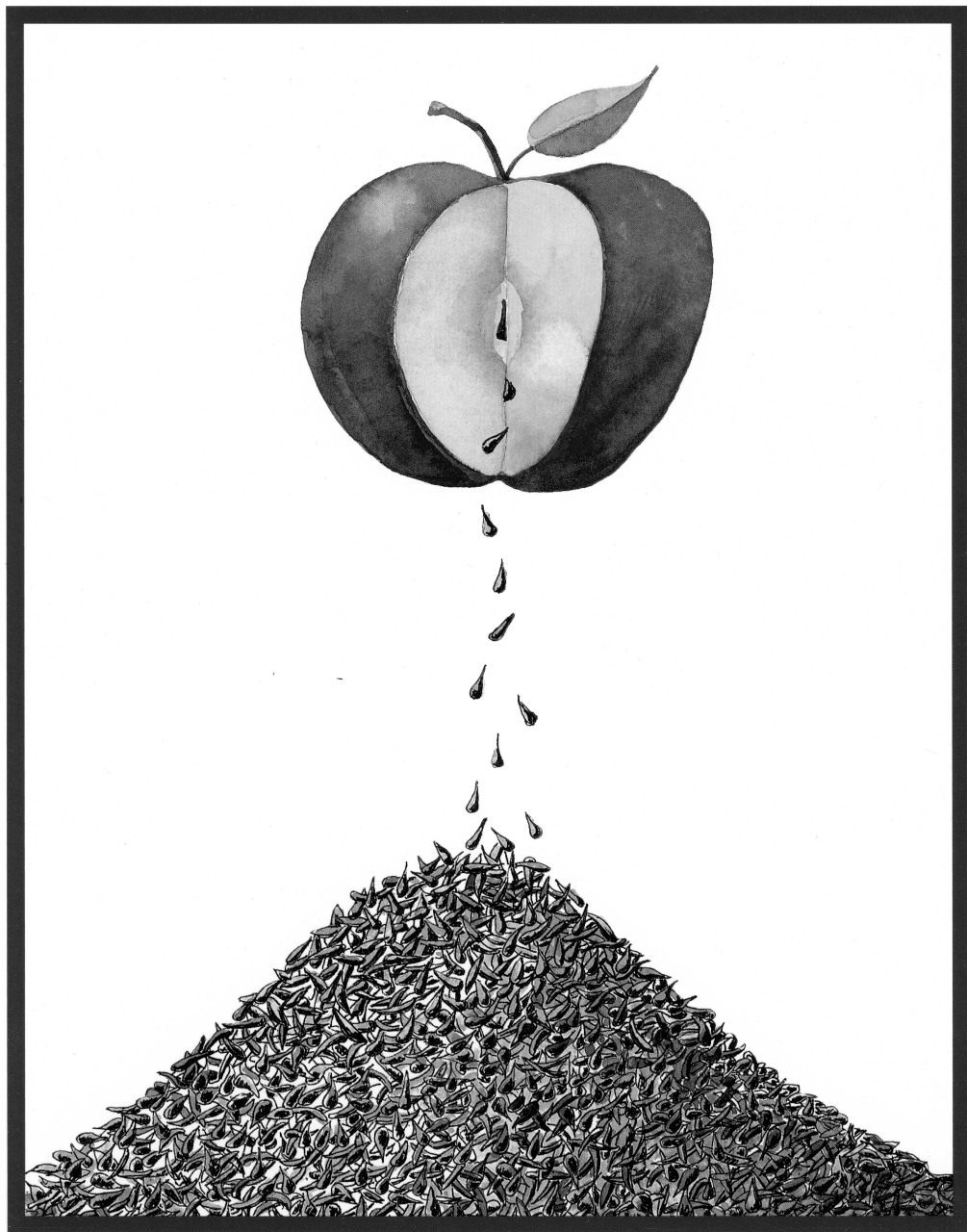


ANTIOCH *the* REVIEW

*Johnny Appleseed
and Other Legacies*

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Ballet School

BY JESSICA RAIMI

“A childhood vision of the dancer’s glory must somehow be cradled and preserved, for the daily duty is onerous and the result slow to appear.”—*Lincoln Kirstein*

Since before I could read, one of my favorite books was an oversized volume of my mother’s, a collection of photographs of ballet stars of the thirties and forties—Alicia Markova, Léonide Massine, Alexandra Danilova. The pictures, by the great Maurice Seymour, were taken with a large-format camera and dramatic studio lighting, which made the dancers appear to stand still even in the air. I was too young to know that photography makes time stand still as well. Only years later did I realize that I would never see them perform.

Little boys, with an instinct no doubt genetically encoded, gravitate toward baseball, dinosaurs, or motor vehicles; little girls fantasize about having a pony or being a ballerina, unless they are sufficiently original to go in for dogs or skating. (My sister, when she was very small, talked of growing up to be a horse; once she was made to understand that this was impossible, she settled for wanting to marry a horse.)

In the grownup world there are probably more professional modern dancers than ballet dancers, but the ballet, along with tap dancing and skating, holds a particular fascination for little girls, perhaps because each employs special, magic shoes to permit feats not possible for ordinary folk.

I had my first ballet lessons when I was five. The highlight of the experience was the annual recital, in which, cast against type, I played a snowflake. I no longer remember whether I was one of the pink

or the purple ones. The details of the routine also escape my recall, though I would bet money that it involved twirling with our arms in circles above our heads in fifth position.

From the wings I watched a routine done by the older girls. They wore tunics of shiny material in metallic colors, and looked as big as grownups to me, although their average age was probably twelve. I believe they danced to *The Planets*. Maybe they were supposed to be planets, or maybe I just concluded that because of the music. They appeared monumental and luminous under the lights.

Subsequent experience makes me certain that the mothers were wearing nice dresses and nylon stockings and were trying to keep the performers' younger siblings from kicking the seats in front of them, that the fathers had cameras and dozens of flashbulbs, that the performance was punctuated by bursts of light, and that the applause was terrific.

A few years later, I studied with a kindly old lady who taught what she called modern dance but which was mostly pretending we were flowers or wind. My mother wasn't eager to have me be a flower, though I personally had nothing against it, so the following year I was enrolled in modern dance classes given at the university by professionals from New York. But I missed ballet, so my mother bought me pink tights with feet and pink practice shoes—modern dance is done barefoot, in black—and enrolled me at the Dismal Ballet School.

The school was attached to the only real ballet company native to Rochester, New York, and its attractions included the opportunity to perform in the annual production of *The Nutcracker*. The director, Madame Renata, who was probably in her sixties, acted the part of a retired ballerina—I have no idea what her career had actually been. She had long, thin, wavy hair, dyed red and combed back from a receding hairline, and she wore a heavy patina of rouge, blue eyeshadow, and mascara. Her posture was so regal and corseted that her back was almost arched. Her figure was not a dancer's but her legs were slender, and she was vain of her girlish ankles and tiny feet. She taught class wearing dresses and backless high-heeled sandals, just like the shoes, I often reflected as she marked steps for us, worn by Barbie dolls.

Madame Renata did not really turn out dancers, but she had one star pupil, a girl with a professional-caliber technique, who served as a demonstrator in our class (an advanced student who takes the front row in a less advanced class). She later went to New York and joined the Radio City ballet, a fact mentioned repeatedly and with awe back

in Rochester. The rest of the girls and a couple of boys took lessons because that was what suburban children did, just as they rode horses or went to Hebrew school or took piano lessons.

While Madame didn't make her students pretend to be flowers, she scarcely seemed to care whether they learned to dance. She knew that her customers, the mothers, paid to indulge their own fantasies. There was one little girl in my class who wore her older sister's worn-out toe shoes, and although the shoes were too big and she was too young to dance on pointe, Madame never stopped her.

George Francis was one of the assistant teachers at the school, and he sometimes taught our class. Somewhere in his thirties—he was always evasive about his age—he had an arresting face, drawn in sharp planes, with high cheekbones, pale skin, and small, deep-set black eyes. He had black hair cut short, though in later years he wore it with bangs over the forehead in a determinedly faggy hairdo. He taught in street clothes, favoring tight black trousers and white short-sleeved shirts with the sleeves rolled up high, and I well remember the muscle definition of his arms and shoulders.

When we learned that George was planning to open his own studio, my mother decided that I should study with him, since he was obviously more serious than Madame Renata. A month or two before his school opened, I took a few private lessons with him.

I was twelve at the time, and I had not led an especially sedentary life. Though I had never seen the point of team sports, and believed it best to greet an oncoming ball by ducking, I had had the suburban child's normal complement of kickball, statues and tag, cycling, swimming at the Y, walking to school, and climbing trees. But I had never forced myself to go for a second and a third wind, to jump higher the more my legs hurt. A few times I came close to fainting.

George called his school simply Ballet School, and took for his logo a silhouette of a man at the height of a leap, the image borrowed from a photograph of Arthur Mitchell, a ballet dancer in New York. The school's name and logo together announced George's position on flowers and snowflakes. Only after he died did I learn that he had served in the Marines, who call themselves the toughest branch of the service, iron men who can repel malaria without quinine. I don't know how he found his way to the ballet and Madame Renata.

At first the school comprised only four girls; a few others soon

joined us. The studio was a bare room with a barre along one wall, mirrors along the opposite wall, and windows in the wall between, next to which George sat with the variable-speed record player; he never prospered enough to have a pianist. We used records produced for the purpose, solo piano pieces and piano transcriptions of orchestral selections, the same few discs class after class. To this day certain melodies from their opening measures—the *Moonlight Sonata*, Gounod's *Faust*, the finale to Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*—will forever speak to me of *pliés*, *tours jetés*, or *changements en l'air*.

A dance class is a series of exercises designed to slowly warm up and strengthen the muscles and tendons while dissecting the technique into its components. The dancer attends first to the correct way of bending the knee, of rising to the ball of the foot, of moving the foot in each direction, then moving the whole leg, the arms, the back, and the head. Then the elements are reassembled into steps and sequences of increasing difficulty, which begin to test the dancer's memory.

The ballet was invented in the court of Louis XIV, so the language of ballet is French, apart from the musical terms, which are Italian. By the time Degas painted the dancers of the Paris Opera, at the end of the nineteenth century, ballet had evolved into the technique that is still its foundation, whatever styles or influences overlie it, just as scales and chords are the foundation for players of classical, jazz, and rock music.

Classes vary in detail and difficulty but never in overall progression. The first part of class is spent at the barre, a wooden banister parallel to the floor at waist height, on which the dancer lightly rests one hand to keep her balance. The second part, the more fun, is "on the floor," in the middle of the room, without support.

The first thing one learns in ballet is how to stand. The required posture, unnatural and difficult at first, is built on two principles: keeping the spine straight with the hips rolled forward in line with the shoulders; and turning the legs out from the thigh, the feet approaching an angle of 180 degrees to each other. This produces the ideal line, and keeps the torso at the center of every movement, which provides balance. The turnout from the hip provides greater freedom of movement, allowing the leg to be lifted higher than from the natural human stance with toes pointed forward.

At the barre, the class does exercises in multiples of eight: *pliés* (*demi* and *grand*) in first, second, fourth, and fifth positions, *relevés*, *battements tendus*, *battements dégagés*, *ronds de jambe à terre*, *ronds*

de jambe en l'air, *developpés*, *grands battements*, and various others. A *plié* ("bent") is a knee bend, done first as a *demi-plié* (half bend), with heels on the ground, then as a *grand plié* (big bend), a deeper squat with heels leaving the floor. The numbered positions are starting poses, with the legs always turned out and feet flat on the ground: first position is with heels together, second, with feet hip width apart; fourth, with one leg forward and one back, weight centered; and fifth, with the feet crossed, heel against toe. (Third position, like fifth but with heels against insteps, is rarely used.) A *relevé* is rising to tiptoe; a *battement tendu* is stretching one leg forward, foot sliding along the floor to the front, side, or back until the heel comes up and the toe is fully pointed; *battements dégagés* are the same, but with the foot leaving the floor; *grand battements*, the same, but raising the leg as high as possible; *ronds de jambe à terre*, circling the leg front to back and back to front with toe on the floor); *ronds de jambes en l'air*, the same thing with the leg extended at waist height.

After these and other exercises of increasing difficulty, the class moves away from the barre for the *adagio*, or slow, part of the class, and the most difficult: unsupported *pliés* and *tendus*, *port de bras* (arm movements), and various combinations of steps. Finally comes the *allegro*, my favorite part, where we are finally truly dancing. The students line up in the corner to take turns doing spins, jumps, and leaps across the floor: *chaîné* turns, *sautés arabesques*, *grands jetés*, and more difficult combinations. Finally, to use up what is left of the students' energy, there will be perhaps sixty-four *changements en l'air*—jumps in place from fifth position, in which the legs are slightly crossed as they straighten during the ascent and then, at the height of the jump, when the toes are fully pointed, switch position front to back before landing. Advanced students will substitute *entrechats quatre*—the same thing, but switching the feet twice before landing. The class ends with the *comprements*, a bow repeated to each side, to signify the dancer's gratitude to her teacher and her audience. In many schools, students applaud the teacher at the end of class, but we did not observe that formality.

We rarely saw George dance more than a few steps at a time. He had renounced dancing after an injury, and cemented this decision with a diet of coffee and cigarettes. Yet we could see from the combinations he demonstrated for us that he had a beautiful line and an intense musicality. Most of all he had the authoritative quality that makes the viewer suspend doubt. Like a sprinter or a horse, he glowed with

power kept in check. His dancing was so strong that he could convulse us by playing his own opposite, imitating Odette the swan princess or the Dying Swan—the ballet has an affinity for swans—aflutter with fearful femininity.

In the ballet studio is the energy of a place devoted to the pursuit of excellence, like a theater or a gymnasium. No matter how tired I was when I arrived, by the time I had changed and walked down the hall to the studio, I was energized, ready to let the music carry me toward beauty. Class was always exciting, with the pure eros of artistic creation.

George was tirelessly observant and critical. “Pull up! Tuck under! Watch that turnout! Keep your weight over the arch of your foot! Straighten that supporting leg! Straighten, and straighten, and straighten! Get that leg up! Higher! What are you waiting for—Christmas?” This was when he was in a good mood. On other days, it was, “If that’s an arabesque, I’m the man in the moon! Debby, you look like death warmed over! Laurice, I found that pound you lost!” Once, he told a hopeless male student, who was raising one bent leg behind him in an awkward *attitude croisé*, “Carter, all you need is a hydrant!”

We used to joke—in the dressing room, of course—about George’s moods: that they ranged from lousy to horrible; that beneath his cruel exterior lay a heart of stone. We knew that when he was not really in a bad mood he often pretended to be, to keep up appearances.

Some people could not abide being told they looked like a Mongolian idiot—there is an argument for gentleness in teaching—and occasionally a student would run from the studio in tears, never to return. But for many of us, the fear of George’s temper was a source of adrenaline. He knew that our anger, our desire to damn well show the bastard, could put spring into aching knees.

In his own school, George derided Madame Renata to his students, many of whom were her alumnae. “This is the way Madame Renah-tata would make you do it,” he would say, demonstrating some ridiculous bit of effeminacy and imitating her plummy voice. Sometimes he would shout, “If you just want to flap around looking pretty, go back to Madame Renah-tata! She’ll take your money! She doesn’t care if you’re working!” He believed that girls should be taught to move in a confident, even masculine, way. We had to understand that one could not be a swan without being an athlete. Dancing was always hard work; the trick was to make it look easy.

“I’m not going to pay attention to you unless you’re working,”

George would remind us. "You don't have to be doing it right, but you have to be trying! Kapeesh?" And he was never fooled about that. He let us know that the neutral or even smiling face is as essential to correct technique as the turned-out leg, and that a grimace was as much a sign of carelessness as of effort. He looked for sweat, for panting, for the stagger of near-collapse between exercises. It was the kind of rough treatment that boys expect from football coaches but that was rarely offered to girls.

George's teaching equipment, aside from the record player, cigarettes, and coffee from the deli (extra milk, extra sugar—my mother said that was how to get some extra nourishment on a tight budget), was a wooden stick that he used to beat rhythms on the floor like the ballet master conducting rehearsals in a Degas painting, or to administer a "love tap" to an insufficiently straight knee or protruding bottom. Unforgettable was the day he stopped the class in mid-combination, glared at us with disgust, and broke the stick across his knee—then used one end of it to stir his coffee. Another time, to show the correct hand position, he went over to one girl and carefully placed his cigarette between her second and third fingers.

Despite his nastiness, in one sense we weren't afraid of George. The dance requires that the teacher touch the student to put her into the correct position; certain things can't be explained in words, only in the body. Most of us were at an age where grown men scared us, but years before we fully understood, we knew George was safe. At the same time, his appeal was heightened for some of the older girls, and some of the mothers, by his unavailability. Years later, an alumna confessed to me, "I used to lie in front of the door to his apartment, clutching a rose painted black."

Much as we complained, we all longed to earn a rare affirmation: "That's it! Good!" Class was unfailingly interesting, if only because one never knew what mood he'd be in and whether his approval could be had. He appealed to something masochistic in us, but there's an element of masochism in every form of physical culture: one can't improve without pain. We had to welcome the pain and enjoy it, to focus on the goal without succumbing to discouragement or laziness.

George's bad moods were partly theater, to illustrate his frustration with those students who could not understand the necessity for pain. He had no use for those who wouldn't trouble themselves to find out, and he disliked sissies. Couldn't we see that we were in pain for our art, and that this suffering ought to be worse than any discomfort

inflicted by his insults? He could laugh at himself, and was amused when one year at Christmas my mother and I gave his two best students dart boards with his picture on them. (To be fair, we gave him a dart board, too, with a picture of the class on it.)

George knew that despite his lack of sophistication about many things, he had a true gift for teaching: an ideal of the classic ballet that he could explain by word and example, and his own way of motivating us. (He had, of course, been much nicer to Madame Renata's clientele.) He knew he deserved better raw material than Rochester offered, but for whatever reason, he had never gone to New York. He had no reputation there, could no longer dance professionally, and didn't pretend to be a serious choreographer, although he might have harbored a dream of having his own company. He was always trying to recruit male students but never had more than a few at a time. (I doubt that he got involved with them; such an incident would have ended his career.) On the other hand, he had started from nothing and begun by working for someone else. It wasn't impossible that he could have established himself in the big city; people do.

After a year or two George had acquired a few dozen students, and was doing well enough to move to larger quarters in an office building in midtown. The new place boasted a studio, an office, and dressing rooms, as well as a waiting room for the mothers, which he did up with a chandelier and dark red fuzzy wallpaper in a fleur-de-lis pattern. The effect was meant to be sumptuous and sophisticated, but when it was done he ever after called it the funeral parlor.

There were now enough students to be separated into various levels of classes. He added night sessions for adults, which he referred to openly as the fat old ladies' classes. My mother faithfully attended once a week, hating every minute but determined to get some exercise and support the school. Several of his younger students were showing glimmers of talent, and one appeared to have the makings of an artist.

Noelle was a shy, pretty girl of ten when I met her, in my first class at George's school. She had had only a few years' training, but she already moved with a pure, delicate line that made everything she did look right, even when it wasn't. She had a long-limbed dancer's body and was so flexible that she could lie on her back with her feet behind her head. Her mother, a slender and glamorous blond, was a dancer

manqué, yet Noelle did not seem imposed upon. She loved to dance, and had the dedication of a professional of twenty-five, pushing herself unmercifully in class, watching her weight, foregoing water-skiing as too dangerous. The rest of us would have hated her had she not been so sweet-natured, modest, and plainly in competition only with herself. Once, when I complimented her on her technique, she said, "I'm a perfectionist—I just can't stand to do it wrong." I immediately thought, "That's a great idea!" and began to expect more of myself.

George heaped insults or praise on her, depending on whether she was working hard enough for his taste. He held her to a higher standard than he did the rest of us. He would yell at her, and she would redouble her efforts, her face turning red while her expression remained serene, except for the occasional crinkling of her smooth forehead in a wince as he shouted, "Higher! Again!"

She took six classes a week, four days after school and two classes in a row on Saturday (the idea was to warm up during the intermediate one and really work during the advanced), while I took class only twice a week after school and two on Saturdays. She intimidated me, but my being two years older compensated for our artistic inequality.

Noelle was intelligent and bookish. She lived in my neighborhood, and we sometimes saw each other on weekends. Eventually George, hearing that we occasionally practiced together, challenged us to choreograph something to show him.

For music I chose Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, so that I could use some black shoes that George loved to tease me about. Before I studied with him, I had persuaded my mother to buy me a pair of black toe shoes, though it was not really proper to get them without a teacher's permission—dancing on pointe is dangerous if done wrong, and unkind to the feet even when done correctly. It is a privilege earned after years of study, and anyway my feet were too flat for the purpose.

Black shoes were, I found out, in bad taste. George required his girl students to wear black leotards with scoop necks and long sleeves, pink tights, and pink shoes with ribbons to hold them on. The boys wore white sleeveless undershirts, gray tights, and black shoes, and the older ones, like all professional dancers, were required to shave under their arms. In the early days George also made the girls wear pink artificial flowers in our hair, which presented a problem. Unless a

ballet dancer's hair is very short, she wears it in a tight bun held firm with elastic bands, hairpins, hairnet, barrettes, hairspray, and anything else that works; much dressing-room conversation concerns methods of making one's hair stay up through the rigors of a whole class. The pink flower ornaments, which George sold to us at cost for fifty cents apiece, consisted of a dozen fabric roses on a paper-covered wire, which we pinned around our chignons. The flowers would come loose from the wires and fly off during pirouettes and we all hated them; eventually George gave up on this refinement in our costume.

Noelle and I spent a couple of afternoons working on the *Scheherazade* project in my parents' living room, being careful to avoid the furniture. George had been slightly malicious in giving us the assignment, since it was one we couldn't possibly complete. We never came up with more than twenty measures' worth of steps, and when we eventually performed it for him it was in stops and starts, with poorly suppressed laughter. Still, the experience taught us something about the difficulty of creation, and about dancing with sex appeal to those tragic, romantic melodies.

This was something George was trying to instill in us: dancing with a sexual quality. He was not after the vulgar or suggestive. For him, dance was Russian classical ballet, and he loved to ridicule what he called "muddern dancers." He would refer to José Limon as José Lemon, or parody Martha Swope's famous photograph of Martha Graham in a long skirt in an *arabesque penchée*, one arm raised with hand clenched, inner wrist pressed to her forehead. Nor did he have any use for the bloodless and ethereal.

Once, my first year with him, when there were only four of us in the class, he uncharacteristically gave us a short jazz sequence. It began with low kicks, with a Broadway tap dance *port de bras*: arms bent, elbows at sides, thumbs hooked behind the pectorals and fingers spread.

We couldn't do it. As pubescent girls we were not going to put our hands that close to our bosoms in front of a man. George was confounded by our blushes and giggles. "Come on, it's jazz dance! Hands like this, wiggle your fingers, and one, and two!" We stood there like Mongolian idiots. The reason then flashed on him, and he gave us another, more familiar, combination.

George kept a small framed portrait of Noelle on his desk, and I once

heard him say, "Of course, it's written in the stars that Noelle will be a dancer." When she was twelve, George entered her in a regional ballet competition. She was to dance with Carter, the only plausible partner our school could supply, the clumsy boy of seventeen, who was awed by Noelle and knew that he was chosen because he was the oldest male student and the only one with a man's physique.

George spent months rehearsing them after class, and the rest of us would peek from the doorway as often as possible. For music he chose the "White Swan" pas de deux from *Swan Lake*, and every time I heard its opening bars I reflected on Tchaikovsky's nerve in taking a descending major scale and calling it a tune. Still, it was hard to be unmoved by the grandeur of the massed strings. Noelle had graduated to pointe shoes only a few months before, and it was touching to see her initial *developpé*, poised on one unsteady foot while regally extending her arm to her partner. As a choreographer George tended to cram each measure over-full of steps, but he managed to reproduce much of the classic duet, and to give Noelle some fancy moves while allowing her partner to stand still—there is no supportive man like a *danseur noble*. The most dramatic of these steps was the *pas de poisson*, in which the ballerina leaps and dives head first into her partner's arms, while he catches her before she hits the floor. We were fascinated by the lifts and triple pirouettes, steps that the rest of us, not having partners, could not execute.

For weeks Noelle and Carter worked uncomplainingly, wincing when George yelled at them. Beating time with his stick, he drove them through endless repetitions. Later, there were fittings of Noelle's white tutu and Carter's crimson doublet, which my mother had been drafted to sew. Finally, on the appointed Saturday, Noelle, Carter, George, and an entourage of other students and mothers drove to Buffalo for the event.

The halls of the high school where the competition was to take place roared with the chatter of nervous dancers and parents. We made our way to the classroom where Noelle was dressing, to wish her luck. She was pale under her rouge and eye shadow, quietly warming up with *pliés* and *tendus* while her mother sprayed her hair into immobility.

When her turn came, her foot shook during the *developpé*, but she made no real mistakes. Her noble bearing and facility for making it all look right pulled her through creditably. She didn't win anything, and she must have been disappointed, but she wasn't visibly upset; she

knew that at her age, any performing experience was beneficial.

During my first couple of years with George, I didn't work very hard. I didn't know it, because I did work up a sweat, and on occasion pushed myself to the limit. But eventually I understood how to mentally examine the position of my foot, ankle, calf, knee, and on up—"Reach for the sky with the top of your head!"—and then start over.

I did not wish to be a dancer, since I knew my build was wrong and that anyway dancers tended not to be intellectuals. Nonetheless, as my friends among George's original group of students progressed, I wanted to improve along with them rather than be left back with the younger girls. I paid closer attention to their methods, and added a Friday night class to my schedule.

But careers weren't the point for most of us. We never even had recitals, which is unusual in a school for the performing arts; instead, once a year, the parents were invited to watch a class. Although George never exactly said so, he wanted them to understand that the discipline, athleticism, and attention to detail of the ballet strengthen the mind and the aesthetic faculties as well as the body. He had found his market niche, leaving others to flap around at Madam Renah-tata's.

I had a book of photographs called *Days with Ulanova*, by Albert E. Kahn, with many pictures of the great Russian ballerina performing, and many more of her in the dance studio taking company class, practicing alone, or coaching young dancers—she must have been close to fifty. In one chapter, she visited a children's class at the Kirov ballet school. The students begged her for a speech. She talked about her own training, saying, "Always remember that the smallest detail, things that may seem insignificant at first, must be done well. No matter whether it's dancing or singing or studying, you must try to do it better. Never be satisfied."

I was beginning to understand how to work at writing—how to remember and transcribe conversations and actions; how to endeavor to entertain and not just report my own accomplishments. Not that I achieved any precocious feats of sensitive observation; most of my journal remained along the lines of "I got an A in biology. We did double pirouettes in ballet class," and much rot concerning the Beatles. But I began to see writing as a process of teaching myself rather than putting down what I already knew.

During my last year at home, after most of my friends had gone to college, school had suddenly become meaningless. Until then I had been a showoff, always ready with the right answer. But now I could no longer concentrate on lectures or reading. I became a curiosity when, in a confused atheistic antiwar statement, I refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance each morning in homeroom, despite being lectured by the authorities about my lack of patriotism. I desperately wanted to be an intellectual, and threw myself into listening to Prokofiev and Shostakovich, reading Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and Ferlinghetti, trying to read William Burroughs, and, when I was allowed to go to the movies, seeing Godard, Truffaut, Fellini, and Bergman. I had to be prepared for discussions. None of this intersected with anything covered in school. All I wanted was to go to New York.

I found myself increasingly in George's line of fire. I turned sixteen that winter, and the fact that I was no longer a girl may have attracted some wrath in itself. I was always hungry, and I always felt fat, which I was only by the standards of dance, being five foot two and more than a hundred pounds. When George acquired a doll-sized model skeleton for his studio, he named it after me.

Even his compliments to me were often couched in insults, as when he would tell the class, "Watch how she jumps! Pretty good elevation for a blimp!" Still, I knew that in his grudging way he liked me. He was intrigued by intelligence, and quick to attest to the truth of the cliché that many dancers are dumb athletes; his major worry for Noelle's career was that she was too intelligent to be happy among them. He would enliven the class with surprise questions, sometimes relevant, sometimes not, such as the time he asked me, between *déga-gés* and *relevés* at the barre, "Quick! How do you spell 'phlegm'?"

After one particularly abusive class, I wanted to fight back, but was afraid to do anything drastic. I happened to be the last to leave, and I got the idea of taking all the coat hangers from the rack in the dressing room and suspending them from each other in an impromptu mobile. George found my construction after I left, and during the next class asked me in front of everyone, "Was it you who did that hanger arrangement?" I admitted it, but only because I could see that he perfectly understood my protest and was amused by the harmlessness of my rebellion. I knew that I slightly intimidated him and that some of his behavior was one-upmanship, but he knew that I respected his intelligence.

From time to time George would expel a student for not working hard enough, though often the rejected one was taken back after promising to mend her ways. Toward the end of that winter he kicked me out, ostensibly for being overweight, although he had fatter students. He probably would have reinstated me, but I was angry enough not to plead. Yet in another way I didn't mind. He knew that I was soon to graduate from high school, that in my heart I had already left town. Looking back, I think he was angry at me for deserting him, since I had been one of his original crew, and jealous of me for discovering that New York was my destiny.

We remained on friendly terms, and while I never took another class with him, I returned a number of times to take pictures. The lines and shapes, the meaning and emotion, created by dancers are infinitely various. Since the subjects are moving, one must predict where they will be and at what point in the movement by the time one releases the shutter. It requires both skill and luck.

A few years before she died, my mother asked me, "Did I do the wrong thing by keeping you in the ballet school?" It had never occurred to me that she would think that. "No, not at all!" I said. "That's good," she said. "I always thought it was mean of him to give you that assignment to choreograph *Scheherazade*. It was something you couldn't possibly do." I couldn't begin to tell her that she had missed the point of the lesson: to be challenged and to appreciate what a choreographer does.

I had gained from George the faith that my work was progressing even when I couldn't see it and the self-discipline to trade the pain of the present class for the future joy of dancing. In the dressing room, we often reminded each other that improvement happened not continuously but along a series of plateaus and setbacks. How minor were George's irritability and insults compared to what I had learned about the craft and habits of the artist!

In the years after I left home, while George was never financially secure, his school had a full schedule of classes, and he began teaching at a local college as well. Tracy, an alumna from that period, recalls, "He'd hold court in the student center, sitting there and insulting people."

He had a heart attack, and then another. Though he claimed to

be forty-six, he was rumored to be in his fifties. "When he got sick, he looked eighty years old," says Tracy. "He lost so much weight, he couldn't wear his toupée anymore, so he wore a baseball cap all the time. He was so shrunken that even his teeth looked bigger."

After his final heart attack, she and a few other dancers went to scatter his remains on Lake Canisius. She recalls, "Kathryn had this little red can of his ashes. She was shaking it and saying, 'I've finally got him where I want him!'"

Another former student chanced to see the demolition of the office building where our studio had been, in a part of midtown Rochester that has been gradually and completely renovated over the decades in a vain effort to halt emigration to the suburbs. She was walking by at the very moment the wrecking ball swung into the plate glass window that still bore the legend "Ballet School" with the phone number and the silhouette of the man leaping.