective tissue for their endeavours can be found in the bodies of the young dancers who constituted the American Ballet and its offshoots: 'The existence and participation of a relatively stable cadre of dancers over these years offers compelling grounds for considering these many activities as one story. Whether in ballets, or operas, or musicals, or films, their bodily labor and physical movements were the essential ingredients that tied together the work of the enterprise as a whole' (12). They studied, toured and performed, often under gruelling conditions, and always 'on display'. Among its many contributions, Steichen's book gives us the framework to properly appreciate what they achieved.

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6 Sally Banes, 'Balanchine and Black Dance', in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 53–69; see also Susan Manning's *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).