Spring-Summer 2019

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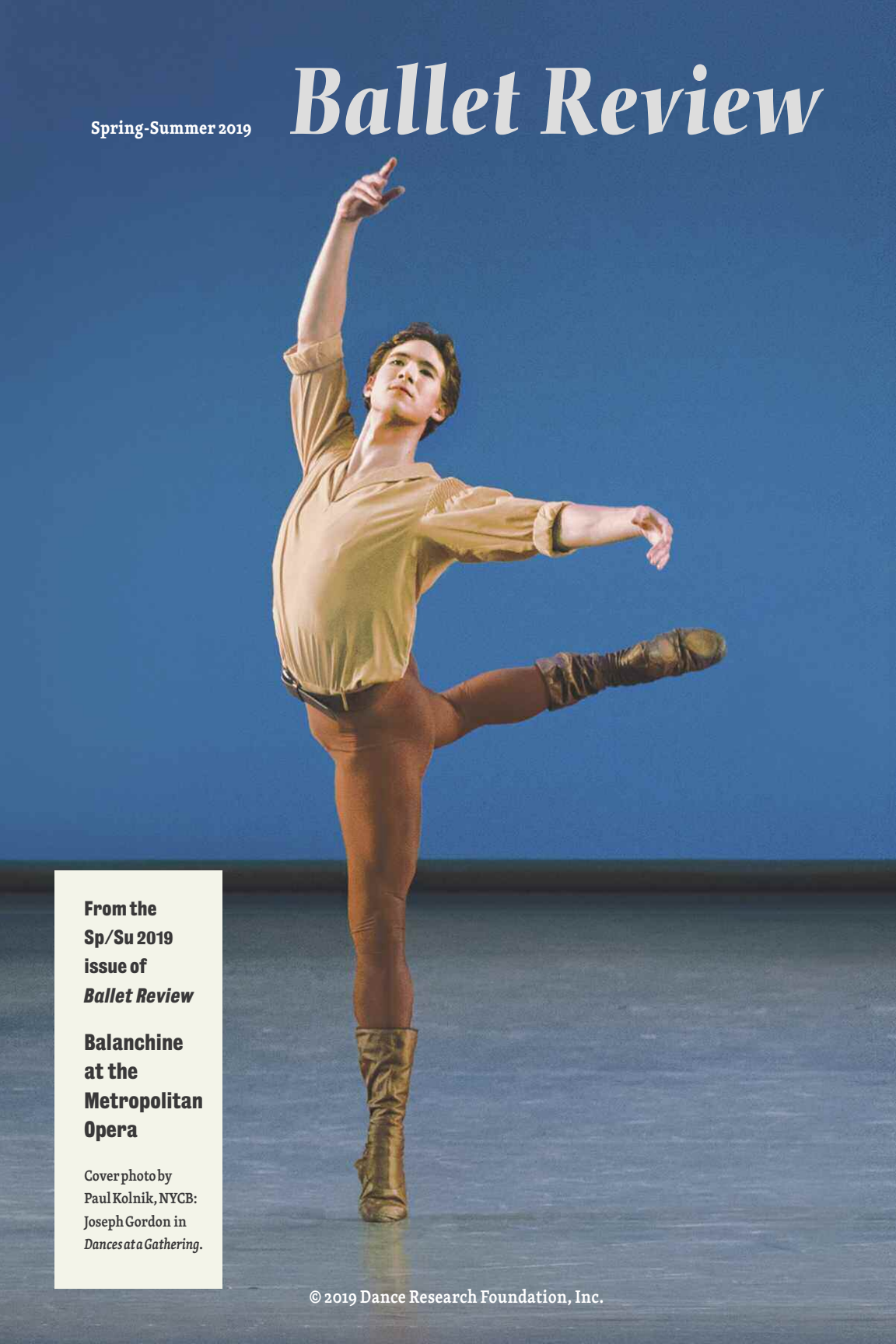

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Balanchine at the Metropolitan Opera

Cover photo by Paul Kolnik, NYCB: Joseph Gordon in *Dances at a Gathering*.

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The Metropolitan Balanchine

Marian Smith

There are plans afoot for him to do "serious" dances for two musical shows this fall; if anybody asks him how he reconciles this hotcha stuff with the Met work, he says cagily, "Each is for different pooblic."

— *The New Yorker*, October 26, 1935[1]

From 1935 to 1938, George Balanchine served as the choreographer at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where he devised dances for at least twenty operas and eight ballets.[2] During the same time, he choreographed his first four shows on Broadway – *Ziegfeld Follies, On Your Toes, Babes in Arms, I Married an Angel*. Thus Balanchine's works appeared onstage in New York City more than nine-hundred times during a three-year span – a remarkable record for a young immigrant artist not yet thirty-five years old.

This highly productive part of Balanchine's career has been overshadowed by his time with Diaghilev and then later at New York City Ballet. The Broadway musicals have received some attention, in the Popular Balanchine Project for example. So have the independent ballets Balanchine staged at the Met, including *Orpheus and Euridice* (with the singers in the pit), *The Card Game*, and, of course, his *Apollon Musagète* in its first American appearance, with Lew Christensen in the title role. But the opera ballets have been virtually ignored, and his tenure at the Met, downplayed as a regrettable eyeblink, hardly worth remembering – an unfortunate case of Balanchine's genius being rejected by the stuffy opera crowd.[3] The connection between the opera productions and the Broadway shows has received almost no comment, something I want to do here by focusing on the Met's 1935 *Aida* and its relationship to *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Babes in Arms*, as well as to other popular entertainment in Manhattan in the late 1930s.

Before getting to *Aida*, we need to consider that in accepting the job at the Met, Balanchine was taking on two formidable endeavors, far greater than the task – daunting enough – of creating multiple opera ballets in short order (something he had already done in Monte Carlo for Diaghilev). Edward Johnson, the Metropolitan Opera's new general manager, wanted him to help revive the flailing Metropolitan Opera. At the same time, Lincoln Kirstein, Balanchine's patron and self-appointed front man, wanted him to help establish a particularly American kind of ballet. That is, Balanchine was given the twin tasks of breathing new life into an old institution, the Met, and creating a newly imagined one, an American ballet.

Johnson, who hired Balanchine, was a well-liked Canadian tenor (aka Eduardo di Giovanni) who had sung at the Met for many years.[4] In May of 1935, he replaced Giulio Gatti-Casazza, who had just sailed for Italy after a now-storied twenty-seven-year reign during which, according to a farewell assessment in the *New York Times*, he had "worked as hard as he could" to "transform the Metropolitan . . . into [a] semblance" of La Scala, and managed to make the Met "in large measure worthy of the chief city of the New World."[5]

With the assistance of Toscanini, Puccini, and Caruso, Gatti-Casazza had achieved much of his success before the First World War. By the time of his retirement, however, and in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929, ticket sales were down. The orchestra and singing forces had fallen from the top rank. The in-house ballet troupe had deteriorated to a "shocking" state, so much so that an outside ballet company had to be hired.[6] As one reporter put it, "It would be difficult to imagine a much more trying situation than that which confronted Edward Johnson when . . . called upon to take charge of the opera or-

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ganization for which he had sung for many years."[7]

Johnson – congenial, optimistic, a man of quiet authority – set to work quickly upon taking the reins in mid-May. By August 7, 1935, he was ready to disclose his plans publicly. In a wide-ranging "fireside chat" with reporters, Johnson laid out his vision for the theater, offering at every turn a sense of freshness and bright renewal. The star system would be curtailed "so as to provide for better, balanced casts instead of most of the money going to one or two singers."[8] The singers' claques would be abolished. The house itself would be freshened by a thorough cleaning, new paint, better lighting, and "comfortably squashy seats." American singers would now be especially welcome, for the Met would aim to become a "clearinghouse for American opera" whereby the Met would share artists and productions with other American companies.[9]

Johnson also spoke bluntly about taking on the Met's growing competition. The Rockettes were drawing large crowds at Radio City, and the number of new musicals on Broadway had increased for the first time in years in the 1934-1935 season.[10] Radio listenership in American households was rising sharply, with twice as many radio sets in 1933 than just four years earlier.[11] Talking pictures had fully come into their own, too, and they could be seen in New York (and other large cities) in conjunction with live stage shows that sometimes included a troupe of dancers whose choreographies might entail, among other styles, both tap and ballet.[12]

Given the growing threat of the public's new entertainment options, it is easy to see why Johnson felt himself in a battle for audiences. "We can't fight [. . . the movies and radio] financially," Johnson told the press. "We must fight them on an artistic basis, and that is what we are going to do."[13] As for Broadway, he added, "The engagement of George Balanchine was a great victory, one that will help us in our rivalry with the theatre."

And how would Balanchine help? By providing a corps de ballet as attractive as Broadway chorus girls: a troupe of "young people endowed with beauty of form and face"[14] who were "capable of competing with any revue in dancing and pulchritude"[15] and "good looking enough to please any tired business man."[16] From the old troupe the Met would keep "the best looking ones, the best dancers and those with the best extremities."[17]

Moreover, "a modern ballet" would be "provided in place of the distressing flannel-clad dancers of old." "No longer will the girls in *Aida* come on in wrinkled legs. Under the direction of George Balanchine, the ballet will have life and interest."[18] "Modern costumes, modern technique, the modern idea of classic dancing prevail."[19] Another reporter summed it up: Balanchine's "appointment means the complete revolution of the ballet into more modern and attractive lines."[20] And his ballet company was to be one of the features that will "turn opera into something Broadway will like and will want to come to."[21]

When Balanchine and his troupe arrived at the Met, so did the twenty-eight-year-old Lincoln Kirstein. Not a dancer or a choreographer, Kirstein, the Harvard-educated son of a rich Boston businessman, was a poet, essayist, art critic, and budding dance historian drawn to archival study. He had fallen in love with the ballet and conceived the notion of establishing in the United States a ballet company in the manner of the great troupes of Europe, but American in disposition. Feverishly pursuing his dream on the other side of the Atlantic, he had found George Balanchine and in 1933 invited him to the United States.

Shortly after Balanchine had come ashore in New York a few months later, it was Kirstein – with the financing and business know-how of another young Harvard graduate, Edward M. M. ("Eddie") Warburg – who oversaw the opening of a ballet school, the "School of American Ballet," and a ballet company, the "American Ballet."[22] When Warburg agreed to become the president of the School of American Ballet, he had never seen a ballet.[23]

It was Kirstein who, starting in 1934, pushed for Balanchine's hiring at the Met so that both

choreographer and company could have a stable home. Balanchine favored the idea. Kirstein's plan was to create ballets for opera (as the Met job obliged Balanchine to do) but to devote the choreographer's main efforts toward making new, stand-alone ballets for presentation on special evenings at the Met, apart from the opera.

What Kirstein meant by "American" ballet was not entirely clear, but he was forced to hone his definition of it when attacked by the *New York Times* dance critic, John Martin, for hiring a Russian for his ballet company. Thus we may discern, if a little fuzzily, how Kirstein conceived of American ballet in 1935, and how he believed Balanchine was going to help conjure it into existence.

Ballet, said Kirstein, was a "400-year-old medium of Italian, French, German, Scandinavian and Slav origin." *American* ballet would be developed on the American continent by Balanchine and other Europeans, who would teach ballet to American-born dancers according to the finest Russian standards, but only as a "temporary necessity." Kirstein also explained what American ballet was *not:* "American ballet is not tap-dancing, though it may use it. It is not the Virginia reel, though country dances can be added to its context."[24]

According to Kirstein's vision, the repertory of new American works would be choreographed mostly by Balanchine, and would include neoclassical and modern ballets, like *Serenade* and *Orpheus and Euridice.*[25] But a strict requirement for Kirstein was that the repertory include ballets on American subjects – for instance, "New England in Colonial times, pre-Civil War days, early Dutch life in Pennsylvania, and the West during its stirring pioneer days."[26] Kirstein especially favored a ballet based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and pushed hard for Balanchine to stage it,[27] possibly to arrangements of music by Stephen Foster.

John Martin, like Kirstein, passionately hoped for the foundation of an American ballet company and style.[28] But he rejected any notion that Balanchine was the right person to lead the way. For him, the *sine qua non* of a truly American ballet company was an actual American at the helm, and when the Met job was about to come open, Martin, in his *New York Times* column, pointedly proposed several promising American choreographers for it: Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, Paul Bachellor, Senia Gluck-Sandor, Agnes de Mille, Ruth Page, and Catherine Littlefield. If the Met is "administered by men with their ears to the ground for significant native developments," he had written hopefully, "it may well be in the position of fostering an important art movement."[29]

So when Balanchine was hired a few months later, Martin was furious. "It is deeply to be regretted," he wrote icily in the *New York Times* published the day after the announcement was made, "that once again American artists have been passed by for a high artistic post for which at least half a dozen of them are eminently fitted. This, too, in an organization which has gone on record as favoring the use of native talent wherever available. Apparently the old tradition has not yet been eradicated that we are a crude pioneer people and must import our culture from the European fountainhead."[30]

Martin acknowledged Balanchine's gifts as an artist, but voiced doubts about the readiness of the young dancers and keen disappointment over the demise of the sort of American Ballet company Kirstein had described in its pre-organizational days – a company that would allow for "the creation of a type of theatrical dance that should develop the full flavor of American life and culture, starting with the technical tradition of the academic ballet as nothing more than a framework." And he offered a dagger-sharp recommendation for Kirstein: "It is that he charge his whole experience to date to profit and loss, congratulate himself on having helped to get better dancing into the opera house, shake hands cordially with Mr. Balanchine, and get to work starting an American ballet."[31]

If Balanchine had an explicit notion of what constituted American ballet at this stage in his career, he did not disclose it. We may infer

from his actions, though, that he lacked enthusiasm for Americana ballets as Kirstein was conceiving them. True, he had choreographed *Alma Mater*[32] (first called *Touchdown*, a sort of revue depicting American college life), but he never acted on Kirstein's frequent exhortations to choreograph a ballet based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Nor was he the least enticed by another of Kirstein's ideas, *Hobo Jungle*.[33]

When a reporter sought him out at the School of American Ballet to ask him about his new job shortly after the Met contract was announced, Balanchine sounded an essentialist theme that he would return to several times over the course of his life: "Americans are very quick to learn, very musical" and the American physique and build well suited for dancing.[34]

A few weeks later Balanchine spoke at greater length on the subject in a *Daily Mirror* story called "A Real American Ballet for the 'Met'": "The American girl makes the ideal dancer because she is better built than girls of other countries. This, I think, is due to the freedom permitted American women and the frequency and [illegible] with which they engage in athletics from young girlhood. Dancing requires hours of arduous work—it is no facile exercise – consequently, the lithe, magnificent body of the American girl stands her in good stead during the difficult training period. Another thing, Americans manifest a remarkable response to rhythm. They eat with it, even smoke cigarettes with it, so the technique of ballet dancing is easily learned by them."[35]

But Balanchine's ideal "American girl" may not necessarily have been what white audiences in America would have expected. In Paris, before ever coming to America, Balanchine had encountered one of the most accomplished and famous American dancers of the day, Josephine Baker.[36] He admired her greatly, and likely choreographed small numbers for her.[37] As the dance historian Beth Genné points out, Balanchine may have been inspired by Baker when he created the classicized jazz (or Africanist) steps for *Apollo* in Paris in 1928.[38] These movements included hip thrust poses, high kicks, and one of Baker's specialties, the split in the air while being held by her partner. Indeed, Genné even posits that Balanchine had found in Josephine Baker his first American muse in a long line of long-legged, lithe female dancers.

And it was not only American women whom Balanchine admired; he is also known to have found great inspiration in Fred Astaire – so much so that Eddie Warburg told a reporter that Astaire might appear at the Met as a soloist in a ballet: "All our ballets at the Metropolitan won't be toe-dancing. We will introduce other forms. Balanchine is experimenting now with tap-dancing. We probably will use it. Take Fred Astaire. He is a great tap dancer, and at the same time a great ballet dancer. Someday, maybe, we will have Astaire as soloist in a ballet at the Metropolitan."[39] In short, one may surmise that for Balanchine in 1935, if there were such a thing as American ballet, it relied on the American body and its ways of moving, not – as Kirstein held at the time – on American subjects, themes, and music.

Balanchine and Kirstein diverged on another matter as well: whether or not Balanchine should work on Broadway. Though publicly supportive of Balanchine's interest in Broadway, Kirstein privately considered it a dalliance that threatened his own lofty plans for the American Ballet company. Shortly after Balanchine's first Broadway show, the *Ziegfeld Follies*, opened in previews in Boston on December 30, 1935, Kirstein even wrote in his diary that "Tchelitev [Pavel Tchelitchew] & myself, Lucia Davidowa [are] all concerting on preventing Bal. from doing another commercial show for Dukelsky or the Shuberts. Not enough time with Tom [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] & Orphée."[40] He also noted that he "hated" Balanchine's collaborator at the *Follies*, the composer Vladimir Dukelsky (better known as Vernon Duke).[41]

It was not only Balanchine, but many of his dancers at the Met as well, whose training had been in classical ballet, but whose careers

had necessarily taken them to the popular stage. Lew Christensen had performed as a Russian character dancer and in a "stunt-filled ballet act," as Debra Sowell has put it, and then in the cast of *The Great Waltz* on Broadway.[42] Gisella Caccialanza, at age twenty-one already a seasoned performer of movie prologues at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles and then at Radio City Music Hall, was dancing five shows a day when Serge Lifar persuaded her to audition for Balanchine's new school.[43] William Dollar and Daphne Vane had also come from Radio City Music Hall.[44] Kathryn Mullowney, too, had danced ballet in several prologues per day – in her case, at the Paramount Theaters on Broadway and in Brooklyn, where to advertise the show she toured the borough standing in arabesque on the hood of a car. ("Of course I was tied on."[45])

Indeed, it is worth noting, as a gauge of the state of ballet spectatorship in the United States in 1935, that some of the Americans in Balanchine's fledgling company – even soloists – had never seen a full program of classical ballet until the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo appeared in New York in 1933.[46] For instance, Annabelle Lyon, who had moved to New York from Memphis to study with Fokine, found it "thrilling to see a real ballet company in a whole evening of ballets."[47]

On December 16, 1935, the much-anticipated opening night of the Met's new season was a grand success. The capacity audience received the performance of *La Traviata* enthusiastically, one critic hailing it as the auspicious beginning of a new American era at the Met: "An almost entire American regime was in evidence for the first time. . . . Edward Johnson . . . headed the organization as general manager, the first American to hold the post during the active season. Two of the principals in the case, Richard Crooks and Lawrence Tibbett, were Americans, and the new ballet corps was American. New lighting and ventilation equipment, too, was American . . . . Indeed, almost everything was American except the opera itself."[48]

Olin Downes in the *New York Times* declared the performance "the most eloquent and artistic interpretation of the familiar work that has been seen here for a number of seasons,"[49] and Winthrop Sargeant in the *Evening Post* praised the "spontaneity that pervaded the production as a whole."[50] Even the ever-on-edge Kirstein admitted in his diary that the ballets had been successful: "After a difficult week of rehearsals, disagreements, costume fittings at the Met taking hours & hours after a row over moving the 2nd gauze for Tannhauser & my being rude to everyone, including I'm afraid M. Johnson the general mgr: after terrible impatience with Defrere, an imbecilic stage mgr., the opera finally opened. The kids danced well enough and looked clearly trained"[51] [punctuation edited].

Detailed accounts of the choreographies of *La Traviata* are not to be found in newspaper accounts, for dance critics were rare in those days, and John Martin of the *New York Times* focused his efforts elsewhere. But journalists did write enough about the new ballet company's first outing to give us some sense of its attainment. Olin Downes said, "Members of the American Ballet, in an ensemble devised by George Balanchine, had more youth and enthusiasm than technical finish."[52]

Pitts Sanborn declared them revelatory of the "infectious enthusiasm of youth," adding that "if their rhythm was not invariably perfect, their spirit was admirable." He reported, further, that the audience "seemed to enjoy the dancing greatly, though there was no lack of applause for the singers also."[53] There was praise for dancers themselves, deemed "likable in appearance and spirited in their dancing."[54] And in Sargeant's estimation the new troupe was better than the old one: "A handling of the ballet interludes by the American Ballet under George Balanchine . . . far transcended anything of the sort that has been seen at the old opera house in many years."[55]

It seemed an auspicious beginning for the American Ballet at the Metropolitan Opera, and Balanchine even told a friend not long

afterward that he "adores the house and thinks of himself as a fixture for years and years, like Petipa at the Mariinsky."[56]

Four days after the season opened, the Met's new *Aida* made its debut, and the reviews of the ballets were, again, largely positive. W. J. Henderson of the *Evening Sun* declared plainly, "The American Ballet demonstrated its worth." He went on to say, "The dance of the priestesses was not entirely harmonious with the scene, but that of the slaves was admirably done by male dancers and the triumphal celebration at the return of Radames, with Daphne Vane and William Dollar as principals, was a brilliant feature in the spectacular finale of the second act."[57]

Julian Seaman of the *Daily Mirror* said that Balanchine "makes the 'Aida' ballets worth seeing"[58] and Leonard Liebling of the *New York American* proclaimed that the ballet was to be "credited with an excellent achievement enthusiastically received by the audience."[59]

Critics were also well-disposed to the so-called "Negro Dance" (*Danza dei piccoli schiavi mori* of act 2, scene 1), devoting particular attention to it. As Liebling explained approvingly, Amneris' entertainment was now furnished "by a group of black youths who indulge in a becomingly savage and lively dance" instead of the "girls dressed as Negro boys furnishing unconvincing entertainment for Amneris" – a custom that had "offended and bored [dance lovers] . . . for years."[60] Another critic declared that these "stalwart dancers . . . represented a considerable change from their petite predecessors of former days;"[61] another said that they "leaped and cavorted in the best Ethiopian manner."[62] And another hailed Balanchine's "substitution of male dancers, nude but for a coating of lampblack, in place of the girls in black cotton tight who usually do the barbaric blackamoor numbers," as "a welcome innovation."[63]

Olin Downes of the *New York Times* built upon the twin themes he had raised in the *Traviata* review, noting dancers' technical shortcomings but praising the choreography: "The best choreographic idea of the evening was the dance of the big black slaves before Amneris's seat of power. The tradition is the little, funny, black ones with cymbals, who dart about like insects. The slaves last night were big fellows from the desert and they danced with the suggestion of a primitive Africanism which made welcome variation from the stereotyped procedure, and belonged believably to the moment. But this is a hard dance, and there is need of perfecting it technically."[64]

In general the critics found the company likeable and the ballets good – albeit with room for improvement – and made a point of noting positive audience reactions. The reviews were one of hopefulness for the ballet. All seemed to be well. However, a different story was unfolding behind the scenes.

Paul Cravath, the powerful chairman of the board of the Metropolitan Opera Association, disliked the American Ballet's performances – "especially the one in 'Aida'" – and in a letter he urged Edward Johnson, only ten days into the new season, to "have a frank talk with Balanchine," presumably to persuade him to take a more traditional approach, and to correct the mistake of devising choreographies that over-emphasized the "acrobatic skill" of certain dancers.[65]

December 26, 1935

Dear Mr. Johnson:

I have not read the comments of musical critics of the performance of the American Ballet at the Metropolitan, but I hear that they are not favorable. I have heard a good deal of adverse criticism among the boxholders and subscribers of the ballet performances, especially the one in 'Aida', which I confess I share. I think the feeling of the subscribers that I have heard talk is that in opera the ballet should adhere pretty closely to tradition, and should err on the side of conservation. The feeling is that the performance of the American Ballet in our operas have been too acrobatic, and have been so managed as to show off the acrobatic skill of certain of the members of the Ballet. If you feel as I do, or rather if you feel like heeding

the rather general adverse comment, why don't you have a frank talk with Balanchine. He must know the classical traditions for ballet in the opera in our repertoire.

Very sincerely yours,
[Paul Cravath][66]

Cravath did not specify how Balanchine had departed from tradition. But in press descriptions and private comments, one may find plausible reasons for the "adverse criticism" from boxholders and subscribers that troubled Cravath.

One may have been the modern tone of a snippet that Balanchine had reused from *Prodigal Son* (1929) – specifically, that in which the men, in pairs (as Debra Sowell describes it): "hold on to each other back-to-back and skitter around with bent knees."[67] (On opening night, having never had the time to rehearse in black face paint, they could not recognize each other, and everyone was forced to scramble around the stage to find his partner.[68])

Another problem was very likely the "Negro Dance" with its "big black slaves" that the critics had praised: one dancer recalled later that audiences were "horrified" that Balanchine had dispensed with the "darling little children" of Amneris' court and instead "put the six tallest men in the ballet and had them blackened."[69] And a patroness made a comment to Edward Johnson about "these Negroes all over the white women."[70] (Did it make you nervous? Johnson asked. "No, it made me jealous," she answered.[71])

Another cause of offense may have been "the practically nude ballet in the processional scene [of act 2, scene 2], . . . an imaginative and atmospheric touch, climaxed by William Dollar and Daphne Vane with as daring a set of steps and postures as has ever astonished and pleased on the stage of the Metropolitan."[72] And yet another was, perhaps, the "snake-hips" dance done in the "Temple Dances" (the *Danza sacra delle Sacerdotesse* of act 1, scene 2) reported in the *New York Daily News* by Danton Walker, a gossip columnist on the Broadway beat.

Perhaps it was the splits, the piggyback rides, or the jumping between each other's legs that he mentions in the same review. Under the title "'Aida' at Opera Wins Cheers, Giggles, Hisses," Walker wrote that "The first 'Aida' of the Metropolitan Opera's New Deal brought forth cheers, applause, laughter and – believe it or not – hisses. Cheers for the new Amneris, Gertrud Wettergren, and applause for those veteran artists. . . . The laughter and hisses were for the American Ballet, which, in its effort to be different, executed some of the most astonishing figures that ever shocked a Met audience. Many disparaging things have been said about Rosina Galli's old-regime ballet, but at any rate Mme. Galli [Gatti-Casazza's wife and the choreographer Balanchine replaced] never introduced snake-hips into the temple dances, had her ballerinas doing splits, or permitted the boys and girls to go piggyback or jump between each other's legs in the victory scene."[73]

Walker didn't say to his readers that the movements he describes were usually associated with African American dancers, most notably, the "snake hips," a dance calling for full-body undulations and a seeming bonelessness, which had been brought to the attention of white audiences by Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker.[74] Yet, as noted above, critics in general approved of the *Aida* ballets (even if they found them "daring"), and reported that audiences had, too.

Danton Walker's story caused consternation at the American Ballet. Kirstein wrote in his diary the day after it appeared that the tabloid press "tried to make the dancers in Aida hiss-provoking, shocking, etc."[75] And the comment about snake hips, in particular, irritated Balanchine, who issued a quick denial in an interview with Dorothy Kilgallen of the *New York Evening Journal*: "Maestro Assails Critics of Hi-di-Hi Ballet at 'Met'[76] / 'Aida' Dance Wiggle Real Ethiop' Style, Says Balanchine." The article read,

"Mr. George Balanchine today criticized the critics, most of whom have been criticized before.

"But Mr. George Balanchine is the daring young man who lifted the Metropolitan Opera ballet out of its petticoats, gave it snake hips, a dash of hi-di-hi and achieved more terpsichorean authenticity than has been mentioned around the Met in many a year.

"He put a reptilian wiggle in the torsos of the 'Aida' chorus until the dowagers couldn't believe their lorgnettes. He staged an orgy in 'Tannhauser' and was heard to remark, 'This scene is in hell and in hell they don't dance a minuet.' . . .

"Mr. Balanchine's ballet kicked the music critics in their aisle seats and sent them hoking to their midnight typewriters with words formerly used only in reviewing Harlem floor shows. It was this which delighted, if also slightly disturbed, Mr. Balanchine today.

"'The critics don't know anything about dancing,' he declared in gentle Russian accents.

"'They are like prima donnas. They think only of the singing, the singing. They do not know one dance from another.'

"THE ETHIOP WAY

"'What they called snake hips in "Aida" is the way Ethiopians danced in those days. Not on the toes, in nightgowns, but with the hips. This I learned from museums, from libraries. This is the correct way. If I has been done differently in the past, then it has been done wrong,' he added.

"It isn't hi-di-hi at all, the dance director insists – it's archaeologically authentic.

"'I can prove it – the snake hips, the tumbling, the whole ballet – from hieroglyphics,' he said."[77]

Three days later Grena Bennett of the *New York American* joined Kilgallen in scoffing at Balanchine's denials, calling his *Aida* "far removed from anything depicted on ancient Egyptian illustrations."[78] Later, Kirstein leapt to Balanchine's defense, declaring that the choreographer had given the priestesses in the Temple Scene belly dances (*not* snake hips), although Kirstein used the French term, "*danses du ventre*." These *danses du ventre*, Kirstein averred, were based strictly on historical sources; namely: "religious sculptures at Sakkarah, at Beni-Hassan, and . . . La Fage's archeological engravings."[79]

What none of them said about the *Aida* choreography, however, was that at the time Balanchine was creating it, he was also working on the *Ziegfeld Follies* on Broadway in close proximity to three prominent African American dancers: Harold and Fayard Nicholas (then aged fourteen and twenty-one), and Josephine Baker. And even though Balanchine was choreographing for Baker, and not the Nicholas Brothers, I would argue that he was very likely inspired and influenced by all three of these stars, whom he was observing at close range in late 1935 as he was setting the *Aida* ballets.[80]

In fact, most of the very moves that Danton Walker described can be identified *specifically* with Josephine Baker and the Nicholas Brothers and their acts: Josephine Baker was known for her near-nudity and her splits. The Nicholas Brothers were known for their acrobatics, their tumbling, their splits and for sliding under each other's legs. And Fayard Nicholas made undulating movements in the *Follies*, full-body undulating being the defining movement of "snake hips" dance.

Why Balanchine would disavow the influence of African American style and ideas in his *Aida* at the Met must remain a matter of speculation. Opportunism and racism on Balanchine's part may account for it: he took ideas from African American dancers and then denied having done so.[81] It may have that he was playing the "hieroglyphics" card in a petulant attempt to beat his detractors at their own highbrow game. His answer about historical references was as offensive as he thought the questions were.[82]

It may be that Balanchine really *had* consulted archival sources, as Diaghilev and some *Ballets Russes* choreographers had done in the preparation of their ballets, although, of course, such research would not have precluded Balanchine's using living African Americans in New York as a source at the same time, as he implied it would.

It may be that Lincoln Kirstein, better attuned to American racist restrictions of the time than Balanchine, a recent immigrant, encouraged him to deny using African American dance as a source for the Met *Aida* choreographies, fearing that Balanchine's job was in danger. For Kirstein had a stake in keeping Balanchine gainfully employed so that the two of them could keep working toward creating an American ballet. In any case, Balanchine had crossed the line at the Met, causing offense by creating a choreography that was racially out of step with what audiences expected.

This transgression in *Aida* is a counterpart to a controversy Balanchine sparked on Broadway only six weeks after *Aida's* premiere with the opening of *Ziegfeld Follies* – a controversy that has been described at length by Beth Genné. Many people were offended by the glamorous number Balanchine choreographed for Josephine Baker in the *Ziegfeld Follies* ("5 A.M.," by Ira Gershwin and Vernon Duke), in which she wore a beautiful golden gown designed by Vincente Minnelli and was adored by four white male dancers in elegant attire.[83] The presentation of a black woman in this favorable light would not have been far-fetched in Paris (as Josephine Baker herself said at the time) but it flopped in New York, where white audiences preferred to see her in exoticized acts like "Isle in the West Indies," another of Josephine Baker's numbers in the same show (this one choreographed by Robert Alton), in which she wore a brief costume decorated with tusks.

Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* found Baker too "refined," comparing her unfavorably to the Nicholas Brothers, who "restore your faith in dusky revelry."[84] And an employee of the Shubert organization (which produced the show), was quoted as saying "She's black, trying to be white, why don't she go on and be her original self like she was in *Shuffle Along*, when she was stickin' her fanny out and looking ugly?"[85] As Maude Russell, an African American dancer and singer, said, "At that time, nobody wanted to see a colored girl being twirled around with four white boys and dressed up like a queen."[86] Thus, just as Balanchine's *Aida* choreography at the Met was too black for white performers, his "5 A.M." Broadway choreography for Josephine Baker was too white for a black performer.

Eventually, Balanchine re-choreographed his Met *Aida* not once but twice, the second time attributing it petulantly to Marius Petipa.[87] Balanchine's revisions to *Aida* included adding children to the "Negro Dance," as tradition had dictated, and eliminating the nearly nude pas de deux in the Procession scene.[88]

But even as Balanchine's company kept performing his *Aida* choreography at the Met in progressively more conservative versions, Balanchine created a riotous parody Egyptian ballet for the new Rodgers and Hart Broadway show *Babes in Arms*, which opened at the Shubert Theater on April 14, 1937. This parody-*Aida* was surely Balanchine's retort to the critics of his Met *Aida* – both the public ones in the press, and the private ones behind the scenes.

Babes in Arms featured an Egyptian Ballet (referred to as such by Balanchine[89]), danced in a show-within-the-show during the song "Johnny One Note," sung by Wynn Murray. One verse of the song is about *Aida*:

> Poor Johnny one-note
> Got in Aida
> Indeed a great chance to be brave
> He took his one note
> Howled like the North Wind
> Brought forth wind
> that made critics rave,
> While Verdi turned round in his grave!
>
> Couldn't hear the flute
> Or the big trombone
> Ev'ry one was mute
> Johnny stood alone.[90]

The number featured the show's lead couple, Alfred Drake and Elenore Tennis, as a High Priest and Priestess, along with various other characters, including eight priestesses. The entire dancing and singing ensemble dressed in pseudo-Egyptian costumes that included

dish-towel headgear and household utensils (under the premise that a group of amateur children were putting on a show on a shoestring budget).

The show's cast includes a Southern, racist showman character who tries to exclude young black characters from his show ("Lee Calhoun's Follies"). The black characters, Ivor and Irving De Quincy, are played by the Nicholas Brothers, whom Balanchine especially requested be brought into the cast after the Boston preview.[91] Their show-stopping choreography at the end of the Egyptian number was staged by Balanchine but based on the Nicholas Brothers' own practice of sliding under and jumping over each other. Here is a description by Constance Valis Hill:

"Balanchine's idea for the so-called Egyptian Ballet was for Fayard to jump over a line of chorus girls and for Harold to slide through the girls' legs. First two girls stood together and hunched over to make a bridge, with Fayard jumping over the backs of the girls and Harold sliding through their legs. Then another girl joined the line, and the brothers repeated the jump and slide; one by one, girls were added until there was a line of eight girls, pressed together and bent over with legs straddled. Fayard timed his jump over the backs of the girls and into a split so that on his recovery, Harold's slide under could be extended through Fayard's legs."[92]

After having jumped over and slid under all eight priestesses at once, the two brothers "exit[ed] in mock-Egyptian style with bodies in profile, arms bent at the elbows and wrists, and heads jutting forward and backward."[93] Fayard Nicholas recalled that Balanchine "'didn't show us anything. He just told us what he thought would be sensational for the number. And it was – the audience went wild.'"[94]

One of the cast members even stated explicitly in an unpublished interview sixty-three years later that this scene was "supposed to be like a scene from the Metropolitan Opera's *Aida*."[95] A critic in 1937, Helen Eager, stated outright that in *Babes in Arms*' "satirical walloping of Aida," Balanchine was taking a "merry revenge" on the critics of his Met ballets.[96]

Perhaps Rodgers and Hart were inspired by Balanchine's troubles at the Met and in response wrote young talented black characters into their new show, along with a racist showman character, and a song about an untalented singer who was appearing in *Aida*. Lorenz Hart was chummy with Balanchine, and when they spent weekends socializing together in the summer of 1936 in Cape Cod, along with "Doc" Bender and Dukelsky, it is possible that Balanchine told backstage tales of the ruckus raised by his *Aida* choreography.[97]

Rodgers and Hart were also well aware of Balanchine's gifts as a satirist. His "Princess Zenobia" ballet – a send-up of *Scheherazade* – was playing to great approbation in their smash-hit *On Your Toes* on Broadway even as *Babes in Arms* was being created.[98] In any case, Rodgers and Hart gave Balanchine the chance to devise a parody choreography of *Aida*, and Balanchine played it to the hilt.

One can imagine that Balanchine was genuinely surprised by the adverse reaction to his *Aida* ballets. After all, he was creating choreography along the lines of what Edward Johnson had asked for. First, it had modern elements, including the quotation from *Prodigal Son* (even though few in the audience likely recognized it as such). Further, its African American-influenced elements may have seemed, to Balanchine, utterly appropriate not only for making opera "something Broadway will like and want to come to,"[99] but also for giving the ballet a truly American style, in keeping with Kirstein's vision.

Although it turned out be too controversial to keep, Balanchine's *Aida* choreography of 1935 deserves recognition as a milestone in the history of representations of race at the Met and an instance of crossing over between the Met and Broadway. Its Broadway counterpart in *Babes in Arms* deserves recognition, too, as the revenge parody that it is.

More important perhaps, I would argue that this choreography found itself at the nexus of

several conflicts. For at the time it was created, old dividing lines were being re-negotiated between European and American sensibilities in American art; between the older generation of Met audiences and the younger one whose teenage years had been lived in the jazz age; between popular culture and self-proclaimed high culture; between uptown and midtown, immigrant and native born, black and white.

Into this turbulent and vibrant climate came a young Russian whose provocative dances for *Aida* touched upon all of these debates, making a bold statement about race, American identity, and generic convention at the nation's most prestigious opera house. The statement proved too bold for the Met. But it ignited a firestorm that illuminates for us a meaningful chapter in the histories of both opera and dance in the twentieth century.

NOTES

I thank George Dorris for ushering me into the world of the Met Archive, and for the highly useful comments he made about an earlier version of this manuscript. Further, I am grateful to the University of Oregon Humanities Center for a residential fellowship supporting this project, John Pennino for help during my several summer trips to the Met Archive, Carolyn Guzski for profitable research tips, and Helena Spencer for countless ideas and inspirations. Finally, I thank Beth Genné for directing me to this topic in the first place.

1. Charles Cook and Russell Mahoney, "Met's Maître," in *The Fun of It: Stories from The Talk of the Town, The New Yorker*, ed. Lillian Ross (New York: Random House, 2001), 94.

2. See the George Balanchine Foundation's chronological title list of Balanchine's works at www.balanchine.org/balanchine/chrontitlelist.jsp?p=1 and George Balanchine, *Choreography by George Balanchine: A Catalogue of Works* (New York: Viking, 1984).

3. Lincoln Kirstein's tendentious and influential account of Balanchine's Met career is given in a chapter entitled "The Age of Iron: 1930-1936," in his book *Blast at Ballet: A Corrective for the American Audience* (New York: Marstin Press, 1938), 16-48. See also Lynn Garafola, "Imperfect Partners," *Opera News* 69, no. 4 (2004): 42-46.

4. Several North American opera singers in the early twentieth century (including Caterina Jarboro/Katherine Yarborough, 1903-1986) took Italian names when performing abroad.

5. Hubert Witherspoon, Gatti-Casazza's immediate successor, died suddenly six weeks into his term. See "The Going of Gatti-Casazza," *New York Times*, March 31, 1934, in which the unnamed writer declares that Gatti-Casazza "turned opera at the Metropolitan from an annual and more or less doubtful piece of jobbery into a continuous and well-considered artistic enterprise."

6. John Martin, *New York Times*, August 18, 1935. On the history of the Metropolitan Opera Ballet up to 1921, see George Dorris, "Dance and the New York Opera War, 1906-1912," *Dance Chronicle* 32, no. 2 (2009): 195-262; "The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, Fresh Starts: Rosina Galli and the Ballets Russes, 1912-1917," *Dance Chronicle* 35, no. 2 (2012): 173-207; "The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, Fresh Starts: The Influence of the Ballets Russes, 1917-1919," *Dance Chronicle* 35, no. 3 (2012): 281-314; and "The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, Fresh Starts: Galli in Charge, 1919-1921," *Dance Chronicle* 36, no. 1 (2013): 77-102.

7. George Schaun, "Modernizing Opera at the Met: Tomorrow, Under Edward Johnson, It Launches a 'Five-Year Plan,'" *Baltimore Sun*, December 15, 1935, Metropolitan Opera Scrapbook (hereafter called "MOS").

8. "New Ballet to Perform at the Met, American Artists Will Take Over Dancing, Johnson Announces," *New York World-Telegram*, August 8, 1935, MOS.

9. Schaun, "Modernizing Opera."

10. Gerald Martin Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 488.

11. Kate Lacey, "Radio in the Great Depression: Promotional Culture, Public Service, and Propaganda," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 24.

12. In the 1930s, *Variety* referred to theaters combining live and film entertainment on the same bill as "combination houses." In rare cases, the live shows were customized to fit a film, as, for instance,

the show accompanying *Top Hat* (1935) at Radio City Music Hall, which featured "a projected backdrop of the film's title designs, a re-creation on stage of the film's ballroom set, dancers in top hats and tails, and an all-male choir with twenty-four members singing the film's signature song, 'The Piccolino.'" *Variety*, September 4, 1935, 17, paraphrased in Mark Glancy and John Sedgwick, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s: A Study Based on the *Variety* Dataset," in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steve Neale (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012), 192-93. Some of the dancers in Balanchine's company at the Met, including Kathryn Mullowney and Gisella Caccialanza, were experienced "combination house" dancers.

13. "Popular Punch for Opera: Sweeping Change in Metropolitan," *New York American*, August 8, 1935, MOS.

14. Pitts Sanborn, *New York World Telegram,* August, 8, 1935, MOS.

15 "Popular Punch."

16. "American Ballet Engaged by Met." *New York Post*, August 8, 1935, MOS.

17. "Popular Punch."

18. Herbert Drake, *Cue* magazine, no date noted in scrapbook, but probably December 1935, MOS.

19. Arthur Voland, "Discarding Time-Worn Policies the Metropolitan Opera Season Opens This Week, Renewing Old Glories and Redoubling Public Interest," *Daily Doings*, week of December 13, 1935, MOS.

20. Henriette Weber, "Met Invites Broadway, Frowns on Highbrows," *New York Evening Journal*, August 8, 1935, MOS.

21. Weber, "Met Invites Broadway."

22. See Edward M. M. Warburg, "Fifty Years Ago: The Beginning of the School of American Ballet," *Playbill*, New York City Ballet, Winter Season 1983-1984, 4-10, and Francis Mason, *I Remember Balanchine* (New York: Doubleday, 1991; reprinted Anchor, 1992), 121-29.

23. Eugene R. Gaddis, *Magician of the Modern: Chick Austin and the Transformation of the Arts in America* (New York, 2000), loc 4484 of 10,545, Knopf e-book.

24. Lincoln Kirstein, *New York Times*, August 25, 1935. Letter is quoted in its entirety in Anatole Chujoy, *The New York City Ballet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 55-57.

25. On Balanchine's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, see James Steichen, *Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). See also James Steichen, "George Balanchine in America: Institutions, Aesthetics, and Economics of the Nonprofit Performing Arts, 1933-54" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014).

26. Ora McCord Wheatcroft, "Music, Stage, and Screen," publication unknown, December 1935 (MOS). Kirstein later spoke with Martha Graham about a Civil War ballet: "She had a very good idea abt. a vocalized accompaniment for a dance on some words from the Declaration of Independence & a flag ceremony done for the Civil War when the battle-scarred regimental flags are returned & no one is left to receive them." Kirstein diary, October 8, 1936, in Lincoln Kirstein, 1907-Papers, (S)*MGZMD 123 Series I, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

27. Gavin Raker, "Choreographing History: Uncle Tom as Modernist Ballet," nanopdf.com, 2003, 110, https://nanopdf.com/download/choreographing-history-uncle-tom-as-modernist ballet_pdf.

28. On further aspects of the clash between Martin and Kirstein, see Andrea Harris, "Chapter One: Modernism and American Ballet," in *Making Ballet American: Modernism Before and After Balanchine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially 25-29.

29. John Martin, *New York Times*, March 17, 1935. He was also careful to point out that three of them (de Mille, Page, and Littlefield) had had experience staging ballets in opera. Kirstein wrote in his diary on March 16, 1935, presumably after reading an early edition of the next day's *New York Times* (or mis-dating his diary entry), "John Martin wrote an article mentioning Balanchine and Novikoff's names as new maître de ballet at the NY Met opera and saying 'No No. We must have an American.' I now consider his interest in ballet as superficial, that he is a chauvinist and as far as I'm concerned an enemy that I cannot make use of." Kirstein diary, March 16, 1935.

30. John Martin, "The Dance: At the Opera," *New York Times*, August 18, 1935, MOS.

31. As Martin Duberman has written, "Lincoln's rejoinder entirely ignored Martin's essential points: that the American Ballet was a risky choice because it was relatively new and inexperienced; that an art originating in an aristocratic culture might not flourish in a democratic one; and that George Balanchine had, thus far at least, seemed uninterested in American themes and American forms of expression in dance. Lincoln avoided those

issues because – in 1935 – no cogent response to them was yet possible." Martin Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 300. As I point out below, however, Balanchine was indeed interested in *African* American forms of expression in dance.

32. *Alma Mater*, with music by Kay Swift (arranged by Morton Gould), costumes by John Held, Jr., book by Warburg. See Warburg's account in Warburg, "Fifty Years Ago," 5-6. One character wore a raccoon coat lent by Warburg himself. Katharine Weber, *The Memory of All That: George Gershwin, Kay Swift, and My Family's Legacy of Infidelities* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011), 197.

33. Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, 266, 288.

34. *New York Herald Tribune,* August 8, 1935, MOS. Balanchine later said, "I like Americans. They have a rhythm, a rhythm of their own. In Russia, the girls were often short and fat and round and all corseted-in. American girls are long and have an easy grace of their own. . . . Big girls with long legs . . . that's what I want. Not small girls with big heads." Robert Maiorano and Valerie Brooks, *Balanchine's Mozartiana: The Making of a Masterpiece* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1985), 71, quoted in Beth Genné, "'Glorifying the American Woman': Josephine Baker and George Balanchine," *Discourses in Dance* 3, no. 1 (2005): 45.

35. "A Real American Ballet for the 'Met,'" *Daily Mirror*, October 20, 1935. On the microfilm of the Met scrapbook, one word of the text is illegible.

36. Exactly where and how they first met is unclear, but it is certain that she invited him to her house in Paris. Genné, "'Glorifying the American Woman,'" 34-37.

37. This according to Lincoln Kirstein. Sally Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," in *Writing Dance in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown,CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 58.

38. Genné, "'Glorifying the American Woman,'" 47-48. Brenda Dixon Gottschild had already noted the "Africanist" influence on *Apollo*; it was Genné who suggests Josephine Baker may have directly inspired this influence. Also, Gottschild points out the problematic nature of the term "jazz dance": "Not only a donor, Balanchine was also the fortunate recipient of a rich, partly Africanist-inspired legacy during his musical comedy years. Furthermore, the term 'jazz dance' functions as a smokescreen in [this case] . . . . [I]t serves to conceal the Africanist presence." Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "Stripping the Emperor," in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 60.

39. "Met's Ballet – Fred Astaire Proposed as Opera Stage Soloist," *New York American*, August 26, 1935. On Balanchine and Astaire, see Beth Genné, *Dance Me a Song – Astaire, Balanchine, Kelly, and the American Film Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 63; 107-11.

40. Kirstein diary, January 1, 1936. Two days later, though, the question arose of Balanchine's doing "another commercial show which he'd agreed to a long time ago. I resent the time wasted away from Tom and Orpheus." Kirstein diary, January 3, 1936. See also Lynn Garafola, "Lincoln Kirstein, Modern Dance, and the Left: The Genesis of an American Ballet," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 23, no. 1 (Summer, 2005): 20-22. She suggests that Kirstein's frustration with Balanchine's interest in Broadway may have led him to start Ballet Caravan. See also James Steichen, "The American Ballet's Caravan," *Dance Research Journal* 47, no. 1 (April 2015), 69-94.

41. See Duberman, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, 280.

42. Debra Sowell, "Christensen Brothers," in International Encyclopedia of Dance, vol. 2, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen and Dance Perspectives Foundation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 160-161; and Debra Sowell, *The Christensen Brothers: An American Dance Epic* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 75.

43. Sowell, *The Christensen Brothers*, 104 and 119-120.

44. Jane Von Bergen, obituary of William Dollar, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 2, 1986, http://articles.philly.com/1986-03-02/news/26082816_1_dancers-ballet-master-george-balanchine.

45. Kathryn Mullowney had crossed the Atlantic for summertime study with Russian dancers in Western Europe, but had never seen a full evening of ballet until she saw the Monte Carlo company in New York. Kathryn Mullowney, interview by Victoria Huckenpahler, 1976, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

46. On ballet training in the United States before Balanchine, see Jessica Zeller, *Shapes of American Ballet: Teachers and Training Before Balanchine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

47 Lyon goes on to say, "And finally they did a whole night of Fokine's ballets – ballets that we knew. And we went to see them. The next day we all came back to class and criticized them because, of course, they hadn't done them correctly!" interview with Annabelle Lyon, interview by Elizabeth Kendall, 1976, *MGZMT 3-1861, 35, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

48. Unidentified clipping in Met scrapbook (December 1935), which asserts that Johnson was Canadian-born but had become a US citizen. According to Johnson's obituary in the *New York Times*, he never relinquished his Canadian citizenship. (The obituary also reports that he was attending a ballet when he died.) "Edward Johnson of 'Met' Is Dead, *New York Times*, April 21, 1959.

49. Olin Downes, "'Traviata' Hailed for Its Artistry," *New York Times*, December 17, 1935.

50. Winthrop Sargeant, "Metropolitan Season Opens with 'Traviata,'" *Evening Post*, December 17, 1935, MOS.

51. Kirstein diary, December 17, 1935. Kirstein is referring to Desire Defrere (1888-1964), the baritone and stage director.

52. Downes, "'Traviata' Hailed for Its Artistry."

53. *New York World-Telegram*, December 17, 1935, MOS. The lead roles were sung by Lucrezia Bori, Richard Crooks, and Lawrence Tibbett.

54. *New York Herald-Tribune*, December 17, 1935, MOS.

55. Sargeant, "Metropolitan Season Opens with 'Traviata.'"

56. Kirstein heard this from Pavel Tchelitchew. Kirstein diary, December 22, 1935.

57. W. J. Henderson, "Three Debuts in Two Operas," *Evening Sun*, December 21, 1935, MOS. He misspells "Vane" as "Vani."

58. Julian Seaman, "Music," *New York Daily Mirror*, December 21, 1935 (MOS).

59. Leonard Liebling, "Opera Matinee Has Notable Cast in 'Lohengrin'–'Aida' Impressions," *New York American*, December 22, 1935, MOS. He had also written in a review published one day earlier that "one of the outstanding features of the evening was the ballet. The temple dances, while not exactly anciently that ritual, had atmosphere and vitality." Leonard Liebling, "'Aida' Presented at Evening Performance," *New York American*, December 21, 1935 (MOS). Favorable comments were also offered by Henriette Weber: "There were new costumes and a new slant to the ballet, which won outbursts of approval for Mr. Balanchine's leaping dancers, with a special hand for William Dollar and Daphne Vane in the 'victory dance.'" "Music: Debut at 'Met' of Wettergren," *Evening Journal*, December 21, 1935, MOS.

60. Liebling, "'Aida' Presented at Evening Performance."

61. Francis D. Perkins, "Aida Returns to Metropolitan with 2 Debuts," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 22, 1935, MOS.

62. Grena Bennett, *New York American*, January 3, 1936, MOS.

63. Danton Walker, *New York Daily News*, "'Aida' at Opera Wins Cheers, Giggles, Hisses," December 21, 1935, MOS.

64. Olin Downes, "First 'Aida' Given with New Singers," *New York Times*, December 21, 1935.

65. The "frank talk" may have been the one that Johnson initiated with Warburg, probably on December 27. After the evening performance, Kirstein wrote in his diary, December 27, 1935: "Johnson spoke to Warburg abt. the dances . . . . Hard for Johnson and his board of directors on his neck all the time."

66. Correspondence file of Paul Cravath, Metropolitan Opera archives.

67. Sowell, *The Christensen Brothers*, 110.

68. Interview with the Christensens conducted by Francis Mason, Donald McDonagh, and Don Daniels, spring 1984, transcript, San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum, San Francisco, California. Quoted in Sowell, *The Christensen Brothers*, 110.

69. Ruby Asquith Christensen in KQED interview, quoted in Sowell, *The Christensen Brothers*, 110. According to an entry in Kirstein's diary, both white men in black body/face paint and black men partook in the ballet; the latter may have been extras in the procession. "'Aida': Daphne Vane & Bill Dollar soloist, nearly nude, danced O.K. The Metropolitan's preposterous mis-en-scene. The horrible costumes on the supers. The files of Roman centurions & broken-down halberdiers. Madness & freakishness of the backstage which is elixir to me. The negro-boys (ours) in contrast to the *real* negro 'slaves': latter standing in the four basins – only water we are given, trying to wash the makeup off." Kirstein diary, December 20, 1935.

70. Kirstein diary, December 22, 1935. I am surmising that the patroness was referring to the

"Negro Dance." But she may have been referring to the act 2, scene 2 Procession and "Victory Dance." See also Don McDonagh, *George Balanchine* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 72.

71. Backstage, the supers in *Aida* were getting an eyeful, too, according to Kirstein's diary. "New clothes-tub to wash the black paint off . . . Cocks emerging from the shadows & Doug Coudy washing Daphne Vane off with the supers changing for the next act being 'horrified.'" January 2, 1936.

72. Liebling, "Opera Matinee Has Notable Cast,"

73. Walker, "'Aida' at Opera Wins Cheers, Giggles, Hisses."

74. See the 1930 film short *Crazy Horse*, featuring Earl "Snake Hips" Tucker (1905-1937).

75. Kirstein diary, December 22, 1935.

76. The term "Hi-di-hi" is from the refrain of Cab Calloway's popular song, "Minnie the Moocher."

77. Dorothy Kilgallen, *New York Evening Journal*, December 30, 1935, MOS.

78. Jan 3, 1936. My emphasis. Henriette Weber of the *New York Evening Journal* objected to Balanchine's assertion that music critics knew nothing of ballet, and reiterated her support for his *Tannhäuser* choreography: "Although we music critics, according to Mr. Balanchine, know nothing about the ballet, it must be set down in this column as was the case after the first 'Tannhäuser,' that in this opera the Metropolitan's new ballet-master has brought out the purposes of the composer so well that for the first time he is stamping the ballet part of an opera with its true significance. His rioting dancers in the Bacchanal are a vast improvement over the massively-robed sirens and what-not of the former ballet." Henriette Weber, *New York Evening Journal*, early January, 1936, MOS.

79. Kirstein, *Blast at Ballet*, 30.

80. Kirstein Diary, November 30, 1935.

As Sally Banes has shown, Balanchine, as a young man in Russia, and then in Western Europe and England, had found African-American performers particularly compelling, and his choreographies reflected his interest in their art: "Some of Balanchine's 'anticlassical' innovations were created simply by injecting African-American elements into the classical vocabulary. These elements include characteristic positions of the arms and hands, for instance the arms held akimbo and 'jazz hands' – palms presented, with the wrists flexed. They also appear in frequent pelvic thrusts, crouches, bent legs, flexed ankles, and flat feet, and in rhythmic features like syncopation (suspended beats or freezes). (Obviously such elements as bent legs or suspended beats, per se, do not constitute African-isms. However, the more these elements appear in clusters, the more they resemble African-American dancing.)" Sally Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance" [1993], in *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 63.

Further, Elizabeth Kendall points out, "Balanchine's love for tapdancing shaped his choreographic style in the most fundamental way, generating a consistent emphasis on multiple, complex steps and intricate, syncopated rhythms, with a relatively understated port de bras that at the same time allowed for a flexible torso." Banes, "Balanchine and Black Dance," 55.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild, in another canonic study, points out that "Africanist" features in Balanchine's ballets (including, among many others, in *The Four Temperaments*, 1946; *Rubies* in *Jewels*, 1967; and *Symphony in Three Movements*, 1972) were not simply occasional, decorative touches, but deep components of style and structure that were "assigned to soloists and principals in serious ballets, thus assuring them integral significance in his work." Gottschild, "Stripping the Emperor," 71, 78.

81. Five years later, by contrast, Balanchine did openly acknowledge his admiration for black dancers in Katherine Dunham's company. "No one else can do certain hanging, fluent, smooth jumps" the way the men did; "no women trained in classical ballet hold their arms as beautifully" as these men; "no women trained in classic ballet hold their arms as beautifully" as the women in Dunham's company. He also acknowledged his debt (albeit in a roundabout way) to the style and ideas of black dancers in *Cabin in the Sky*, who were performing the roles of black characters. "'What is the use,' he asked, 'of inventing a series which are a white man's idea of a Negro's walk or stance or slouch? I only needed to indicate a disposition of dancers on the stage. The rest almost improvised itself.'" That is, the dancers contributed significantly to creating it. *Dance Magazine*, November 1940, 11. For Brenda Dixon Gottschild's commentary on these remarks, see Gottschild, "Stripping the Emperor," 69-70.

82. Opera highbrows and a snooty dowager of the mid-1930s are lampooned in the Marx Broth-

ers' *A Night at the Opera*, which opened on November 15, 1935, only a month before Balanchine's first Met opera-ballets appeared in *La Traviata* on December 16.

83. Genné, "'Glorifying the American Woman,'" 31-32; and Genné, *Dance Me a Song*, 78-84.

84. Brooks Atkinson, "The Play: Fannie Bryce in the 1936 Edition of the 'Follies' Under Shubert Management," *New York Times*, January 31, 1936.

85. Maude Russell, quoting a comment made to her; see Genné, "'Glorifying the American Woman,'" 55, note 25.

86. Maude Russell, quoted in Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1993), 205, quoted by Genné, "'Glorifying the American Woman,'" 44.

87. H. Howard Taubman, "Balanchine Out of Opera; Ballet Will Go with Him. Master of Troupe Criticizes Metropolitan's Standards – Says Dowagers Did Not Like His Dances as They Were 'Too Good,'" *New York Times*, April 13, 1938.

88. Children returned to the act 2, scene 1 ballet ("*La Danza dei piccoli schiavi mori*") in the 1936-1937 season, according to the *New York Times*: "There were some changes in the ballet, notably the recruiting of a group of young boys and girls in their early teens, some perhaps younger, in the dance of Amneris' little slaves. The youngsters moved vigorously. And they added a light touch when they backed off after their dance, and in their bewilderment barged into a wall instead of the wing. The audience laughed as the dancers scurried around to the exit." H. T. [Howard Taubman], "'Aida' Presented at Metropolitan," *New York Times*, January 1, 1937.

After the December 2, 1937, premiere of *Aida* for the 1937-1938 season, Oscar Thompson reported, "Newly elaborate divertissements by the American ballet represented some improvement over those of last year, particularly that of the temple. Daphne Vane danced a solo prettily in the triumph scene. Little Nubians succeeded the dusky athletes of Amneris's outdoor boudoir and this, too, was a change for the better." "'Aida' and a New Baritone," *New York Sun*, posted on the Metropolitan Opera Archives website, no publication date [probably December 3, 1937], http://69.18.170.204/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/fullcit.w?CID=122030&limit=5000&xBranch=ALL&xsdate=&xedate=&theterm=193738&x=0&xhomepath=http://69.18.170.204/archives/&xhome=http://69.18.170.204/archives/bibpro.htm.

89. Constance Valis Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123.

90. "Johnny One Note lyrics," Soundtrack Lyrics, 1999, accessed January 8, 2019, www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/babesinarms/johnnyonenote.htm.

91. The Nicholas Brothers took over the roles of the DeQuincy brothers from Kenneth Wilkins and LeRoy James, who remained in the cast in other roles.

92. Hill, *Brotherhood*, 123.

93. Hill, *Brotherhood*, 124.

94. Hill, *Brotherhood*, 123. In the A&E *Biography* documentary on the Nicholas Brothers, a few seconds of Viola Harden Nicholas' home movie of the "Egyptian Ballet" can be seen. It shows Fayard jumping over several hunched-up characters in Egyptian costumes and then triumphantly beating his chest, Harold then sliding under Fayard's legs, and the two Nicholas brothers exiting in "mock-Egyptian" style. Chris Bould and Michael Martin, *Biography – The Nicholas Brothers* (A&E Home Video, 2000), VHS.

95. Constance Valis Hill, interview with Marjorie Jane, Popular Balanchine – *Babes in Arms*, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, *MGZMD 146, box 14, p. 11. www.balanchine.org/balanchine/03/popularbal_guide_to_dossiers.html.

96. Helen Eager, *Boston Traveler,* April 8, 1937, MOS. Eager made this observation after attending the Boston preview in March 1937, before the Nicholas brothers joined the show. Some photographs (taken in Boston) of "Lee Calhoun's Follies," with characters in Egyptian costumes (presumably from "Johnny One-Note," or what Balanchine called the "Egyptian Ballet") may be seen in Popular Balanchine – *Babes in Arms*, Jerome Robbins Dance Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, *MGZMD 146, box 14.

97. Vernon Duke [Vladimir Dukelsky], *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), 369; and Gary Marmorstein, *A Ship Without a Sail: The Life of Lorenz Hart* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 283.

98. On satire in the "Princess Zenobia" ballet, see James Steichen, "Balanchine's 'Bach Ballet' and the Dances of Rodgers and Hart's *On Your Toes*," *Journal of Musicology* 35, no. 2 (2018): 273-281.

99. Weber, "Met Invites Broadway."