

THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

Ballet Notes

Balanchine's Don Quixote

June 2007







Balanchine's Don Quixote

Choreography: George Balanchine

Staged by: Suzanne Farrell®

Music: Nicolas Nabokov

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Set Design: Zack Brown

Costume Design: Holly Hynes

Lighting Design: Brad Fields

Produced in association with:

The Suzanne Farrell Ballet Company

Balanchine's Don Quixote is a gift
from Roger and Kevin Garland.

Cover: Heather Ogden and Hazaros Surmeyan.

Left: Suzanne Farrell in rehearsal.



Synopsis

...everything a man does he does for his ideal woman. You live only one life and you believe in something and I believe in a little thing like that.

George Balanchine, *Life Magazine*, August 1965

Secluded in his study, a gentleman late in his life, by the name of Alonso Quixano the Good, surrounds himself with gigantic books of chivalry. Fairly devouring the tales of adventure, peril and romance, he has come to inhabit the life of a knight-errant of yore and *"everything our adventurer thought, saw, or imagined seemed to happen according to what he had read..."* His god-given destiny is clear: his mission is to ride out into the world to undo evil and to protect the oppressed, the vulnerable. He calls himself Don Quixote de la Mancha, certain that his noble deeds will glorify the *"lady of his thoughts"* for *"the knight-errant without a ladylove was a tree without leaves or fruit, a body without a soul."*

Now with the powers of his fervid imagination, he enchantingly transforms his faithful servant girl into the love of his dreams. He names her Dulcinea and envies her in every woman he sees. She stands above all others because of her virtue, trust and elegant strength of purpose: *"She is my queen and lady, and her beauty is supernatural, for in it one finds the reality of all the impossible and chimerical aspects of beauty, which poets attribute to their ladies..."* His visions of Dulcinea — in all her guises — will ignite his idealized exploits. His pursuit of her, never-ending, will be the reward for his valour.

Still, there can be no true knight without the proper squire. He entices his potbellied, down-to-earth neighbour, Sancho Panza, to follow him. Assembling a rusty set of armour on his gaunt frame, Don Quixote begins his quest in earnest: *"Sancho, my friend, know that I was born, by the will of heaven, in this our iron age, to revive the one of gold...which makes my heart almost burst in my bosom with the desire to embark on this great adventure, no matter how difficult it may prove to be..."* When Sancho heard his master's words, he began to cry with the greatest tenderness in the world." On his woeful old horse, Rocinante, Don Quixote meets travelers on the road — a mistreated peasant boy, a chain gang of slaves, a persecuted shepherdess — who are seen as the victims of dreadful wrongs that he must dutifully right. He even interprets the puppets in a theatre as marauding Moors from whom he must defend his Dulcinea. These heroic expectations are

quickly thwarted, however, by violent clashes with reality. He is held up to ridicule at the court of the Duke and Duchess, tossed about like a rag doll, assaulted with swords, and *"grief-stricken to find himself so injured by those for whom he had done so much good."*

In spite of his frequent, humiliating setbacks, Don Quixote exhibits a vigour and a richness of invention; we wonder at his endless courage in the face of preposterous circumstance, his inextinguishable will to survive — flourish — on his crusade. Quixote's passion for the celebration of Dulcinea's beauty and goodness, for the redemptive power of love and its deep devotions, holds us in awe. His pride before every fall moves us. Not even the loyal Sancho can temper his master's faith in his own indestructibility: *"Woe is me!"* Sancho cries. *"If this adventure has anything to do with phantoms, which is how it's looking to me, who has the ribs that can stand it?"* Nevertheless, after a foreboding dream in which Don Quixote fails to rescue an imperiled Dulcinea, he fearlessly, even recklessly storms a whirring windmill, perceiving it to be a pack of giants that is keeping him from his cherished lady.

Don Quixote is finally forced home, exhausted and broken by the selfishness and cruelty of humanity that he had tried so indomitably to deny. A procession of clerics, penitents and knights arrives at his bedside, the last vestige of chivalry from the books that are now banished from his imagination. As Don Quixote's transcendent visions fade, he is left alone at the last with the few loyal people of his village. Sancho begs his friend to once again take up the lance and the shield, and the servant girl wills him to live. The ingenious knight who once proclaimed, *"God brings his children to heaven by many paths: chivalry is a religion,"* dies humbly as Alonso Quixano the Good.

Synopsis written by poet Emily Fragos

Excerpts from the English translation of Don Quixote © 2003 by Edith Grossman are used by kind permission of Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

Top: Suzanne Farrell with Heather Ogden and Artists of the Ballet in rehearsal.
Bottom: Suzanne Farrell with Nan Wang in rehearsal.

George Balanchine, 1904–1983

George Balanchine was more than a great choreographer. He was one of the 20th century's true artistic luminaries, an animating figure who revolutionized classical ballet and broadened its popularity.

Apart from being prolific — more than 400 works — Balanchine was adaptable and versatile. As he once remarked, "*I entertain with steps.*" And he made those steps not just for the ballet stage but for Broadway, Hollywood and television too. He once even choreographed for a circus elephant.

We must be grateful that the rigours of the Russian Revolution, which Balanchine experienced as a student at the Maryinsky Theatre, eventually impelled him in 1924 to make his career in the west. By then Balanchine, whose father was a composer, had already completed a thorough training in classical ballet and music and was making his mark as an innovative choreographer.

Although creatively fertile, the European phase of his career had its share of ups and downs, in parallel with the vicissitudes of the troupes with which he worked. Balanchine's career was potentially heading into the doldrums when American arts patron, scholar and balletomane Lincoln Kirstein convinced him to come to the United States. That was in 1933.

From today's vantage it's hard to comprehend what a challenge it was for Balanchine and Kirstein to achieve their goal of establishing an authentically American classical tradition. It took a number of false starts before Balanchine's New York City Ballet was founded 15 years later.

Balanchine, who remained its artistic head until his death, turned NYCB into one of the world's greatest companies. More importantly, together with the school he and Kirstein had established in 1934, NYCB became a creative laboratory. Balanchine, inspired by the brisk tempo of American life and the athletic physicality of its dancers, was able to pursue his vision of a new kind of ballet classicism — "neo-classicism" as it came to be known.

Its premise was that dance is a primary, independent art that needs neither narrative nor decoration to achieve its effect. Dance, for Balanchine, was not the theatrical accompaniment to something else, not even music. Instead, blessed with a depth of musical understanding rare among choreographers, Balanchine forged a new kind of partnership between dance and music in which they functioned as complementary equals.

Countless ballet companies around the world perform

Balanchine works, not just because they give pleasure to audiences but also because they help dancers grow as artists. The technical demands of Balanchine choreography are specialized. Among others they require speed, alert musicality, considerable athleticism and extraordinary stamina. Although rooted in the academic code of classical ballet, Balanchine's choreography has distinct dynamics, embraces asymmetry and often pushes the body beyond its traditional, perpendicular ballet "centre."

Balanchine became the most influential figure in modern ballet. Widely imitated but never equalled, he revived the art form not by rejecting the past but by retooling it for a new age.

The National Ballet and Balanchine

Cumulatively, The National Ballet of Canada has presented a representative range of Balanchine choreography, starting in the early 1960s under founding Artistic Director Celia Franca with two of his most popular works, *Concerto Barocco* and *Serenade*. Another enduring Balanchine favourite, *The Four Temperaments* came in 1969. Under Artistic Director Erik Bruhn, Balanchine's dazzling *Symphony in C* joined the repertoire in 1984. However, it was James Kudelka, Artistic Director 1996–2005, who stepped up the pace of acquisitions by adding six Balanchine works during his tenure. Among these were the early masterwork *Apollo*, the magisterial *Theme and Variations* and *Jewels*, Balanchine's celebrated three-act, "plotless" ballet. It was also Kudelka who arranged a co-production with The Suzanne Farrell Ballet Company whereby Balanchine's full-length *Don Quixote* now comes to Canada. The National Ballet is only the third company to have danced this extraordinary work, the others being New York City Ballet and Suzanne Farrell's own troupe.

A Different Don Quixote

Don Quixote, the fictional hidalgo launched into the world in 1605 by Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra, has long been lodged in our collective human consciousness.

Cervantes's masterpiece, often considered the first true novel, is a digressively sprawling work, published in two volumes — the second came in 1615 — and containing 126 chapters. Soon translated into English, Cervantes's *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* has since been translated into more than 65 languages.

Even if those who have read it in its entirety are relatively few, millions of people around the world at the mention of "Don Quixote" immediately conjure the image of an endearing old knight-errant in battered

armour, riding a mangy steed and tilting at windmills. It is then hardly surprising that as ballet choreographers searched for popular subjects Cervantes's *Don Quixote* was recognized as a rich mine of dramatic possibilities.

The earliest known *Don Quixote* ballet dates from 1740. This Viennese production was followed by several other 18th century versions in France and Italy. Charles Didelot, the celebrated French choreographer, staged the first Russian version in St. Petersburg in 1808 and *Don Quixote*'s popularity as a subject for ballet was confirmed by other early 19th century productions elsewhere in Europe.

The ballet version best known by today's audiences, however, derives from the great Marius Petipa's 1869 production, considerably revised in 1871, for the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg, set to a spirited score by Ludwig Minkus. Petipa's version, though not the first to focus on the comically romantic adventures of Quiteria (Kitri) and Basilio from the second part of Cervantes's novel, nevertheless established this as the favoured scenario for most subsequent productions. Russian choreographer Alexander Gorsky retained much of Petipa's scenario and some of his choreography for a shorter version he staged for Moscow's Bolshoi in 1900. The National Ballet's previous *Don Quixote*, first presented in 1982, stands firmly in this tradition.

George Balanchine knew the Petipa/Gorsky *Don Quixote* from early personal experience as a dancer in Russia but decades later, when he decided to create his own version for New York City Ballet, he started afresh.

Balanchine boldly confronted the central challenge for choreographers in adapting Cervantes's novel. Unlike the Russian version that relegates *Don Quixote* to the margin of the plot and portrays him as an amiable old fool, Balanchine decided to make *Don Quixote* the subject of the ballet. Apart from a radically different scenario, Balanchine also underlined his departure from tradition by commissioning a new score from his old friend, Russian-American composer Nicolas Nabokov.

Those familiar with the ubiquitous Russian *Don Quixote* may detect superficial similarities – we still have Sancho Panza and windmills – but the essence of Balanchine's version is startlingly different. His *Don Quixote* contains occasional comic elements but its overall tone is dark, serious and infused throughout with heartfelt religiosity. As the ballet unfolds, the dividing line between reality and fantasy constantly shifts to create the disorienting sensation of tumult and chaos.

Balanchine's Don Quixote, far closer in spirit to that of its literary source, is the story of an idealistic old man, inspired — some might argue misled — by his reading of medieval tales of chivalry, to seek redemption by venturing into the world to right wrongs and defend the innocent. In keeping with the chivalric tradition portrayed, and implicitly satirized by Cervantes, Balanchine's tragic hero is also engaged in a quest for an idealized and unattainable love object, in his case the virginal Dulcinea of his dreams.

Choreographically *Balanchine's Don Quixote* can also be deceptive. It appears to follow the structure of a grand traditional 19th century story ballet with all its scenic trappings, virtuoso solos and varied ensemble numbers, but the actual steps are arrestingly modern in detail and inflection and laden with metaphoric and dramatic intent. Act II, set in the ducal palace, initially gives the appearance of a traditional Russian ballroom scene, complete with entertaining divertissements, but it is anything but and ends alarmingly. Act III, in which the abused and battered *Don Quixote* has a fevered vision of his beloved Dulcinea, is one of the most arresting choreographic passages ever created in narrative ballet. The mounting tension of this scene is masterfully conveyed in choreography that counterpoints the illusion of beauty, symmetry and harmony with a powerful undercurrent of impending danger.

Also striking is that beyond all the lavish spectacle *Balanchine's Don Quixote* is actually a very personal story — about an idealistic man and his longing for an unattainable woman.

At the time of its creation in 1965, much was made of the apparent parallels between the then 61-year-old Balanchine's own life and the tale itself. He was personally besotted with and professionally entranced by then 19-year-old ballerina Suzanne Farrell. She was his muse, his Dulcinea, and it was Farrell's unique dancing talent that brought Balanchine's long-held dream of choreographing *Don Quixote* to fruition.

Yet, for all the fascination of this complex back story, recounted movingly in Suzanne Farrell's autobiography, *Balanchine's Don Quixote* has a timeless resonance. It seems almost incomprehensible that after a 13-year performance history at New York City Ballet, from 1965 to 1978, this extraordinary work was allowed to languish, unseen for more than a quarter century. Now, restored to the stage by Farrell herself, *Balanchine's Don Quixote* is here once more to entertain, challenge, confound and deeply move us with its profoundly human story.

— Michael Crabb



Above: Eric Ragan and Momchil Mladenov in the world premiere of *Balanchine's Don Quixote* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. This was a co-production between The Suzanne Farrell Ballet Company and The National Ballet of Canada (2005).

Photography: Paul Kolnik, Sian Richards and Cylla von Tiedemann.

The National Ballet of Canada
The Walter Carsen Centre
for The National Ballet of Canada
470 Queens Quay West
Toronto, Ontario M5V 3K4

Phone: 416 345 9686
national.ballet.ca

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