

SHELF LIFE

by **MARINA HARSS**

IN *BALANCHINE AND THE LOST MUSE: Revolution and the Making of a Choreographer*

(Oxford; \$35), Elizabeth Kendall has brought to light a wealth of new detail surrounding the obscure early years of George Balanchine, the man who modernized ballet and went on to become the greatest choreographer since Petipa. His happy childhood and St. Petersburg ballet training, until now only sketched as the first steps on the path to glory, receive their full due. One can practically see the diminutive, self-assured boy at his piano and smell the dust in the halls of the Imperial Theater School. In addition, Kendall has restored the memory of an almost forgotten figure of that world, Lidia Ivanova. A classmate of Balanchine's, Ivanova became a member of his small troupe, the Young Ballet, a cadre of whom, rechristened the Soviet State Dancers, departed on tour in 1924, ready to conquer the world.

But almost as soon as we meet her, Ivanova vanishes. She died on the eve of the dancers' first European tour (from which they would never return), in an accident that to some balletomanes—Kendall included—has sinister overtones. In Bernard Taper's standard biography of Balanchine, published in 1963, Ivanova merits only a few words. But as the "lost muse" of the book's title, she becomes a symbol of the "revolutionary aesthetic" of a new generation and its mix of idealism, athleticism and immediacy. However, it is clear that Kendall also sees her as the casualty of a new recklessness unleashed by the sudden eradication of old rules. Once the protégés of the Imperial household, Russian ballet dancers—especially attractive young women like Ivanova—were apt to fall prey to unpredictable new temptations: celebrity, the night

life and sexual flirtations with unscrupulous men. Kendall alludes to Ivanova's associations with shadowy companions with political connections reaching as far, perhaps, as the Cheka, the secret police. She holds these men responsible for Ivanova's demise, even if the evidence doesn't quite add up. Reading about Ivanova's unsavory friends, one can't help but be reminded of the power games that continue to roil Russian ballet—such as the near-blinding of Sergei Filin, artistic director of the Bolshoi, in an acid attack connected to rivalries at the company.

It is clear that Kendall, who teaches at the New School, is drawn to the young dancer, whom she refers to throughout by the diminutive "Lidochka." Her fascination is made all the stronger by the scarcity of historical material, and it is bolstered by her knowledge of Russian, which Taper did not speak or read.



Javotte rehearsal, spring 1921, George Balanchine at center holding Lidia Ivanova

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She has dug up every last scrap, drawing from published and unpublished memoirs, letters, photographs and passing references buried in Russian archives. She has undertaken a painstaking labor of reconstruction, driven by a desire to understand the inner life of this elusive figure. "Most people loved and even adored her, onstage and off," she writes—including, one senses, Kendall herself.

Into the void of historical sources steps the passionate conjurer. By necessity, Kendall's account is padded with conjecture. Was Ivanova the inspiration behind the tragic lost women who appear in Balanchine's ballets? Was her death an accident? Who can say? These lacunae lead the author to occasionally overinterpret the material at hand. To Kendall, Ivanova's sad eyes in a portrait hanging on a museum wall suggest dark emotional undercurrents. A series of press reports about her death segue into some juicy but not quite conclusive theorizing about the accident, a

collision between a pleasure boat and a ferry in a St. Petersburg waterway. Was she murdered? We'll never know.

By the same token, Kendall's ability to breathe life into characters and situations is one of the main pleasures of the book. Daily life at the ballet academy is depicted with a rare immediacy. Kendall has scoured school ledgers, daily schedules, the handwriting on photographs, and from them summoned a world. We learn how many classes the pupils took each day, where they slept, what they did in their free time, and even what punishments were meted out for disobedience (denial of sweets). Just as vivid is her account of cultural life during the period of the New Economic Policy, when young dancers performed in cabarets, summer retreats and movie houses. It was a time of stark contradictions: hunger, cold and chaos, but also experimentation

and hope. This was the climate in which Balanchine made his first ballets.

The most vivid glimpses of Ivanova emerge not from the rather scant evidence surrounding her private life, but from descriptions in the voices of those who saw her perform. They speak of her powerful jump, as well as her thrilling, unself-conscious relationship with the audience. An admirer remembers how she rushed toward the footlights "with unbelievable lightness, sharply accenting the rhythms...huge black eyes shining." Kendall can't resist going a step further, interpreting Ivanova's style as that of a visionary, bending "an old plot to revolutionary ends without even changing the steps."

In the end, however, it is possible to forgive these excesses because of Kendall's ardor. *Balanchine & the Lost Muse* is no dry reconstruction of an ascetic pursuit. To Kendall, ballet is a living, breathing art, worthy of these dancers' fervor and our interest: "the effect of good ballet training... is that it bypasses thought," so that we are "swept into the energy of motion and the exultation of self-mastery." We certainly do not need to know the story of Ivanova in order to understand the subtle undercurrents of Balanchine's ballets. But we are the richer for having it. ■

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