

Freed Reads

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If you're a professional dancer, a student of dance, or just love the art form, may we recommend a book—or two or three—that we know you'll find to be nothing short of fascinating?

Freed Reads is the place where devotees of dance gain inspiration from the life stories of famous ballerinas and choreographers, as well as the immortals of the silver screen.

Today, we profile the lives of three dancers, all of whom were principals at one time or another at New York City Ballet, and all of whom danced for the Master, George Balanchine.

Holding on to the Air: An Autobiography

by Suzanne Farrell & Toni Bentley

Six years after the death of legendary choreographer George Balanchine (who discovered, molded and, eventually, fell in love with the young dancer), Suzanne Farrell recounts her life: From the time she arrived in New York City at age 15, through her years in New York City Ballet as Balanchine's ultimate "muse", to marrying and leaving the company—and returning years later to work with Balanchine again.

As the center of Balanchine's attentions, Farrell collaborated with him in the creation of his most celebrated works. Though she could not reciprocate when he fell in love with her, Farrell speaks with great regard for their mutual devotion, which found its physical consummation through the "dance" and not the traditional way. The book's highest appeal will be to the dance audience; ballet students and fans will find it fascinating. It is essential for any performing arts collections.

Co-written with former NYCB dancer Toni Bentley, Suzanne tells her extraordinary and often controversial tale with grace, integrity, and style, never going on the offensive or writing an unkind word of anyone. Farrell's book is a moving personal story, and readers will find her life nothing short of inspirational.

Once a Dancer An Autobiography

by Allegra Kent

Like Suzanne Farrell, Allegra Kent joined the New York City Ballet at the age of fifteen. She remained there for 30 years—20 of those years as principal dancer. Beautiful, sensuous, and mysterious, she quickly became an essential Balanchine staple—and the story of her personal life is as dramatic as the story of her rise to fame.

Born Iris Cohen in 1937, Kent reveals her often strange and bizarre life, which at times reads more like a Grimm's fairy tale than a dancer's memoir. Beginning with stage mother/Christian Scientist Shirley Cohen, Allegra paints a portrait of a slightly paranoid free spirit whose snap judgments would alter the course of her young daughter's life, including anglicizing the family name, a much disliked nose job for Allegra, to moving the family from town to town at the drop of a hat. Iris went so far as to push her daughter in a bad marriage to photographer Bert Stern as the means to protect her from the clutches of Balanchine, whom often made a habit of marrying his younger protégés.

Allegra's love for dance manifested in her need to communicate in silence. Unlike her mother, whose method was to talk things out, Allegra was drawn to ballet because it allowed her to talk in "a soundless way." As she writes, "...No one can touch silence."

Kent would often leave the dance world at the peak of her successes, only to return as mysteriously as she had left. One self-imposed exile involved having three babies at the peak of her fame. Another time was due to excessive overeating, that led to her discovery of water wings and to author *Allegra Kent's Water Beauty Book*.

Though Ms. Kent's autobiography also offers wonderful remembrances of her contemporaries including, among others, dancer Edward Villella, costumer Mme. Karinska, artist Joseph Cornwell, Violette Verdy, and Baryshnikov, it remains overall a poignant—and sometimes painful—account of one of the dance world's most talented and enigmatic artists.

Maria Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina

by Maria Tallchief

Born in 1925 to an Osage Indian chief and his Scots-Irish wife, Maria Tallchief grew up in the more stable and comfortable environment that eluded future colleague Allegra Kent. And, unlike Ms. Kent, Maria's dotting mother left Maria alone once her dancing career took hold. Also, unlike Allegra, Maria would not elude the romantic overtures of Balanchine—no, she would marry him.

Instantly accepted as a member of the Ballet Russe as a young teen, Maria quickly caught the eye of the controversial and brilliant choreographer. Their marriage—both personally and professionally—formed the beginnings of the New York City Ballet, where she would dance for 18 years. Acknowledged as the most technically accomplished ballerina ever produced in America, Maria's dedication to her craft led to the company's first great success, 1949's "The Firebird." The foremost exponent of Balanchine's choreography, Tallchief's other important roles included Orpheus, Scotch Symphony, Caracole, Swan Lake and The Nutcracker.

Tallchief's dignified autobiography provides us with many stories and insights that shed light on both this crucial moment in dance history and Balanchine's elusive personality. She is reserved about their personal relationship but candid about the increasing favor Balanchine showed to younger dancers, which led to the annulment of her marriage, and her departure from NYCB in 1966.

Assisted by ghostwriter Larry Kaplan (who also co-authored Edward Villella's autobiography, *Prodigal Son*), Tallchief remains modest about her own astonishing talent, but expresses continued amazement for her former husband's brilliance. Her descriptions of working with Balanchine and Stravinsky are fascinating, while her accounts of a typical 14-hour practice day are formidable.

Maria Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina is a fascinating self-portrait of the fairy-tale life of a woman who understood that talent, committed to a singular, focused purpose, could change the world.