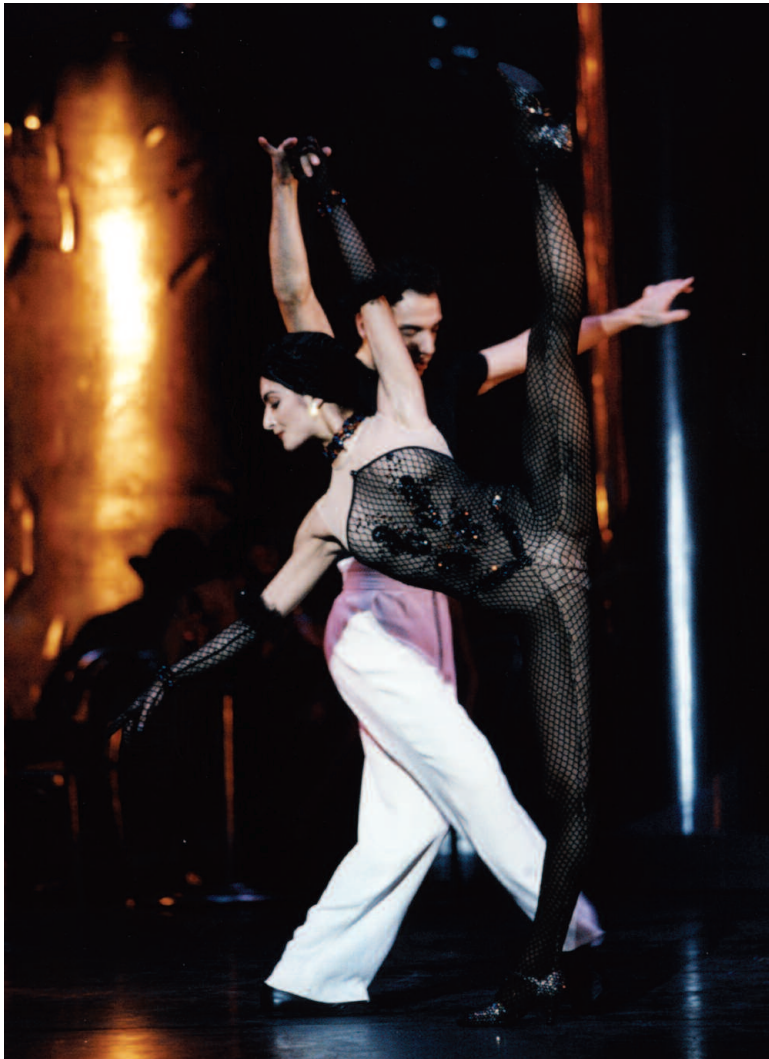


# Broadway and beyond

Allen Robertson writes about George Balanchine's 'other career' and his pre-New York City Ballet stage successes



Slaughter on Tenth Avenue: Monica Zamora as the Striptease Girl and Joseph Cipolla as the Hooper; photo: Bill Cooper

He was undoubtedly the most prolific choreographer of all time. His catalogue includes a list of 425 works stretching from a student dance staged at a Russian summer school in 1920 to a final ballet in 1982. One of his many biographers, Bernard Taper, suggests that George Balanchine was able to be so productive because he took his job seriously yet always managed to take himself lightly – ‘God creates, I assemble’.

Time and again his dancers recalled how he would walk into the rehearsal studio and simply start getting on with the task at hand. His facility to turn out movement with seemingly effortless spontaneity became something of a legend – ‘My muse must come to me on union time’.

Throughout his career he never played at being the tormented artist struggling with insecurities or doubts. Paul Taylor, a dancer who went on to become one of the USA's finest modern dance choreographers, performed for Balanchine just once, in a solo choreographed for him in *Episodes* in 1959. Three decades later Taylor summed up his own approach to creativity as something he had picked up from Balanchine. In 1989 he told me, ‘I’m a little leery

of the word “inspiration.” I like the word “deadline” better.’

Anyone who ever worked with him will recognise Taylor’s comment as a Balanchine portrait in miniature. He wasn’t just one of the greatest dancemakers, he was also one of the most practical. His unflappable composure is one of the reasons why he turned out to be so successful when working on Broadway and in Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s. Composer Richard Rodgers admitted that he was initially fearful, expecting to encounter a Russian tyrant, a snooty highbrow slumming it on the Great White Way. Instead, he found the exact opposite. Rodgers remembers that Balanchine’s dictum to him was simply, ‘You write. I put on’.

What Rodgers wrote and Balanchine put on was *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, the finale to their 1936 Broadway hit *On Your Toes*. The show is a backstage comedy about a Russian ballet troupe desperately in search of a fresh success to lift them out of the red. The finale to the first act explains why the company finds itself in such catastrophic straits. *The Princess Zenobia* ballet,

Balanchine's riotous parody of the orientalism so in vogue via hot-house extravaganzas such as *Scheherazade*, illustrates artistic desperation on a grand and gaudy scale. It spills over with laugh-out-loud high jinks worthy of today's deliberately ridiculous travesty company Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo.

There was an unsuccessful Broadway revival in 1954, but it was only in 1983 that *On Your Toes* once again triumphed. This was when Natalia Makarova took over the ballerina role. She won a Tony Award on Broadway and added an Olivier Award when she reprised her role in the West End the next season. Former Royal Ballet star Sarah Wildor performed the ballerina role in 2003 for a Royal Festival Hall production when Adam Cooper devised his own version of Balanchine's choreography as well as casting himself as the leading man.

*Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* the ballet dates from 1968, when Balanchine opted to separate it from *On Your Toes* in order to showcase it as an independent one-act work. His cast for this New York City Ballet staging was led by Suzanne Farrell, his favourite ballerina, and Arthur Mitchell, who would later go on to found the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Birmingham Royal Ballet's production was first staged in 1999 with Monica Zamora and Joseph Cipolla. This season Robert Parker will be returning to the ballet. He says that he is going to have great fun brushing up his tap dancing. 'I've always loved comedy, especially when it has the kind of very dry humour you can do with a serious face. Anyone who knows me knows that I'm not a naturally hysterical guy, but this ballet really is one of my all-time favourites.'

*On Your Toes* was the first of three major successes that Balanchine choreographed in rapid succession for Rodgers. It was followed a year later by *Babes in Arms*, which contained a dream ballet (Broadway's first) populated by characters who

included a mermaid, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich and Clark Gable, to say nothing of John D. Rockefeller. Then in 1938 came *The Boys from Syracuse*, a jaunty romp based on *The Comedy of Errors*, the Shakespeare farce that spins around the multiple mistaken-identity shenanigans of two mismatched sets of twins.

The first *On Your Toes* ballerina was Tamara Geva, who was then married to Balanchine. When it became a Warner Bros film in 1939, it starred Vera Zorina, who had succeeded Geva as the next Mrs Balanchine. She had already appeared in the show's initial West End production as well as in Balanchine's first Hollywood film, *The Goldwyn Follies*.

There's a tantalising 'might have been' footnote about those *Goldwyn Follies* dances. If producer Sam Goldwyn had been a bit more imaginative, his 1937 film would have included Balanchine's staging of George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. But Goldwyn got cold feet, so it wasn't until 1951 that Gene Kelly's version won six Oscars, including Best Picture.

Even though he had arrived in the USA in 1933 in the hopes of launching his own company, it was not until 1948 that New York City Ballet was born. In those intervening years Balanchine proved himself capable of turning his hand towards whatever was needed. And we should never overlook the fact that it was earnings from his swank Hollywood days that allowed Balanchine to think about commissioning a score from Paul Hindemith. The result turned out to be *The Four Temperaments*, one of Balanchine's major masterpieces. What greater tribute could anyone ever pay to the profligate mammon poured out by the glitzy Hollywood dream factory?

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Right: Monica Zamora as the Striptease Girl, Joseph Cipolla as the Hooper and Andrew Murphy as Big Boss; photos: Bill Cooper