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For the next series of Sirens

*** George Balanchine was a man of few words. To fill the void, a video archive records dancers' memories of his instruction.**

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"She's a snake," says former ballerina Yvonne Mounsey, describing the Siren in George Balanchine's 1929 ballet "Prodigal Son," a role that ranks as classical ballet's most fearsome dominatrix. In 1950, Balanchine restaged the work for New York City Ballet and cast Mounsey as the cool man-crusher he had created in retelling the New Testament parable about an errant youth. She was an early version of a female archetype he would return to again and again.

"The Siren is an evil, alluring seductress. She's luscious and snaky. Doubrovka told me this many times," says the ladylike, strawberry-blond Mounsey, still astonishingly fit at 89. She is reminiscing about how Felia Doubrovka -- an elegant, long-legged beauty who was Balanchine's first Siren -- coached her in the role. "Madame Doubrovka came backstage after my performances and gave me tips. She was so gorgeous. When she taught pointe class, she always carried a handkerchief. I worshiped her."

As Mounsey speaks, the Santa Monica sun pours through the high windows of the Westside School of Ballet, where she has run a dance academy for 40 years. A film crew from New York's George Balanchine Foundation is setting up equipment. They have come to videotape her memories as she coaches two dancers in the Siren's pas de deux with the Prodigal. She's passing the Siren's lore on to Melissa Barak, a sloe-eyed 29-year-old Los Angeles Ballet dancer and budding choreographer.

The camera pans Mounsey as she approaches Barak, who sits on the studio's hard floor dressed in rehearsal togs: leotard, stiff pointe shoes and the iconic vertical headdress that makes the Siren tower over her male partner. (Edward Villella was the most famous shorty to dance the Prodigal; Baryshnikov danced the role as well.) Mounsey takes Barak's hand and gently shapes the fingers into a tapered point. Think snake head, she instructs. Retrying a movement, Barak's arm sinuates upward, carving the air like a cobra rising from a wicker basket. Mounsey murmurs, "Better," then explains to the camera that "over the years, that hand got changed."

Barak is struggling slightly with the unorthodox technical demands that Balanchine makes on his Siren. A series of pirouettes initiates not from a flat foot and bended knee but from full pointes. Next, the Siren marches forward on her toes, bending and arching her torso over her moving legs. Later, she performs a daunting backward crab walk, crawling on all fours, but belly up. From this awkward tabletop position, she must stretch one leg after the other to the sky. Barak looks frazzled, and Mounsey is of little help. "Every Siren has to figure that one out for herself," she says.

Barak acknowledges that unlike her other Balanchine repertoire from nine years dancing at New York City Ballet, "Prodigal" is a rough ride for the ballerina. "There's little organic flow," she says. "It's not fluid like Mr. B.'s other works. Even 'Apollo' " - - made one year earlier, in 1928 -- "is less jarring to the body."

Coaching clearly helps. Although dance notation and traditional video are useful tools, neither conveys nuance or intent very well. Thus, the passing of Balanchine's sacred instruction to the next generation of dancers is the mission of the ambitious videotaping project that the Balanchine Foundation calls the Interpreter's Archive. It's spearheaded by former New York City Ballet dancer Nancy Reynolds.

"This is not preservation in the sense of saving or staging full ballets -- although I'm delighted if it is," says Reynolds. "It's about preserving a specific reminiscence of the person on whom Balanchine created a role. We want to capture whatever he communicated to his dancers before it's gone forever."

'Notoriously silent'

The foundation's videotapes are distributed to library dance archives and to major ballet companies. Asked if New York City Ballet consults them, Reynolds says, "I don't know. They have them. I don't really know who watches them." Questioned about the accuracy with which Balanchine's flagship organization has staged his works since his death in 1983, she replies, "I'm not a ballet master. And I'm not telling Peter Martins how to run his company. I'm documenting dancers who worked with Balanchine.

"Balanchine was a genius. But he was notoriously silent. So we have few pearls of wisdom. He believed that dance is not a verbal art. Balanchine was a trained dancer, so he physically demonstrated to his dancers. He also willingly changed steps to accommodate new casts. That's our challenge today."

Mounsey experienced Balanchine's maddening silence. "He gave very little explanation," she says. "There were things that I wondered, like when the Siren beats on her chest with her fist. I timidly asked him, 'What am I supposed to be doing here?' and he said, 'Just do it.' He pretty much left you alone. I developed my part with the help of Doubrovska."

Villella concurs about the choreographer's taciturnity. Villella danced the male lead in "Prodigal Son" for more than 15 years starting in 1960, and the role is closely identified with him. But Villella received little instruction from Balanchine. "He taught me the introduction in 30 minutes," Villella recalled last month while in Los Angeles for an engagement by Miami City Ballet, which he heads. "Then he taught me the pas de deux -- one hour. Then we covered the closing bit -- half an hour. That was it! There was a leaning movement I just didn't understand, and Balanchine told me, 'Byzantine icons, dear. Byzantine icons.' I researched Byzantine icons -- and that was the key. If you didn't grab what Balanchine said when he said it, you missed it."

Because Balanchine's career spanned 60 years, many of his original dancers are gone. Those who danced in the great City Ballet rosters of the mid-1960s are aging. The 28 completed videotaped sessions that the Balanchine Foundation has amassed (an additional 10 are shot and await editing) include Patricia Wilde, Allegra Kent, Melissa Hayden, Arthur Mitchell, Violette Verdy, Maria Tallchief, Villella, Suzanne

Farrell and Merrill Ashley -- all New York City Ballet stars from the 1950s through the 1970s.

"My one good idea was to tape real rehearsals, not talking-head interviews, which don't work for dance," Reynolds says. Sessions can be emotional: "Working with Balanchine was a powerful time in most dancers' lives. For some, it was the highlight of their life. Many, many get lost in memories. Maria Tallchief teared up watching a young dancer do her role in 'Allegro Brillante.' She said to me, 'Oh! George would have loved it!' " (Tallchief was married to Balanchine for six years.)

According to Reynolds, Tallchief initially resisted imposing her views on other dancers. "Tallchief kept asking what she could possibly add. She didn't want to get in the way of interpretations that have evolved." But eventually, Reynolds says, "we recorded her coaching 'Firebird,' 'Scottish Symphony,' 'Symphony in C,' 'Orpheus,' 'Allegro Brillante,' 'The Four Temperaments' and 'The Nutcracker.' "

Villella coached "Tarantella" and the "Rubies" section of "Jewels" for the archive.

"There are many levels to a Balanchine ballet," he observed. "If you only understand the surface, you lose the choreographer's intent. Balanchine never did anything arbitrary -- there was always a decision."

But Balanchine did not much like "Prodigal Son," Villella recalled. The choreographer had had an artistic breakthrough with "Apollo," and he felt that Sergei Diaghilev, the impresario of the Ballets Russes, had imposed the biblical tale on him.

The composer, Prokofiev, treated him rudely during the creative process (Balanchine never again choreographed to his music). "After Balanchine set the piece on me, he told me, 'I never want to stage this ballet again,' " Villella said. "But happily for us, he did."

Preserving history

Happily, because "Prodigal Son" is a tremendously historic ballet. Balanchine made the work at age 25. He was Diaghilev's last resident choreographer, capping a lineup that included Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Leonide Massine and Bronislava Nijinska (Nijinsky's sister).

At the close of the 1928-29 Paris season, the members of the Ballets Russes dispersed to summer gigs around Europe. Diaghilev repaired to his beloved Venice with a new young boyfriend in tow. There, three months after the premiere of "Prodigal Son," he perished, shocking the art world. A painful diaspora ensued as Ballets Russes talents scattered in an artistic wilderness. They included Balanchine, a rootless Russian exile without a passport or a job.

"Prodigal Son" was the last major production of Ballets Russes. Along with "Apollo," it is one of the only two survivors from the 10 works Balanchine made for Diaghilev. Beyond this historical significance, however, "Prodigal" glows artistically in its narrative skill and inventive use of costumes, props and scenery. Balanchine's incipient greatness shines through, particularly in his innovative choreography for the Siren.

"Prodigal Son" has left its mark on everyone it has touched. Balanchine has obviously fared well: According to Reynolds, he now occupies the "top of the pyramid" of his peer group of choreographers. She says: "The [Antony] Tudor people and [Frederick] Ashton people tell me they wish they had [the archive program] we have."

Mounsey, for her part, having trained scores of professional dancers, has lived to see her proudest protegee, Barak, receive a commission to choreograph her second work for New York City Ballet.

As for Barak, the world's newest Siren: "Yvonne trained me since age 8. It's so special for us to tackle this role together."

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PHOTO: MAN-CRUSHER TRAINING: Yvonne Mounsey, 89, coaches Melissa Barak in the notorious "Prodigal Son" role. When she danced it, Mounsey received pointers from Felia Doubrovska, the original Siren.

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