The Lives of Dancers: Marie Sallé to Gelsey Kirkland

At the end of eighth grade, as my family was piling into the car for a two week road-trip from Seattle, Washington to Chautauqua, New York, my mom handed me a copy of Gelsey Kirkland's autobiography Dancing on my Grave. I devoured the book over the first few days of the trip, reading it at least once more before we arrived at our destination. It was Gelsey’s world of Balanchine and Baryshnikov that inspired me to return to dancing that summer, after a two year hiatus. Having been enrolled at Pacific Northwest Ballet School at the age of eight, I had spent several years training pre-professional before I quit—which I did more out of teenage apathy than real disinterest. But once entranced by Gelsey, in addition to returning to my dance training with the intense focus I had lacked before, I also developed an intense hunger to learn all that I could about ballet. For the next few years, although I spent my afternoons in the ballet studio, I spent most of my other waking moments—on the school bus, in school, at home in bed—absorbed in the ballet culture of New York of the 1970s and 80s.

As my exposure to the ballet repertory increased, my interests broadened and I found myself reading about Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and Marius Petipa's ballets in late Imperial Russia. Later, as the director of the University of Chicago’s undergraduate ballet company, I found myself digging through the library for details regarding forgotten plotlines, strange choreographic variants, and background information for program notes. Eventually I found myself writing a thesis on Nijinsky’s L’après-midi d’un faune, and today I am writing a dissertation on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ballet practices. But the ballet biographies I began with are still closest to my heart. When I lose focus, I return to Gelsey’s New York. Over the last fifteen years, this collection has grown and evolved. Although it mainly
contains biographies of ballerinas and a handful of female choreographers, it has grown to contain books on male figures as well, especially those of special importance such as Balanchine, Baryshnikov, and Nureyev. Although my library also contains a great deal of secondary literature on these dancers and their work, I have chosen here to stay as close as possible to my original interest—their lives.

Of great interest to me are both of Kirkland’s books, *Dancing on My Grave*, and *The Shape of Love*, the two books that initially drove me to begin the collection. Although the latter is often dismissed because it was less of a sensation than *Dancing on my Grave*, it describes in depth Kirkland’s detailed approach to character development in ballets, lending insight to her Stanislavskian staging method. It is also bears personal importance to me, given that I read it for a second time while staging *The Sleeping Beauty*, a ballet Kirkland treats in great detail, and again for Kirkland’s acting advice while rehearsing the principal role of Medora in *Le Corsaire*. Additionally, the most recent extension of my collection—the original (and only) editions of the biographies of three eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French ballerinas—is also of special interest. These three books represent the nexus where my academic and personal interests meet. Furthermore, my copy of *Une Danseuse de l’Opéra sous Louis XIV: Mlle Sallé (1707-1756)* *D’après des documents inédits* is especially noteworthy, for it previously belonged to choreographer and Joffrey Ballet founder Robert Joffrey.

As I continue to build my collection, I hope to focus on filling the gaps in my biographies of American ballerinas. I would also like to extend my collection to include additional early twentieth-century biographies of earlier dancers, as, first of all, many of these dancers have not received biographical treatment since, and second, they provide a unique historical perspective for understanding national culture in France through dance around this time.
Bibliography

1. Kirkland, Gelsey, and Greg Lawrence. 1986. Dancing on my grave: An autobiography. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. The book that started the collection. Kirkland describes a troubled childhood and adolescence at the School of American Ballet and her subsequent professional career. For some reason, this was the book that re-inspired my love of dance.


3. Farrell, Suzanne, and Toni Bentley. 1990. Holding on to the air: An autobiography. New York: Summit Books. This was one of the many biographies of Balanchine ballerinas that I read following Dancing on my Grave.

4. Stewart, Edward. 1979. Ballerina. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. A very overly dramatic fictional ballet biography that came out during the peak of public interest in ballet. At this point in high school, if it was about ballet in New York, I would read it.

5. Bentley, Toni. 2003. Winter Season: A dancer's journal. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. Bentley describes a difficult season with the New York City Ballet in which she debates whether or not she wants to continue dancing. I read this book for the first time in the month after I stopped pursuing dance as a career and decided to go to college, trying to decide if there was still a place for ballet in my life. During this year, when I spent six weeks in bed recovering from surgery, I read more dance than ever before, using books as a way to live vicariously in the ballet studio.


7. Fraser, John, and Eve Arnold. 1988. Private view: Inside Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theatre. New York: Bantam Books. I read this book incessantly throughout high school and perused the photos even more often. After Kirkland, these were my next role models, and some later became my teachers.

9. Teachout, Terry. 2004. *All in the dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine*. Orlando: Harcourt. Balanchine is central to my collection both because I was trained by many of his dancers and because it was his ballerinas that inspired me to start reading dance.


19. Dacier, Emile. 1909. *Une Danseuse de l’Opéra sous Louis XIV: Mlle Sallé (1707-1756) D’après des documents inédits*. Paris: Plon. Biography of pioneering female choreographer of the ballet d’action. This book was previously a part of Robert Joffrey’s personal collection, and the information "Mary Ann Wells, Ballet Teacher, Seattle" (Mary Ann Wells was indeed one of Joffrey’s early teachers) is written inside the front cover.


**Wish List**

Hayden, Melissa. 1963. *Melissa Hayden, off stage and on*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday. In addition to falling into my collection of biographies of Balanchine ballerinas, this out of print autobiography was written by one of my high school ballet instructors.


Karsavina, Tamara. 1931. *Les souvenirs de Tamara Karsavina. Ballets Russes*. Paris: Plon. This later Éditions Plon biography would be an interesting addition to the collection, as it demonstrates the changes in the tastes of the Parisian reading public a few decades into the century—and the popularity of Russian dancers at this time!

Vaillat, Léandre. 1942. *La Taglioni ou la Vie d'une danseuse*. Paris: Albin Michel. Marie Taglioni, one of the most famous nineteenth-century ballerinas, is not adequately present in my collection, and this French language biography, in conjunction with the biography noted below by the famous critic Levinson, would help to fill this gap.