



## A passionate love letter re-opened

Ismene Brown

22 July 2006 • 12:01am



### **Balanchine's Don Quixote was a declaration of desire for his exquisite muse - and now, she's restaging it. Ismene Brown meets her**

'It was more than just 'I love you',' says Suzanne Farrell, America's nonpareil ballerina, the love and inspiration of 20th-century ballet's greatest choreographer.

"When people ask me to explain about George Balanchine and myself, I can't put it into words. As Mr B said, 'You don't ask a rose to explain itself.' Some things are unexplainable. Perhaps if you analysed it, you would destroy it."

On her 15th birthday, this ballet-crazy Cincinnati girl auditioned in New York for Balanchine, the world-famous choreographer-director 41 years her senior. He fell in love with her, making her a legend of the century's stage, and divorced his crippled ex-ballerina wife in the hope of making his young muse the fifth Mrs B.

But instead she married a boy of her age, and the raging choreographer threw them out.

So far, so tabloid. But this is the story out of which grew Balanchine's *Don Quixote*, the ballet that Suzanne Farrell's company will perform at the Edinburgh International Festival this summer, and the ballet in which the ageing Balanchine personally enacted his adoration for her.

When it first appeared, in 1965, *Don Quixote* had all the things that the Russian émigré, groomed at Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, had taught America not to want from a ballet - story, drama, three acts, programme music of no great moment. Worst of all, Balanchine danced the deluded old knight himself, and when the ballet began with young Farrell washing his feet and drying them with her hair, most of the nation's dance-lovers squirmed.

As the knight's hallucinations finally drove him so insane that he crawled into a cage to die, many reviewers decided that it was an aberration caused by infatuation.

Others, such as the legendary critic Edwin Denby, were fascinated: "Man's inhumanity to man is one of the two forces at conflict in the ballet. The other is man's goodwill to man," Denby wrote, also noting the production's novel and unorthodox épaulements, marvellous feet, and miraculous inventions for the many soloists.

"Mr B told me it was a ballet he'd wanted to do a long time, and hadn't found the right person to do it with," Farrell says, toying with a breakfast bagel. "He'd done it as a child in Russia. So he was, I think, paying respect to his roots. But I think people were just confused - they felt he'd contradicted himself."

Forty years after the event, Farrell at 60 retains her Jean Shrimpton beauty and wears her long hair loose, like the girl in the 1960s pictures. She is soberly dressed, almost nun-like. Her Catholicism has remained strong throughout her life. It stopped her from sleeping with Balanchine, and it probably accounts for her still being alive.

There were many casualties in the Balanchine-Farrell love affair, not least his polio-stricken wife, the once-glorious ballerina Tanaquil LeClercq, and Farrell's husband Paul Mejia whose promising career was killed off by Balanchine's jealousy.

"It was all overwhelming. I was so young. By the time I got married and left the company I was 23 and felt ancient. And the world was different then. It was before Vietnam, Woodstock - the Sixties were very proper then. It was only on stage that everything made sense."

She came close to suicide. "I was wretched. Because the two people I loved the most were at odds with each other. I was really... lost. I was desperate. I never thought I'd be the other woman. Fortunately I had my religion. I always go to church, and I would pray to God to send me in the right direction."

She speaks as if it were yesterday. Balanchine died in 1983, she and Mejia divorced only in 1997. Had she feared that it would be painful to revive *Don Quixote*, which has never been performed since her day?

"I thought it might. But it didn't. Because that story doesn't exist in the ballet any more. I suppose at the time it was difficult to separate our story from the ballet story."

If you watch Farrell on tapes among the other New York ballerinas, you see this tall, luscious girl's amazing shape-shifting quality. In *Meditation* she's an illusory sylph, in *Tzigane* a dangerous, bendy-bodied Carmen, in *Diamonds* she's the New World's classical ballerina.

Her range was vast, vaster than Fonteyn's, with whom alone she can compare in her ability to dissolve her qualities into the choreography of a genius.

She recalls a conversation between them: "He said, 'If I weren't a choreographer you wouldn't look at me twice.' And I said, 'If I weren't a ballerina you wouldn't look at me twice.'"

Why, I ask her, did Balanchine single her out? "I now think it might have been that my body reacted to music with the same understanding that he had.

"When I'm teaching a ballet to new people, I'll say, do you hear that underlying theme that Mr B really is listening to, and not the overriding one? And they'll say yes, but I don't always see it in the way they respond in their body to the music."

Farrell was technically in a new league. "She is fast, alert and flexible," said Balanchine succinctly about her.

She was also so in control of her sense of equilibrium and so eager to explore this that she could be, as critic Arlene Croce described her, "always off-balance, and always secure". Her ability to go into vertical dives on pointe, then reverse gravity-defyingly backwards and upwards in a 180-degree twist, hastened an evolution of off-balance ballet that even William Forsythe never bettered.

"A lot of dancers don't want to move, they just want to pose," she says. "I'm not a poser," Farrell forbids her dancers to watch her videos.

Heated argument rumbles on that it is Farrell, not her erstwhile partner Peter Martins, who is closer to Balanchine's soul and should be running New York City Ballet.

I ask her, but she will have none of this subject. "I don't go to the ballet in New York. I live in Washington." There the Kennedy Centre (under former Royal Opera House chief Michael Kaiser) funds her teaching programme and resident company, which as yet is handicapped by being only part-time.

Dancers from the National Ballet of Canada will swell the numbers in Edinburgh, and Scotland's children can audition for a scholarship to her Washington dance course, and a part in *Don Quixote*.

"Mr B loved putting children in ballets, I think to remind him that as we get older, even if life teaches us to put up barriers so as to be less vulnerable, we have to continue to have stars in our eyes. Vulnerability is a compelling emotion to observe on stage.

Vulnerability is where spontaneity and creativity come from."

- The Suzanne Farrell Ballet performs Balanchine's 'Don Quixote', Edinburgh Playhouse (0870 606 3424), August 26-29