

Guardian of Balanchine's Style and Technique

Prospect has reported earlier that, with the permission of and in cooperation with The George Balanchine Trust, Cleveland Ballet was, for the first time, awarded the rights to perform one of the most celebrated ballets in the history of dance, George Balanchine's *Serenade* to music by Pyotr Tchaikovsky.

Obtaining permission to stage a Balanchine ballet is a very difficult task. In order to perform Balanchine ballets, the dancers of the ballet troupe must exhibit perfect technique

and artistry - this is the requirement of the Balanchine Foundation. If the level of the dancers meets the high requirements of the Foundation, the troupe is granted the right to stage a production.

The choreographer entrusted by the Balanchine Foundation to carry out staging at the Cleveland Ballet, that is, to choreograph *Serenade* "...in accordance with George Balanchine's standards of style and technique..." is the world-famous ballerina and choreographer Deborah Wingert. She danced with the New York City Ballet for 15 years, and is now part of a small "consecrated" group, selected by The George Balanchine Trust to spread Balanchine's choreography around the world.

Exclusive Interview Of Journalist Diana Bakhtiyarova with Deborah Wingert



Diana:

They are young and ambitious. But you, too, were only 16 when you started working at the New York City Ballet created by George Balanchine, correct?

Deborah:

Yes. Mr. Balanchine himself asked me then to join his company and to start dancing with them. I was with him for over two years before he passed away. So I had time to work and to talk with him. In that sense, I'm very, very lucky. After all, I was there at a time when he was still rehearsing, still spending time in the studios and still wandering the halls of the School of American Ballet.

Diana:

You are one of the few who have permission to stage his ballets. How did you obtain this privilege?

Deborah:

I often think about how it all happened. This is a very interesting story. When I was part of the company, I always felt like soaring on wings; it was always very interesting for me to both dance and watch. 13 years have passed by in a blink of an eye. I have carefully studied Balanchine's ballet and, as a result, knew them well. Imagine, if you will: during their premieres, choreographers placed a stool for me in the wing of the stage; they knew that I would definitely sit there, watch and take mental notes. The whole School of American Ballet knew that I remain a bit of a student at heart and want to learn, watch and study all productions.

Subsequently, after I left the company, I started teaching. My students needed some kind of repertoire to work on. So I asked the Balanchine Foundation if I may show the Balanchine ballets to my students? May I teach them what I have learned at New York City Ballet? May I, for example, teach them the Raymonda variations? I kept asking and

they said yes.

At first, they just observed my work. They saw that I was staging ballets for the joy of learning and for the joy of teaching. As the Foundation began to understand that my dancers could do much more, they began to help me. When I asked to be allowed to do a fragment or an entire act of a Balanchine ballet, the Foundation charged us only a very nominal fee for this.

I succeeded, and I began to stage these ballets better and better. The time came when the senior dancers, who were already staging directors within the Foundation and were tired of traveling to different countries would say to me, "Hey, Debbie, would you like to go somewhere and stage one or another ballet?" Of course, I always agreed. As a result, I was given a Vimeo account, a video platform where all my productions are now recorded.

The other day I looked through the list - it turns out that it contains 25 Balanchine ballets. I regularly staged 15 of these. I was very lucky. I became one of the "chosen" ones, because I liked it so much.

Diana:

Remarkable. You must be a very talented teacher.

Deborah:

I always do everything that's possible and impossible. For example, when I worked with the company, I danced Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco* first at a matinee, and again at night; the kind of brain I had was able to switch around without getting tired.

Diana:

You work as a coach and a player at the same time. How many teachers like you are there, who are permitted by the Foundation to stage Balanchine ballets?

Deborah:

I'm not sure I know the whole list. I am one of the few of my generation who were lucky enough to work with Balanchine. My uniqueness is based on the fact that I was really there, when these ballets were recorded on video and on paper.

During the first few years after Balanchine's death, the ballets were still very fresh and were performed very precisely by the ballerinas and dancers chosen by

Mr. Balanchine himself. So I saw excellent performances of these ballets. But, as you know, ballets cannot be "frozen" in time. I remember Balanchine himself saying that his ballets would change in the future. He knew that everything would evolve and move on, and that it would never be the same again.

Today, the choreography of Balanchine's ballets is largely very similar to the version from the fifties. But there are also small changes, because even Balanchine, when working with ballerinas, would sometimes say: "Oh, I don't like your arabesque. I'd rather you do it differently."

I know this and this is why I regularly return to the library at the Lincoln Center. I watch old archival footage and compare it to the videos that the Balanchine Foundation sends me, the versions that have been sanctioned and authorized. The point of this work is to understand what works best for each dancer and to develop a few options for achieving the best overall look. Knowing that Balanchine himself sometimes allowed changes in the pattern of movements gives us a little autonomy and freedom.

Diana:

Being the guardian of Balanchine's choreography and style is not only a huge privilege, but also an enormous responsibility.

Deborah:

Yes, an enormous responsibility. I'm always quite worried in this regard. I can imagine someone comparing an old library video to my new production and saying "Oh, this is different from what you did." But I will say: I know that this may not be it, but I have a memory with "video" in my own head. I saw with my own eyes how they danced under Balanchine, and I am doing my best to convey to the dancers the flavor and essence of what I remember.

Diana:

How did this fit in with Cleveland Ballet?

Deborah:

Just wonderful. The dancers are very capable. I taught them everything in just

Cleveland Ballet

six days. And they loved my class.

Diana:

Amazing.

Deborah:

Then, I had six more days to train, work, clean up and answer questions. We have recorded all of it. This way, the dancers will have an archived recording that they can view at any time.

Thank God that during this horrible COVID pandemic we learned how to use TVs and Zoom for teaching. Now, I can extend our rehearsals by remote access, to see and evaluate what is happening. I can say, "Oh, you could soften that elbow a little." Or "Don't forget in this place - heels forward, turn out from the top of the hip." This way, I can make technical corrections. And artistic corrections as well.

I am very excited to work with the Cleveland dancers. They are very, very open. They are from different countries. They are from everywhere. Their international dance culture is at a very high level. I'm really very passionate about this.

Diana:

You mentioned *Swan Lake*, which is very much a story-based ballet as opposed to Balanchine's *Serenade* right?

Deborah:

Yes, *Serenade* doesn't have a plot, but as Mr. Balanchine said, if you put a man and a woman on the stage together, the story will develop in an instant. Or you bring 17 women on stage, and that's a different story. Therefore, the story depends on the dancers and, of course, on the music. All of Balanchine's work is driven by music. For him, music comes first.

Diana:

You travel around the world on your mad schedule of Balanchine ballet productions. How is it that you



remain so beautiful, energetic, patient and simply amazing?

Deborah:

There are several answers to this. For example, Cleveland Ballet has a room for Pilates - a system of slow-paced exercises and a gym. Every morning, I would come to the company with Mrs. Gladisa, and while she was teaching, I did my morning exercises; then, I would go into the hall and rehearse with the dancers. This is what I usually do on all my rehearsals with various companies.

Secondly, I feel very inspired being next to young dancers who are eager to learn. I sense how they absorb the information I give them. This keeps me in good shape.

As a rule, I do not travel very long, so I try to work at full capacity. And when I

get home to my studio, I bring that inspiration with me.

Diana:

Do you have a studio in New York?

Deborah:

Yes. I am the Artistic Director of the Manhattan Youth Ballet. I've been with them for 26 years. After I left the New York City Ballet, I met my boss, Rose Caiola, who said, "I would like to work with you." That's how I started my teaching career in New York.

Diana:

How did Ms. Gladisa Guadalupe and Mr. Michael Krasnyansky find you?

Deborah:

They found me through the Balanchine Foundation, Balanchine Trust. It was a happy occasion. But the great irony of fate is (and I think your readers will find it

interesting) that Gladisa and I studied at the School of American Ballet at the same time. Wow, my goodness! And her good friend, the ballerina Linda Jackson, lived with my best friend Marisa Cerberus at Jacques d'Amboise's house. There were no dormitories then, everyone had to find their own place. So, I lived with a Russian family. Next door lived Marisa and Linda. And Gladisa as well, who had her own apartment there, obtained by her parents. So, we were all there, studying at the same time.

Diana:

My God, this is very interesting.

Deborah:

To be honest, I feel like meeting Gladisa has been a huge gift to my life. I do not believe that fate brought us together by chance. I really needed someone like her in my life right now. And she needed my experience for her dancers. How wonderful that we both can share what we love so much in the place we loved. I cried just thinking about it today.

Diana:

This is very touching. It fits well with our frank conversation. Thank you for sharing your deepest secrets. Do you plan to return to Cleveland for the premiere of *Serenade*?

Deborah:

Yes. I will be back.

Diana:

Thank you very much for your time. Would you like to add anything?

Deborah:

I'm just very grateful to fate for my work, which allows me to travel around the world. I'm so lucky.

Interviewed by Diana Bakhtiyarova

Translated by Michael Moskowitz

Serenade

Choreography by George Balanchine

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