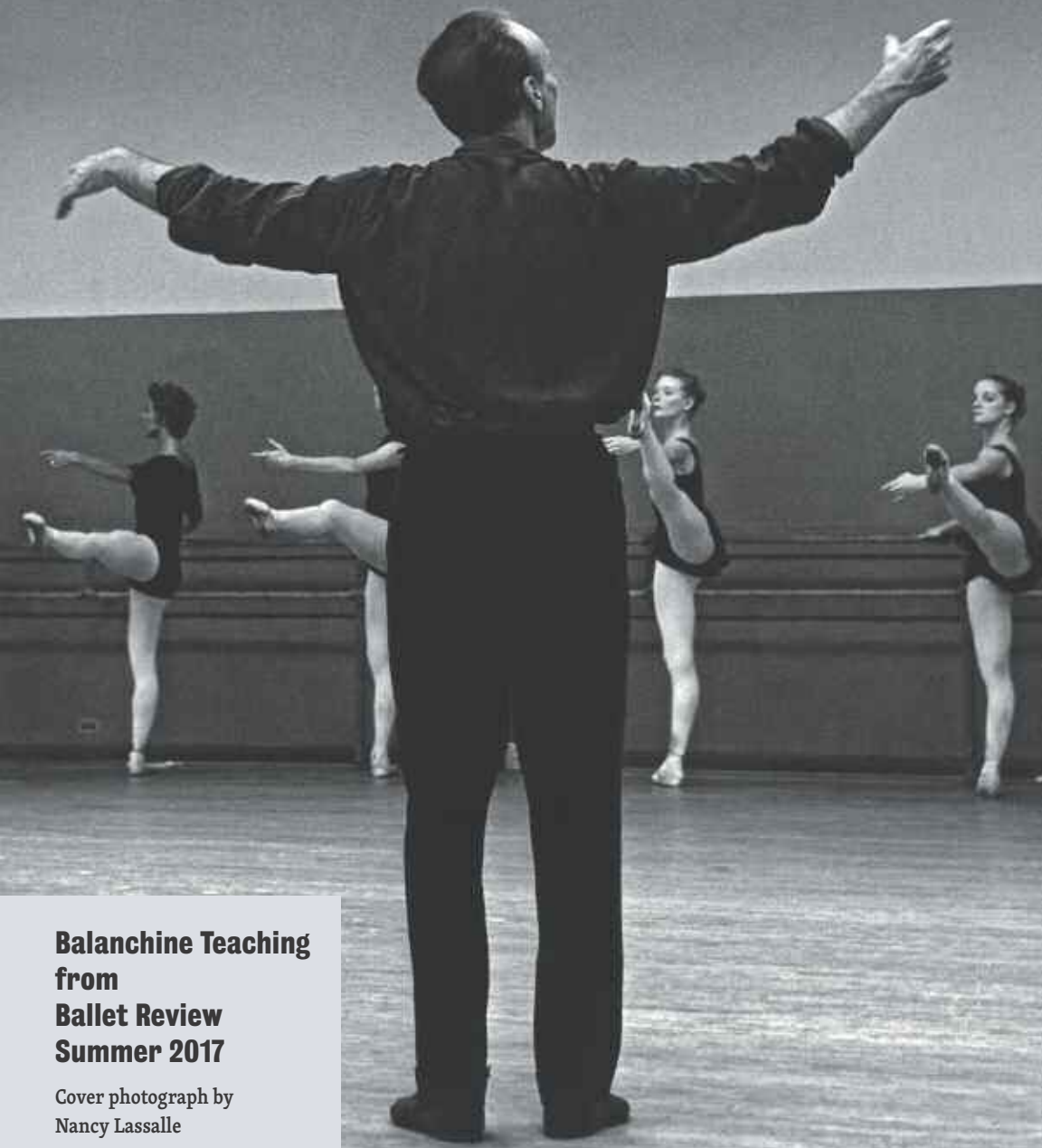


Summer 2017

# Ballet Review



**Balanchine Teaching  
from  
Ballet Review  
Summer 2017**

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Nancy Lassalle

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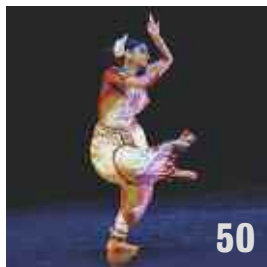
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# Balanchine Teaching

**Joseph Houseal**  
**Photographs by Nancy Lassalle**  
**Notes by Suki Schorer**

At the School of American Ballet (SAB) in 1961 George Balanchine led a two-day national teachers seminar, funded by the Ford Foundation and intended to elevate the level of dance education in America by offering the highest standard of training to future dancers. Teachers came from around the country to learn directly from Balanchine.

Nancy Lassalle recalls, "I asked Balanchine if I could photograph the two-day workshop. He said yes. When I look at these images now I still feel the immediacy of being there. It continues to be very real to me, as does the sense of fortune I felt being in the presence of Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, as I was almost every day for so many years.

"I am neither a photographer nor a dancer, although both have long been my passions. The photographs, I hope, capture Balanchine as he always was in the classroom: a consummate giver, a teacher of classical ballet who deeply felt the desire to share his knowledge and to elevate those around him. The classroom provided creative space for Balanchine the choreographer. I hope that in these pictures you see what I saw then, as now – the artist in his element, forming in Lincoln's words, 'the poems we call ballets.'"

To celebrate its fiftieth anniversary the Eakins Press Foundation is publishing a limited edition portfolio of the photographs, *Balanchine Teaching*, with half of the proceeds going to support SAB's cultural program, initiated at the school by Kirstein. Lassalle, who has directed Ballet Society for twenty years, is now making it possible for it to regularly collaborate with the Foundation.

Peter Kayafas, director and publisher at Eakins Press has announced plans to digitize the entire run of *Dance Index*, a magazine published by Lincoln Kirstein from 1942 to 1949.

It was essentially a series of monographs, each issue addressing dance topics one by one. The Eakins Press Foundation/Ballet Society imprint will also relaunch *Dance Index* as a twice yearly, printed periodical featuring expert guest editors and authors.

*Balanchine Teaching* shows him demonstrating various ballet positions, making slight hands-on adjustments to dancers, articulating his practical knowledge as well as his theory of the art. Suki Schorer, faculty member at SAB and former NYCB principal dancer, has written an essay, as well as detailed explanations of the individual pictures.

In her essay Schorer says that while Mr. B "is known to the world as a choreographer[,] for most ballet lovers he is the greatest of the twentieth century, if not of all time. . . . Yet he said of himself, 'I am a teacher. That is my contribution.' . . .

"Balanchine's choreography, he made clear, came from the music. But the capabilities of his dancers to dance as he wanted came from his classes. He taught so that we could dance as he wanted us to dance, so his ballets would look as he wanted. It is still true today. To dance his ballets as he wanted them danced requires that the dancer learn to dance in his way. What he taught remains as important as the ballets he made. A core function of SAB, more than thirty years after Balanchine's death, is to pass on what he taught us to girls and boys of today who want to dance his way.

"Ballet dancing is based on the skills developed at the barre. Barre exercises are for Balanchine the primary sources of the strength, the skill, and the finesse in movement of the feet and legs on which all the steps depend. Barre exercises must be done very well at least once a day for as long as one dances – Balanchine likened the barre to the daily brushing of one's teeth. His barre generally consisted of short, simple exercises designed to polish and refine the most basic elements of the technique, to ensure our awareness of the directions, to build strength and muscle memory. Selected exercises were repeated, often with variations in tempo or phrasing. He wanted

us to present ourselves as ballet dancers, even at the barre: alert, energized, with a pleasant, but focused demeanor. We generally stood square to the barre, eyes front, free arm mostly to the side. Nearly all work on *épaulement*, *ports de bras*, and *ports de tête* took place in the center.”

“The works of the Eakins Press,” wrote Leslie Katz, the foundation’s creator, early in its history, “are selected from classic and

contemporary literature and art relevant to values currently embattled. In content and form they defend human excellence. Together they suggest that advanced technology need not outmode humane capacity. The symbol of the Eakins Press is a leaf and a hand. Man is and remains a creature of nature capable of cultivation, and art is the measure of his life.” Such photographs as these do much to show us what he meant.



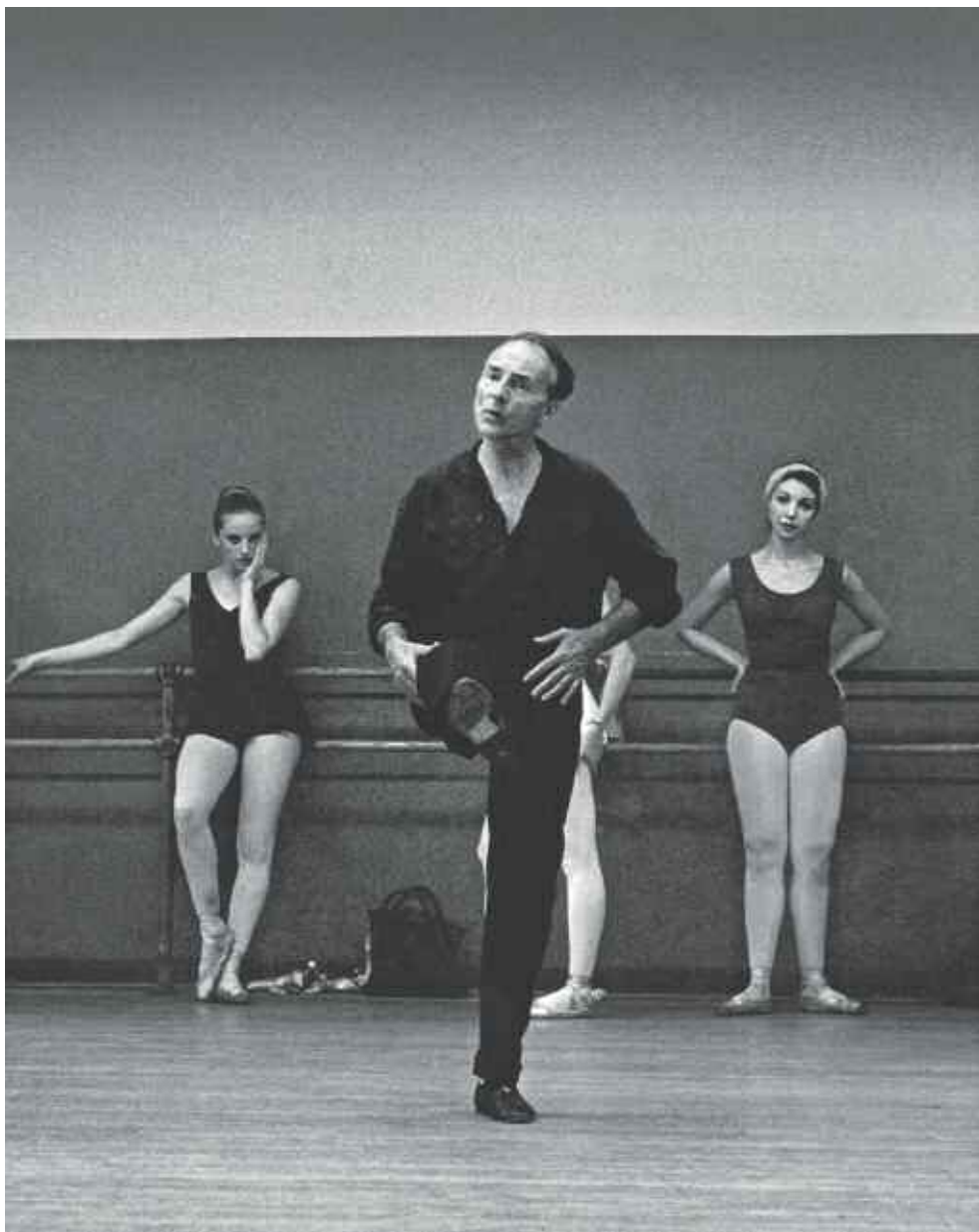
Suki Schorer: *Plié* is the most important movement in ballet. It is a continuous movement to gather the energy that gives the dancer the power for the next moment – a step, a jump, a turn. The dancer pulls up to go down, resisting going down and coming up. The knees bend, the body starts down, and then the arms come, like a parachute, wrists slightly flexed, the hands resisting, holding on to the air. “We are not dancing in a vacuum,” Mr. B liked to say.

Watching Mr. B, we see Sara Leland behind him. To his left, Carol Summer with her hands on her hips, Pat Neary behind Carol, Joysanne Sidimus in a headband, and Vicky Simon in white. I am a little behind Vicky and to Mr. B’s right, my weight on the balls of my feet, in *plié*; the shape of my hands shows I am trying to feel the gathering of power and energy in the *plié* that is needed in the legs.

In those days, ballet studios had floors of old wood planking; worn from years of use, they collected dirt and could not be completely cleaned. This photo must have been taken late in the session: most of us have dirty ankles from having wrapped our foot tightly in *sur le cou-de-pied* front.



Suki Schorer: Balanchine is explaining the action in the plié of the knee going over and out beyond the toes of the foot as the dancer descends from relevé or lands from a jump. Landing from a jump or coming off pointe, the weight is first caught on the tips of the toes, then the toes release as the knee bends over the foot, extending beyond the toes, the dancer controlling the weight through the foot, the plié never stopping, the heel not down, not hitting the floor, at most touching just as the dancer starts up. To help us develop real power in the legs, he gave slow changements from three-quarter grand plié to three-quarter grand plié. To help us develop the quickness he wanted in his very fast allegro, he gave us ultra-quick, shallow changements or soubresauts in fifth. "Toes, toes, toes," he would say. Maybe also very fast jetés or emboîtés. He wanted us to dance "on chickentops": "Chickens don't have heels," he said.



Suki Schorer: Here, Balanchine has raised his leg to the front, the toes directly in front of his center. Fifth is the most important position, and the most centered position. We started from fifth and finished in fifth. In every movement front, whether standing as in *battement tendu* (best understood as an extension of fifth, the toes coming in to the centerline), or traveling, the dancer is aware of her center. Also in these jumps, constant working in to the center: doing *jeté*, the ball of the working foot lands on the centerline, the other coming immediately into *coupé* in the air and finishing in that position; in *assemblé front*, in the air, the thighs are crossed and the pointed feet are joined in fifth on the centerline; in *glissade front*, the feet are in fourth and the thighs are crossed in the air, and landing, the feet join in fifth on the centerline – “tada.”



Suki Schorer: Balanchine divided the body vertically, down the middle, joining the two halves on the centerline of the body. He wanted dancers to think of the body primarily as vertical halves joined at the centerline, rather than thinking, as people generally do, of upper and lower, or head, torso, legs. With the body divided vertically, front, back, and side can be precisely defined and are at the top of the dancer's awareness. Positions, poses, the orientation of the body can be exact and are clearer; with that awareness, they are easier for the dancer to make and for the audience to see. In the picture, Balanchine is starting to explain this idea. His right index finger is on his forehead, the base directly in front of his nose. His left hand could be holding a string with a weight attached indicating his centerline at his chest, in front of his navel, right down to the floor.



Suki Schorer: The topic here is *épaulement*, the diagonals of the body. The tilt of the head – to lay it on a pillow, the bringing forward of the cheek – to ask for a kiss: an absolutely essential element to Balanchine's aesthetic. But very hard to achieve, so a frequent point of exercises in the training. Here, Balanchine is using his hands to guide the head of Barbara Weisberger (a teacher) into the desired line as he shows it himself. Everyone who teaches Balanchine's *croisé* and *effacé* will recognize this moment.



Suki Schorer: *The goal here is a correct effacé front. Mr. B is holding a teacher's leg between his legs as he squares off the hips (pulling the right hip back) so that the toes are on the centerline. Teaching ballet is often more effective through direct contact with the dancer, the teacher molding the dancer's body as needed.*





Suki Schorer: Mr. B in the air at about sixty years old, legs together, happy, enjoying the moment, in the middle of his jump, probably demonstrating cabriole back, legs beating in the air. He has been explaining how to make each jump happen: by collecting energy in the plié (no bouncing off the floor), by controlling the landing.



Suki Schorer: This is probably an adagio, Mr. B “conducting” us, as he sings, “start on one, open, arriving on two, stay alive . . .” Note that in second position each dancer’s arm is in front of the working leg so the leg remains behind the arm and, if possible, in line with the shoulder.