

Books in Brief

This time, we celebrate the art and lives of esteemed choreographer and New York City Ballet's founder George Balanchine and the current Ballet Master in Chief Peter Martins, Balanchine's handpicked successor.

George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker

by Robert Gottlieb

George Balanchine was not only the greatest choreographer of the 20th century, but perhaps also, the greatest ever. This book, written by longtime editor and dance critic Robert Gottlieb (who served for many years on the board of directors of the New York City Ballet), paints a sharp and sophisticated portrait of the famed choreographer as only an ardent fan and admirer who knew Balanchine could do.

In the introduction, Gottlieb observes that Balanchine "carried within him all of ballet, past and present, and was constantly redefining its future. Looking backward and looking forward were not separate matters for him; he summed up everything even as he was reinventing everything." The book vividly details the role fate played in placing the very young Balanchine into the Imperial School of Ballet and Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, rather than in the Imperial Naval Academy as intended. We learn of his extensive musical education in Russia, his dancing career (cut short by an injury), and his many failed attempts to gain ground in the West.

Yet, once in America, Balanchine embraced his new home with the zest, confidence, and joy of creation that were his hallmark. Balanchine's work for Broadway and Hollywood is chronicled, choreographing four shows for Rodgers and Hart, and *The Goldwyn Follies*, respectively.

Serving on NYCB's board afforded Gottlieb a close look at Balanchine both on and off-stage. Standing in the wings, Balanchine revealed to him how he wanted Peter Martins to succeed him upon his retirement from the company. As Gottlieb wrote, "[Balanchine] was always calm, always courteous, always realistic, and always impersonal . . . To me, too, he was a god, and I saw my role as being some kind of messenger of the gods."

If there ever was a god-like figure in the dance world, it was Balanchine—his story, captured in *The Ballet Maker*, is deftly delivered by the talented messenger, Robert Gottlieb.

FAR FROM DENMARK

By Peter Martins with Robert Cornfield

Generally it is the custom for one to pen their autobiography at the end of their career, not in the middle. But such is not the case with Peter Martins in his wonderful mid-life memoir, *Far From Denmark*.

From age of 8 to 18, Martins studied at the School of the Royal Danish Ballet under the auspices of the legendary Danish ballet master August Bournonville, whose ballet, *Far From Denmark*, provided Martins with the title of this book.

Martins danced with RDB in the mid to late sixties. Dissatisfied with the company's lack of artistic sophistication, Martins, now an international star, accepted the invitation of New York City Ballet's co-founder George Balanchine to join the company as a principal dancer in 1969. Martins gladly accepted, but we learn that the transition was anything but smooth: Just before he made his debut, Suzanne Farrell, whom he expected to partner with, abruptly left the company to dance in Europe. Worse, Balanchine found Martins style to be reserved and self-conscious and thus refused to cast Martins in any of his new works.

After briefly entertaining the notion of leaving NYCB to dance with the American Ballet Theatre, Martins rejected the impulse and, instead, convinced Balanchine to work with him. It was here that Martins came to understand the genius of George Balanchine and the depth of his commitment to his art. Immediately, Martins' style was imbued with a new frankness and strength.

Far From Denmark does much to explain Balanchine's true importance to Martins as a choreographer, teacher and role model. We learn that it was these primary factors that impelled Martins to become a choreographer himself.

This beautiful memoir is a thoroughly absorbing read, and highly recommended.