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# Ballet Review



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issue of *Ballet Review*

Elizabeth Kendall on  
The Origins of  
Balanchine's  
*La Sonnambula*

On the cover: Tiler Peck and  
Robert Fairchild in Balanchine's  
*Who Cares?* (Photograph by  
Paul Kolnik, NYCB)



## Ballet Review 44.1 Spring 2016

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Cover photograph by Paul Kolnik, NYCB:  
Tiler Peck and Robert Fairchild in *Who Cares?*

- 4 New York – David Vaughan
- 6 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 8 New York – Nancy Reynolds
- 9 Stuttgart – Gary Smith
- 11 Washington, D. C. – George Jackson
- 12 New York – Joseph Houseal
- 14 Paris – Vincent Le Baron
- 16 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 19 Hong Kong – Kevin Ng
- 21 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 22 Vienna – Gunhild Oberzaucher-Schüller
- 25 New York – Eva Shan Chou
- 26 New York – Harris Green
- 29 Stuttgart – Gary Smith
- 31 Jacob's Pillow – Jay Rogoff
- 33 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 34 Jacob's Pillow – Jay Rogoff
- 36 Chicago – Joseph Houseal
- 37 Saratoga Springs – Jay Rogoff
- 39 Brooklyn – Karen Greenspan
- 41 New York – Harris Green
- 43 Chicago – Joseph Houseal
- 44 Miami – Michael Langlois
- 46 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 47 Chicago – Joseph Houseal
- 48 New York – Harris Green

Henry Danton

- 50 Alla Sizova (1929-2014)

Robert Johnson

- 56 Misty Copeland

Joel Lobenthal

- 67 A Conversation with Pat McBride Lousada

Michael Langlois

- 72 A Conversation with Roberto Bolle

Meryllyn Jackson

- 84 Julie Kent

Leigh Witchel

- 88 A Conversation with Myles Thatcher

Elizabeth Kendall

- 96 *Night Shadow*

Peter Porter

- 103 Jurassic Beauty

Daniel Jacobson

- 106 A Conversation with Tiler Peck

- 116 London Reporter – Clement Crisp

- 124 *Creative Domain* – Susanna Sloat

- 126 Music on Disc – George Dorris

- 132 Check It Out

# Night Shadow

Elizabeth Kendall

Choreographer George Balanchine's oeuvre is usually thought of as "plotless" – or "abstract," "formalist," "neo-classical" – with a vague image attached of black-leotarded dancers striking angular poses on a bare stage. But when I think back to my own first exposure to the New York City Ballet in 1973, what pulled me in were the opposite qualities: some ancient essence of theater on Balanchine's stage that I knew nothing about.

I was a young dance critic, imbued with my generation's hunger for what we thought of as *authentic* – that is, vaguely rural and vaguely anti-performative. Imagine such a person encountering elemental artifice in the form of *Harlequinade*, Balanchine's 1965 homage to a work he had known in his student days, Marius Petipa's 1900 evening-length *Les Millions d'Arlequin* (peopled with those elemental types, Harlequin, Columbine, Pierrot, and Pierrette).

Right after *Harlequinade* I saw another commedia-flavored Balanchine work, the 1946 one-act *La Sonnambula* that hit me even harder. I saw it danced by possibly the greatest-ever Sleepwalker, Allegra Kent. The curtain rose on a castle courtyard in a blue evening lit by torches; masked guests were already feverishly dancing; the grand hall doors opened at stage right to what might be a banquet hall . . . and I was caught.

The commedia of *Sonnambula* is a little less classic than *Harlequinade's*. In fact you could call *Sonnambula* a haunted, even Hoffmanesque tale whose commedia elements evoke not so much ancient Italian street theater as the doom-eager theatricality of the Petersburg Silver Age. The story concerns a Baron, the host of this ball; the Coquette, his hostess (and Originally presented at the 2014 annual conference of The Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

mistress); their elegant guests; a Poet who arrives late; the "entertainment": dancers of a bucolic quartet, a blackamoor pas de deux, a literal Harlequin solo.

But the figure on whom the story turns comes in latest of all, and she's right out of romantic opera: the Baron's mysterious wife. She descends, after much action has left the poet alone onstage, from the castle's upper room – sleepwalking, in a nightgown, holding a candle. She seems to embody the eternal, moonlit mystery of *woman*, and true to type, she indirectly causes the Poet's death.

This layered lineage – commedia, Romanticism – is present in the music, too, not precisely *composed* by the Italian neo-classicist Vittorio Rieti, but rather *gathered* from the works of Vincenzo Bellini. That is, Rieti based his score on melodies from Bellini's 1830s operas, among them *La Sonnambula*.

So – music by Rieti, choreography by Balanchine. But one question about the ballet remained murky until a few months ago, when I (rashly) agreed to undertake this research. Who wrote the libretto – that is, the story? NYCB's performance programs credit the music, choreography scenery, costumes, and lighting of *Sonnambula*, but not the story. It's not mentioned. The Balanchine biographers must know, I thought. But the four biographers (Taper, Buckle, Gottlieb, Teachout) either fail to mention the ballet or simply retell its story – with enthusiasm,.

To find the story's origins we must go back to the ballet's moment of origin – the mid-1940s. Viewed in its own time, *Sonnambula* is not so much an anomaly as we think now. One-act story ballets were the bread and butter of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, that projection of Russia's Silver Age that hit Europe in 1909 with the shock of the new, and ended with Diaghilev's 1929 death. Ballets like *Scheherazade*, *Carnaval*, *Petrushka*, and later, Balanchine's own *Apollo* and *Prodigal Son*. And later on, with various reincarnations of the Ballets Russes, that mode of programming persisted: with *La Boutique Fantasque*, *Gaité Parisienne*, *Le Beau Danube*, *Cotillon*, *Concurrence*.



Allegra Kent in *La Sonnambula*. (Photo: Costas)

A word of clarification about the many Ballets Russes. After Diaghilev's 1929 death, his debt-ridden company retreated back to the Monte Carlo Opera under the direction of the fascinating René Blum (brother of Léon Blum, mid-1930s prime minister of France, later killed in a Nazi camp), and Colonel Vassily de Basil, then in a minor managerial role. It rose again, and again, under several would-be Diaghilevs (such as Colonel Vassily de Basil, Sergei Denham), who employed, in revolving fashion, several of Diaghilev's former choreographers.

Around 1938, Russian émigré American banker Denham fronted the last of the Ballets Russes, which fled Europe for America in 1939.

After employing an assortment of choreographers (Massine, Bronislava Nijinska, David Lichine, Agnes De Mille), Denham's company settled, in 1944, on Balanchine, as more or less house choreographer.

*Sonnambula*, 1946, whose title was changed to *Night Shadow* before its premiere (and later changed back), was the last Diaghilev-style ballet Balanchine made for the Ballets Russes. You could even say that it marked the end of his professional associations with the European-flavored émigré world (until it crowded back into some of his final ballets). After it, Balanchine, too, left the Ballet Russe, to rejoin his original American sponsor, Lincoln Kirstein, so that both could try, once again

after several earlier attempts, to make a stable American ballet company (a company that would become, in 1948, the New York City Ballet).

But we still don't know where *Sonnambula's* story came from!

As it happens, the New York Public Library possesses a treasure trove: Sergei Denham's professional papers, which offer an overview of émigré life in New York – and not just Russian émigré life. Various composers, artists, dancers, costume creators had fled here from all over Europe, all seemingly in desperate need of work. One of them was Max Ernst, the Surrealist German painter, whose American wife, painter Dorothea Tanning, created *Night Shadow's* original Salvador Daliesque scenery and costumes. Another émigré was Vittorio Rieti, the Egypt-born (in 1898), Jewish Italian, neo-classical composer, who'd arrived here in 1940, had gotten some teaching jobs, and was scrounging for commissions from types like Denham.

The earliest mention of this ballet comes in a June 9, 1942, letter from Denham to Rieti, setting forth the conditions under which the Ballet Russe would accept his new piece – “the musical arrangement which you made of the various compositions of Bellini, to be used by us in connection with a ballet production tentatively called *Sonnambula*.”

At this moment, four years before the ballet's premiere, Balanchine wasn't the choreographer, although both Rieti and Denham hoped he would be. Balanchine was then in Hollywood “making something for Zorina (his then wife),” as Rieti wrote to Denham, but heading soon to Mexico and Argentina for professional gigs. On August 18, 1942, Rieti informs Denham that he'd “seen Balanchine ‘passing through’” New York for only a day, but despairs of getting him for *Sonnambula*. He suggests Bronislava Nijinska as choreographer. (“*Je crois que c'est ce qu'il y a de mieux.*” [She seems to be the best we can do.])

Ensuing letters feature Rieti's repeated pleas to be paid his \$1000 fee, and Denham's excuses for not paying, his favorite being,

“*Nous sommes nobles, mais nous sommes pauvres*” (We are noble, but we are poor). By October 1942 Rieti had almost finished the orchestration and sent Denham an ultimatum: he couldn't devote the rest of his life to Bellini. By early summer, 1943, he must have been paid, since on June 11, Rieti thanks Denham for a check and encloses “*le sujet du ballet, avec le cadavre qui vous fait si peur*” (the subject of the ballet, with the cadaver you're so afraid of). What follows, over a page and a half, is the ballet's “Synopsis,” in French, which offers more or less the outline of the “story” that we see onstage today – with a few minor differences; we'll note them later. The action happens around 1835, writes Rieti at the top – the year of Bellini's premature death.

So . . . Rieti wrote the “story” of *Sonnambula*, and finished it three years before the ballet's premiere (which came in February of 1946). But, we might ask, where had Rieti found or dreamed up this seemingly elemental story? First of all, he went back to Bellini's times, the heyday of grand opera and of Romanticism, when the opera coloratura had to go mad or be hypnotized or at least sleepwalk. Some of Rieti's melodies are taken from the actual *La Sonnambula* opera, although the main tragic theme is from Bellini's *I Puritani*.

And Rieti went to Bellini's life, too, with its tempestuous erotic intrigues. Bellini was once thought to have been poisoned by a jealous husband, and Rieti took this and some other wild elements from Bellini's life for his pastiche story.

But there's this other aspect of *Sonnambula's* story that we must consider, too: Rieti's earlier experience as a ballet collaborator. He got his start from none other than Diaghilev himself, who was always searching for new composers. In 1925 Diaghilev heard from Poulenc about Rieti's Concerto for Five Wind Instruments and Orchestra, and summoned the twenty-seven-year-old to Paris from Rome. Rieti played all his music, including *Barabau*, a ballet, with music and story by him – based on a peasant-outwits-soldiers Italian nursery rhyme.

Diaghilev chose *Barabau*, asked for the usual extensive musical changes, and gave the piece to his new, young, house choreographer, Balanchine (who, at age twenty-one, had left Russia only a year ago). This was Balanchine's first original Diaghilev ballet, if we don't count his 1925 remake of *Le Chant du Rossignol*.

Rieti and Balanchine worked together for Diaghilev again, four years later, on *Le Bal*, the last ballet premiered before Diaghilev's death in the summer of 1929. Boris Kochno (Diaghilev's young secretary-turned-key collaborator) wrote the story – not Rieti – basing it on a tale by a Russian “romantic,” Count Vladimir Sologub, about an officer at a ball pursuing a young woman who's not who she seems to be. Illusions, deceit, a ballroom. And Balanchine's contribution? “I had the idea that we should use masks,” he said later. “Two masks for the young woman, so that first, when she took off her mask, there was this ugly old hag, and at the other end, after that, she removed *that* mask and she was seen in her own natural beauty.”

Three years after that, in 1932, Rieti, Kochno, and Balanchine collaborated again on *Cotillon*, yet another “heartbreak ball ballet” (in Rieti's words), for de Basil's Ballet Russe. Rieti was not the composer this time but the orchestrator of music by Chabrier. The synopsis, by Kochno, was about a ball attended by young girls, the famous 1930s “baby ballerinas” (ballet-trained children of Russian émigrés), and also by Fate, wearing black gloves. Another haunted ballroom, where life and death take turns masquerading as each other. (And there was one more Rieti-Balanchine collaboration, *Waltz Academy*, 1944, for American Ballet Theatre.)

So Rieti had experience with the Kochno-Balanchine aesthetic (the two young Russians were the same age and saw eye to eye on many things). This Kochno-Balanchine friendship needs more study. What is clear is that Kochno, a self-appointed literary type, brought from Russia a grasp of that literary-theatrical narrative sensibility we could call the “Silver Age commedia” – of Blok and Bely and Meyerhold.

And Balanchine did, too! He'd worked with Meyerhold; he loved Mayakosky; he'd grown up in the thick of twenties theater experiments. One only has to glance at his later work to see these stock commedia characters re-appearing again and again, camouflaged in American garb or even in just stripped-down tights and leotards.

So with *Sonnambula*, Rieti knew the drill. He knew to return to *romantisme* viewed through the Russian despairing commedia lens (not to speak of Rieti's own mischievous Italian theatrical tastes). All those things were in the *Sonnambula* story *before* Balanchine got officially involved, but they may have come as much from Rieti's thoughts about the Balanchine-Kochno sensibility as from Rieti's view of Bellini.

In late 1944 Balanchine did manage to free himself to choreograph *Sonnambula*, and was handed a finished musical score and a finished story. But was it finished? What is the story of a ballet? As you've probably guessed, I want to make a larger point in this article concerning ballet history and the practice of writing it. A ballet's “story” cannot be only what's on paper, nor can it be the “scenario” of its music. So what is it? Does it lie in words, or music, or steps, or individual performances – or all of the above?

Let's start with a simple question: what did Balanchine add to the story?

First, he added the masks, as he had done in *Le Bal*. In Rieti's Synopsis it's just a fete, not a masked ball. Balanchine also added commedia to the four divertissements, which Rieti named merely “Pas de trois, Variation, Pas de deux, Coda.” In the ballet they're Pastorale, Blackamoor Pas de Deux (nowadays it's the same pas de deux, but not in blackface), and a solo for a literal Harlequin. (There was a fourth divertissement in Rieti's synopsis, a hoop dance, later dropped when four divertissement seemed too many to keep the narrative flowing. It can be seen, however, on YouTube in the Ballet Theatre *Sonnambula*.)

But Balanchine added much more than details: he added heft, weight, the undertow of

passion and the immediacy of longing, to match what had been, in Bellini's time, the composer's groundbreaking *long* melodies. *Sonnambula's* choreography contains possibly the most poignant enactment of unrequited longing in the whole balletic repertory. More about that in a moment.

Here I want to mention one of the things that makes Balanchine such a ripe subject for critics and scholars: his apparently effortless merging of his personal story – his personal narrative – with the life described on his stage. If you study Balanchine's childhood, you could say he swallowed Russian prerevolutionary theater whole, in that childhood, after he was shut up at age nine in the Imperial Ballet School. It's as if he buried all his familial experiences and replaced these, at great depth, with the artificial illusions of the theater – *as if these had shaped his inner life*. In *Sonnambula*, as it went from Rieti's paper to Balanchine's stage, the two main characters became three. For the third, Balanchine enlarged the *other* woman's role in the ballet – the Coquette, the mistress of the party host, the Baron. In Rieti's Synopsis she's just "*une dame*" who drops her handkerchief so the poet will notice her. Her rise to narrative importance creates a triangle – two ballerinas and one poet – and an implied struggle.

To see the parallels between life and art, let's look at Balanchine's own situation at the time of the ballet's creation, 1945-1946. The war had ended; the world was settling down. And

yet, Balanchine didn't seem to have a professional future. He was shuttling back and forth between Hollywood, New York, Mexico, and Argentina. Even worse, he was between wives – that is, between muses (the wives were muses stamped into legality). It became



Ruthanna Boris as one of the original Blackamoor dancers, 1946.

clear in the late summer of 1945, just when he turned to choreographing *Sonnambula*, that his marriage with his most unrequited of loves, dancer-actress Vera Zorina, was ending. (He befriended two young choreographers at that time, John Taras and Todd Bolender; to each he broke down and wept about his romantic situation.) And yet, even as Balanchine was undone over one woman leaving him, the new

one had entered. The very young Maria Tallchief (still twenty in 1945), caught his eye in the Ballet Russe's late summer tour.

It was just then that Balanchine took up Rieti's libretto for *Sonnambula*, with central characters of the Poet and the Sleepwalker – and now the Coquette. One of these two ballerina roles he'd promised earlier to the Ballet Russe star, Alexandra Danilova, who had been his (common-law) wife before Zorina, from the late Diaghilev years to the early 1930s. That's already a life-art collision. Danilova chose the Sleepwalker, she reports in her memoir, *Choura*, since she usually played Coquette roles – the seducer, the Other Woman. The Seducer role went to . . . the *real* Other Woman – Maria Tallchief, Balanchine's new love and soon-to-be wife. They were married in August of 1946, a half-year after *Sonnambula*'s premiere.

So who's to say that *Sonnambula* didn't merge with Balanchine's interior landscape, and that his own romantic anguish didn't get grafted onto its story? But this personal stuff, if it's relevant, is not enough to explain the elegant poignancy of *Sonnambula*, as told in dance matched with music. When chronicling dance, personal emotions in the creators aren't enough to note. One needs to follow their translation, via craft, into a wordless medium.

The whole ballet is "narrated" through dance steps "interrupted" by gestures belonging to real-life intrigues. There are eight couples in ball gowns and tails, and Venetian masks, *dancing*. But their steps are somehow feverish – speeded up, and decorated with moments of faux bravado, especially for the men (Russian-peasant-like stamping in circles around partners). And the concept of *zigzag* powers it all. If there's one way to describe the "family" of steps in this ballet – it's this zigzagging: the steps turn in on themselves; they trace over themselves, causing dancers' bodies to rapidly close in and open out – bodies alone, in pairs, in groups. This is somehow Balanchine's physical analogue for the edgy rhythms and atonal dissonances Ri-

eti had "laid over" the Bellini *track*. The effect is to signal that this ballroom is out of synch with time – it's in the past, but contains present-day frissons of danger and dystopia.

This theme of turning in/turning out in zigzags finds its ultimate expression in one of the two main pas de deux at the ballet's center: that between the Poet and the Coquette. It's often overshadowed by the more famous one following it, but this one, too, is a masterpiece – of folding in, to open out, to fold back in again. It comes *after* the moment when, one by one, the women have removed their masks to show their faces to their partners and both have run offstage. The last to reveal her face is the Coquette – to the Poet. They don't run off. The Poet enfolds the Coquette's arms from behind – like the Prince and Swan Queen trope from *Swan Lake*. What follows are swoops up and down the stage diagonal, with the two tightly entwined, the poet holding her from firmly at her waist. It's a pas de deux of extreme closeness and extreme deviousness. It's *physical*.

The other, contrasting pas de deux, the Poet and the Sleepwalker, happens after the crowd has surprised the Poet-Coquette's tête-à-tête in dance. At the end of the sweeping Polonaise procession of partners toward the dining hall offstage, with Poet and Coquette bringing up the rear, the just-romanced Coquette is whisked away by the Baron. The Poet, left alone in the courtyard, quiets down as music and mood change; he looks around and sees a light descending through castle windows, and suddenly . . . the *Sonnambula* appears with her candle, heading across the stage on pointe in a mysterious hurry. The Poet tries to engage.

What ensues is all about the opposite of the entwined pas de deux. It's about the space between them – sometimes the width of the stage – that can't be crossed. First, he tests her; tries to embrace her; realizes she's asleep. Then as the melody opens up, he experiments: he pushes her backwards from the chest; she responds like the wind; he runs to intercept, then swirls her around by holding her candle. This is not physical, but metaphysical.



All of the stage space is set in motion. When he finally tries to embrace her – she ducks. He lies down and puts an arm in her path – then the other arm. Each time she steps over. At the absolute climax of the aching melody, he attempts to encircle her, bringing his joined arms around backwards over her head, then still enclosing her, lowering himself in a slow-motion backbend to the floor. This is the climax of the unrequitedness I mentioned earlier. As he lies there with his once upflung arms encircling her feet – she pauses, then steps out again.

“Why can’t I reach her?” the whole *pas de deux* seems to ask. And, “Why do I want her – so much more than the available earthly one? Even when it’s so hopeless and so dangerous?”

Those are the questions asked over and over, in different ways, in a surprising number of Balanchine ballets that ranged over his whole creative life. In 1960 when the NYCB had already been in existence for twelve years, Balanchine had a new prodigy, the 23-year-old Allegra Kent. He decided to restage *Night Shadow* for her – and he re-renamed it *La Sonnambula*. That’s why we have it today, this Ballet Russe anomaly in the spare repertory of the NYCB. Once again in 1960, the longing and deviousness and heartbreak of 1946 were re-enacted – as well as the striking end, with the “cadaver” that had so bothered Denham.

Only this time, Balanchine had already given this tragic end his own twist, too. In Rieti’s version the Poet falls to his death from a castle window, pushed (offstage) by the Baron. In Balanchine’s, he’s stabbed inside the castle (also offstage) by the Baron who has rushed in with a knife. The poet staggers out onstage and dies there. Then the Sleepwalker reemerges, as before, from the same door, again on a mys-teri-

ous errand. But this time she almost runs into the body; she comes up against it.

To another melodic climax, the Sleepwalker stops. She heaves her head and chest around in somehow formal mourning – like a grand port de bras, back and around, but without the arms. This for me is the ballet’s most profound moment. Rieti didn’t write it. His script only has her bending down to hold the dead Poet in her arms, at which point the assembled guests wake her up (*On la reveille pendant qu’elle tient dans ses bras son ami mort*. [They wake her up while she holds in her arms her dead friend.]

In the Balanchine version she never wakes up. She steps over the body, but her intuited grief has transformed her “errand” into a funeral procession toward the castle door. The commedia performers fall in behind her. Four of them lift the Poet high in the air (he’s a fellow artist – one of them), then place him, in pieta position, in her arms.

This is another moment when someone’s very personal emotion seems to pierce through the stage action. The audience can’t help but see an almost embarrassing vulnerability, belonging to the moment’s creator, the choreographer. Still holding the Poet in her arms, the Sleepwalker backs into the shadowy castle. Then “their” light seems to again climb up the castle windows until it breaks free and heads into the sky (at least in older NYCB productions – now the castle is enclosed), as the assembled guests watch in wonder.

So whose story is it? Rieti’s? Balanchine’s? The dancers’ who dance it?

It’s all of theirs. To exist, *La Sonnambula*’s story must be told in performance, in several media. It’s a collaboration – across time and space – across even life and death.