



# IN BALANCHINE'S CLASSROOM

A film by Connie Hochman

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## SYNOPSIS

IN BALANCHINE'S CLASSROOM takes us back to the glory years of Balanchine's New York City Ballet through the remembrances of his former dancers and their quest to fulfill the vision of a genius. Opening the door to his studio, Balanchine's private laboratory, they reveal new facets of the groundbreaking choreographer: taskmaster, mad scientist, and spiritual teacher. Today, as his former dancers teach a new generation, questions arise: what was the secret of his teaching? Can it be replicated?

Filled with never before seen archival footage of Balanchine at work, along with interviews with many of his adored and adoring dancers and those carrying on his legacy today, this is Balanchine as you have never seen him. This film will thrill anyone interested in the intensity of the master-disciple relationship and all who love dance, music, and the creative process.

# ABOUT GEORGE BALANCHINE

[partially excerpted from The George Balanchine Foundation website]

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, George Balanchine (1904-1983) is regarded as the foremost contemporary choreographer in the world of ballet. He came to the United States in 1933 at age 29, at the invitation of the young American arts patron Lincoln Kirstein (1907-96), whose great passions included the dream of creating a ballet company in America.

At Balanchine's behest, Kirstein was also prepared to support the formation of an American academy of ballet that would rival the long-established schools of Europe. The School of American Ballet was founded in 1934. Several ballet companies directed by the two were created and dissolved in the years that followed, while Balanchine found other outlets for his choreography. Eventually, with a performance in 1948 at New York City Center, the New York City Ballet was born. Balanchine served as Ballet Master and principal choreographer from 1948 until his death in 1983.

Embracing television, Balanchine staged many of his ballets and created new work especially for the medium: in 1981 he redesigned his *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* to include a wide range of special effects, including animation. Through television, millions of people have been able to see the New York City Ballet. "Choreography by Balanchine," a five-part "Dance in America" presentation on the PBS series "Great Performances," began in December 1977. Balanchine traveled to Nashville with the Company for the tapings in 1977 and 1978 and personally supervised every shot, in some cases revising steps or angles for greater effectiveness on screen. The series was widely applauded by critics and audiences all over the country and nominated for an Emmy award.

Balanchine also choreographed for film, opera, and musical theater. Among his best-known dances for the stage is *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, originally created for Broadway's *On Your Toes* (1936) and later made into a movie.

As his reputation grew, he was the recipient of much official recognition. In the spring of 1975, the Entertainment Hall of Fame in Hollywood inducted Balanchine as a member, in a nationally televised special by Gene Kelly. The first choreographer so

honored, he joined the ranks of such show business luminaries as Fred Astaire, Walt Disney, and Bob Hope. The same year, he received the French Légion d'Honneur. In 1978, he was one of five recipients (with Marian Anderson, Fred Astaire, Richard Rodgers, and Artur Schnabel) of the first Kennedy Center Honors, presented by President Jimmy Carter. He was presented with a Knighthood of the Order of Dannebrog, First Class, by Queen Margrethe II of Denmark. In 1980, Balanchine was honored by the National Society of Arts and Letters with their Gold Medal award; the Austrian government with its Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Letters, First Class; and by the New York Chapter of the American Heart Association with their "Heart of New York" award. These joined such earlier commendations as the French Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters decoration and the National Institute of Arts and Letters award for Distinguished Service to the Arts. The last major award Balanchine received--*in absentia*--was the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1983, the highest honor that can be conferred on a civilian in the United States. At the time, President Ronald Reagan praised Balanchine's genius, saying that he has "inspired millions with his stage choreography . . . and amazed a diverse population through his talents." Soon after, on April 30, 1983, George Balanchine died in New York at the age of 79.

In 1970, *U.S. News and World Report* attempted to summarize Balanchine's achievements: "The greatest choreographer of our time, George Balanchine is responsible for the successful fusion of modern concepts with older ideas of classical ballet." A major artistic figure of the twentieth century, Balanchine revolutionized the look of classical ballet. Taking classicism as his base, he heightened, quickened, expanded, streamlined, and even inverted the fundamentals of the 400-year-old language of academic dance. This had an inestimable influence on the growth of dance in America. At first his style seemed particularly suited to the energy and speed of American dancers, especially those he trained, but now his ballets are performed by all major classical ballet companies throughout the world.

**Balanchine's more than 400 dance works include the following major ballets:**

*Apollo* (1928)

*Prodigal Son* (1929)

*Serenade* (1934) – His first ballet in America

*Concerto Barocco* (1941)

*The Four Temperaments* (1946)

*Symphony in C* (1947) originally titled *Le Palais de Cristal*

*Theme and Variations* (1947)

*Orpheus* (1948)

*George Balanchine's The Nutcracker (1954)*

*Divertimento No. 15 (1956)*

*Allegro Brillante (1966)*

*Agon (1957)*

*Stars and Stripes (1957)*

*A Midsummer Night's Dream (1962)*

*Bugaku (1963)*

*Tarantella (1964)*

*Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet (1966)*

*Jewels (1967)*

*Who Cares (1970)*

*Symphony in Three Movements (1972)*

*Stravinsky Violin Concerto (1972)*

*Union Jack (1976)*

*Vienna Waltzes (1977)*

*Ballo della Regina (1978)*

*Davidsbündlertänze (1981)*

*Mozartiana (1981)*

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

## By Connie Hochman

*In Balanchine's Classroom* grew out of my lifelong interest in the work of the groundbreaking choreographer George Balanchine. As a child in the 1960s, I trained at his School of American Ballet and danced alongside the New York City Ballet, with Balanchine at the helm. During these years, I witnessed a profound bond between Balanchine and his dancer-disciples, which continued to inspire and fascinate me.

In the 1970s, as a dancer with Pennsylvania Ballet, I experienced the thrill and exhilaration of dancing many of Balanchine's greatest ballets. Still, I wanted to know more about Balanchine, the teacher. I remembered that friends of mine who joined New York City Ballet had the opportunity each morning to take company class with him. But whenever I asked about it, they froze. No one would discuss Balanchine's classroom.

Something told me that what transpired in that room – off limits to anyone outside New York City Ballet – was important. My curiosity only grew. Why did Balanchine teach and not just choreograph? How did his class relate to his ballets? What was it that he sought from his already proficient dancers? Why wouldn't they talk about it?

Decades later, my childhood memories of Balanchine, fueled by my desire to solve the mystery of his classroom, impelled me to seek answers. I proposed a series of interviews with former Balanchine dancers. To my delight, many said yes – 90 in all. One by one, they opened up about the phenomenon of Balanchine's teaching. His unorthodox methods. The extremes. The charged atmosphere. His unrelenting presence.

As each dancer travels back in time to the creative whirlwind of the Balanchine era, they re-live the lessons he teaches about dance and beyond: those "a-ha" moments when resistance gives way to surrender and a super-intelligence takes over. Balanchine's class is more than just a metaphor for life. It is Life itself – short, fleeting, intense, with rewards in proportion to one's engagement and dedication. The dancers' words, at last, began to quench my thirst for understanding and *In Balanchine's Classroom* was conceived.

In addition to the dancer testimonials, which form the basis for the film, I launched an extensive search for visuals to bring the story to life. In the process, I discovered a trove of never-before-seen archival footage of Balanchine in America. With special permission from The George Balanchine Trust, I traveled across the country and to

Europe to film Balanchine's former dancers staging his ballets, teaching classes, and faithfully passing on their unique knowledge to the next generation. As I witnessed this painstaking process of transference, new questions arose which ultimately drive the final film: What happens when a master is gone? What was the secret of his teaching? Can it be replicated?

My fervent wish is to share with others the story of this extraordinary teacher and his extraordinary disciples. It is, in essence, the artist's journey, a subject rarely tackled in film. The magic of Balanchine's classroom was like nothing on earth. By opening the door, I invite you in to see for yourself.

## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Connie Hochman was a professional ballet dancer with Pennsylvania Ballet where she performed many Balanchine masterworks. In 2007, Connie began a series of interviews with former Balanchine dancers – ninety in all – to explore the phenomenon of Balanchine’s classroom. Why did he teach and not just choreograph? What did he teach? How did he teach? How did his daily class relate to his ballets? Their remembrances of his unorthodox methods and transformative teaching form the basis of *In Balanchine’s Classroom*.

In addition to the oral histories, Connie launched an extensive and painstaking search for visuals that would bring the story to life. Over years, she discovered a trove of never-before-seen archival footage of Balanchine in America. With approval from The George Balanchine Trust, Connie traveled around the country and to Europe to film Balanchine’s former dancers staging his ballets, teaching class, and passing on their knowledge to today’s generation.

As a first-time filmmaker, Connie consulted with Louis Psihoyos (*The Cove, Chasing Extinction*), and Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine (*Ballets Russes, The Galapagos Affair*), each of whom offered guidance and helped her form the creative team behind *In Balanchine’s Classroom*.



# INTERVIEWEES

**JACQUES D'AMBOISE**, who passed away on May 2, 2021, was recognized as one of the finest classical dancers of our time. He led the field of arts education with a model program that annually introduces thousands of children to the magic and discipline of dance. In 1976, while still a principal dancer with Balanchine's New York City Ballet, Mr. d'Amboise founded National Dance Institute in the belief that the arts have a unique power to engage and motivate individuals towards excellence.

Mr. d'Amboise's work in dance education took him all over the world—from the extremes of Yakutsk, Siberia, to the Danakil Desert in Ethiopia; from over 1,200 feet below sea level at the Dead Sea to the mountains of Nepal; from the dryness of the Atacama Desert in Chile to rainforests on the island of Kauai in the Hawaiian chain. Over the last 42 years, the NDI program in New York City along with its associates, both nationally and internationally, have reached and influenced over two million children.

At age 15 and at Balanchine's invitation, Jacques joined New York City Ballet and the following year made his European debut at London's Covent Garden. He was promoted to Principal Dancer at 17 and performed for 35 years, retiring at age 50.

Mr. d'Amboise had more works choreographed for him by Balanchine than any other dancer. These masterworks include the ballets *Stars and Stripes*, *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*, *Episodes*, *Figures in the Carpet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Jewels*, *Raymonda Variations*, *Meditation*, and *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*. D'Amboise is most remembered for his portrayal in what critics called "the definitive *Apollo*." In addition to his dance career, Mr. d'Amboise also choreographed. His credits include almost twenty works commissioned for New York City Ballet.

—Excerpted partially from the National Dance Institute website

**MERRILL ASHLEY** is considered one of the great Balanchine ballerinas. The New York Times described her dancing as the kind that "helps shape the standards of greatness."

Ms. Ashley trained at the School of American Ballet, the official school of New York City Ballet. In 1967, Balanchine invited her to join his New York City Ballet. Early on, Balanchine challenged Ms. Ashley with several of the most demanding ballerina roles he ever created, such as his *Theme and Variations* and *Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto #2*. In 1977, Balanchine choreographed the bravura *Ballo della Regina* expressly for Ms.

Ashley to showcase her virtuosic abilities. That year he promoted her to Principal Dancer.

At NYCB, she danced an enormous repertoire of Balanchine ballets, along with many works choreographed by Jerome Robbins, Jacques d'Amboise, Peter Martins and more. During those years Ms. Ashley was in demand as a guest artist around the world and earned an international reputation. In 1980, towards the end of his life, Balanchine choreographed *Ballade* for Ms. Ashley. In summing up her career, *The Wall Street Journal* stated, "she basically taught the world how ballet is danced."

In 1997, after 31 years performing with New York City Ballet, Ashley retired and joined their artistic staff where she taught and coached until 2009. Since then, Ashley has been staging and coaching Balanchine ballets, teaching master classes, and lecturing on Balanchine all over the world.

**GLORIA GOVRIN** was a groundbreaking dancer with George Balanchine's New York City Ballet. Her strength, stature, and larger than life personality made her a star soloist throughout her career. Balanchine choreographed roles specifically for her because of her unusual height, charismatic stage presence, and unique abilities. Roles such as Hippolyta in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, Coffee in *Nutcracker*, the Princess in *Firebird*, and La Bonne Fee in *Harlequinade* were so stamped with her identity, that the entrances and exits on the musical scores were marked with her name rather than that of the role. Mr. Balanchine established her in high-profile roles in ballets such as *Stars and Stripes*, *Western Symphony*, *Apollo*, and *Agon*.

Upon retirement, Ms. Govrin opened her own school and company in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She went on to teach at several of the country's most prestigious ballet schools and companies, such as Pennsylvania Ballet, The Rock School, and San Francisco Ballet School. Currently, Ms. Govrin is the Artistic Director of Eastern Connecticut Ballet in East Lyme, CT, where she has been training dancers for over ten years.

Over the decades, many of Ms. Govrin's students have gone on to professional careers with companies worldwide. As glorious as performing with Balanchine's New York City Ballet, Ms. Govrin has yet to find a greater passion than teaching. She is considered one of the leading masters of the Balanchine Technique and brings her experience, expertise, and infectious enthusiasm into every class she teaches.

**SUKI SCHORER** joined New York City Ballet in 1959 and was promoted to principal dancer in 1968. She performed leading roles in numerous Balanchine ballets, such as *Serenade*, *Apollo*, *Concerto Barocco*, *Symphony in C*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Tarantella*, and *Jewels*. Balanchine also choreographed certain roles expressly for her in *Raymonda Variations*, *Don Quixote*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *La Source*, and *Harlequinade*.

From her earliest days in the Company, Mr. Balanchine recognized Ms. Schorer's potential as an instructor. He asked her to teach special classes to new Company members as well as guest teach at the School of American Ballet. At his behest, she oversaw a lecture demonstration series at schools throughout the NYC area, which she did for over 20 years. Upon her retirement in 1972, Balanchine appointed her to SAB's permanent faculty. Ms. Schorer has been teaching classes and staging Balanchine ballets for SAB's annual spring performance for nearly 50 years. An in-demand master teacher at schools and companies worldwide, Ms. Schorer is considered the foremost authority on Balanchine technique.

**EDWARD VILLELLA** is regarded as one of America's greatest male dancers. His performances exuded virility, grace, and bravura technique. He changed the way men danced in America as well as the way male dancers were perceived.

A kid from Queens, NY, one day he watched his sister's ballet class and decided it was for him. He entered Balanchine's School of American Ballet at ten but was forced to interrupt his dance training to complete academic studies. A graduate of the New York Maritime Academy, he obtained a B.S. in Marine Transportation and was a championship boxer. He returned to ballet training and in 1957 was invited to join Balanchine's New York City Ballet. He was promoted Principal Dancer in 1960.

Mr. Villella was the original male lead in many iconic Balanchine ballets, including *Tarantella*, *Rubies / Jewels*, *Harlequinade*, *Symphony in Three Movements*, *Bugaku*, *Tarantella*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Oberon), and perhaps most famously in the 1960 revival of *Prodigal Son*. Upon retirement from the stage, Villella taught and guided several companies, including Ballet Oklahoma, Eglevsky Ballet, and New Jersey Ballet. In 1986 he became the Founding Artistic Director of Miami City Ballet. Within a decade he led the company to international acclaim.

**HEATHER WATTS** joined New York City Ballet in 1970 and was promoted to Principal Dancer by George Balanchine in 1979. During Watts's tenure with the company, she had numerous principal roles created for her by Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, and Peter Martins. She was acclaimed in such Balanchine masterworks as *Agon*, *Concerto Barocco*, *Apollo*, *Symphony in C*, *Theme and Variations*, *Bugaku*, and *Serenade*.

During her peak, Ms. Watts was in-demand around the world as a guest artist and became an international ballet star. She was prominently featured in the PBS "Dance in America" television series, "Great Performances," and "Live From Lincoln Center" programs. She performed with frequent partner Mikhail Baryshnikov at the White House in a national televised performance of Balanchine's *Rubies* for President and Mrs. Carter. She retired from the stage in 1995 in a gala performance at Lincoln Center.

In addition to her dancing career, Ms. Watts has directed national and international dance touring companies, including a tour entitled "Homage a Balanchine" of 108 cities for Columbia Artists. She has taught about Balanchine's life and work at Harvard, Princeton, and UC Santa Barbara. In 2012, Watts received a Doctorate in Fine Arts honoris causa from Hunter College.

# IN BALANCHINE'S CLASSROOM

## CREDITS

Director/Producer	Connie Hochman
Executive Producer	Mark Hochman
Editors	Anne Fratto Patrick Gambuti Jr.
Composer	Chris Hajian
Music Supervisor	Suzana Peric
Cinematographers	Don Lenzer Tom Hurwitz Martin Morales
Consulting Producers	Dan Geller Dayna Goldfine
Supervising Sound Editor/Mixer	Peter Levin
Colorist	David Gauff
Graphics	Margalit Neusner Maple Shipp

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