

Suzanne Farrell (1945 -)

by *Elizabeth Kendall*

Suzanne Farrell was a leading ballerina of the [New York City Ballet](#) in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s—a golden age for dance—and the last muse of the 20th century’s greatest ballet choreographer, [George Balanchine](#). She was a catalyst for two final bursts of creativity in Balanchine’s life, and she inspired other prominent choreographers as well, among them [Jerome Robbins](#) and Maurice Béjart. By the time she retired from the stage in 1989, she had amassed a repertory consisting of an unprecedented number of ballets—more than 100—a third of which were created on her. She had given the term “ballerina” an enhanced, and widely visible, contemporary meaning and a definitively American face. She had thrilled audiences with the fearlessness, gravity, dignity, daring, and seemingly private spirituality of her dancing, and liberated several generations of young dancers to try for a hitherto unimagined freedom on the stage.

“She wasn’t emoting onstage, or ‘acting,’” remembered a younger NYCB soloist, Zippora Karz. “She put herself in a place of complete vulnerability, and allowed herself a direct, spontaneous reaction to the alignment of the choreography, the music, and her own (trained) body. There’s no formula for creating that kind of magic” (Kendall, 2011). After her 1989 retirement from the stage, Farrell did not leave the profession, but instead found practical and lasting ways to transmit her dance experience and beliefs on a national and international scale, first and foremost as director of the Kennedy Center’s only resident ballet company, which she created, the Suzanne Farrell Ballet.

Suzanne Farrell was born Roberta Sue Ficker on August 16, 1945, in the Cincinnati suburb of Mt. Healthy, Ohio. Her young parents, Donna von Holle (later Holly) and Robert Ficker, an official in a meat-packing company, divorced when she was ten. She grew up, with her mother, grandmother, and two older sisters, Donna and Beverly, in a household of women. Encouraged,

like her sisters, to study the arts, she became both a baton twirler and a ballet student of Marian La Cour at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. At eleven, after seeing the New York City Ballet perform in Bloomington, Indiana, she co-created, with a friend, a small amateur organization which she named the New York City Ballet Juniors. In 1960, after a national ballet scholarship program was instituted by the Ford Foundation and Balanchine’s [School of American Ballet](#), its representative, the NYCB ballerina Diana Adams, visited Cincinnati and offered the teenager mild encouragement. As a result, fourteen-year-old Suzi Ficker, with her mother and two sisters, sold their household furniture and moved to New York. Balanchine himself auditioned her for the School on her fifteenth birthday, and offered her a scholarship.

After a year studying with SAB’s mostly Russian teachers, Ficker, now sixteen, entered the New York City Ballet in fall, 1961. She used the occasion to find a new name, via the telephone book: Suzanne Farrell. Singled out soon after by Balanchine, she was cast in small roles and told to “watch” (and learn) big ones, notably Queen Titania in his 1962 *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (which she later danced in the filmed version of 1966). In 1965 she originated her first new Balanchine ballet, a pas de deux, *Meditation*, which he made on her and NYCB principal dancer Jacques D’Amboise, thereafter a frequent partner. It was uncharacteristically romantic and intimate, a fact that signaled Farrell’s new importance in Balanchine’s creative life, and also reinforced the idea among critics and audiences that his ballets could be viewed as a diary-like account of his own emotions, enriched by multiple associations from within his and ballet’s past.

Over the next six years, Farrell mastered 28 already existing roles from across the NYCB repertory, many of which—including Balanchine masterpieces like *Apollo*, *Concerto Barocco*, and

Symphony in C—she and Balanchine reworked and rescaled to fit her particular gifts. Balanchine also built many new ballets around her. In 1965, he created an original three-act version of an older Russian ballet, *Don Quixote*, casting Farrell as Dulcinea and sometimes appearing onstage himself sometimes as the Don. It offered new challenges to Farrell’s ballet technique and dance acting. “In the course of these rehearsals,” Farrell later wrote in her autobiography, *Holding On to the Air*, “we first developed what came to be called my ‘off-balance’ movement... When I did a high kick or fast inside turn I would put so much energy into it that my recovery was not always perfectly ‘on-balance’...Balanchine became intrigued watching my various recovery techniques” (109). This phase of their partnership culminated in Balanchine’s 1967 *Diamonds*, the last part of the evening-length triptych *Jewels*, and his ultimate homage, via Farrell and her partner Peter Martins, to the traditional regal figure of the ballerina. But the intensity and indefinite status of his and Farrell’s creative partnership—Balanchine was still married to former ballerina Tanaquil LeClerq—overwhelmed the twenty-four-year-old ballerina. In spring, 1969, Farrell married Paul Meija, a young member of the company, and left the New York City Ballet. Both young dancers found a new home in Maurice Béjart’s Brussels-based Ballet du XXe Siecle.

In Brussels, Farrell tried out a new style of dance drama: explicit, bold, self-consciously dramatic. Béjart, then in his forties, made eleven original ballets on his American ballerina, including *Fleurs de Mal*, *Ah Vous Dirais-Je Maman*, and *Il Triomphe*, before Farrell reconciled with Balanchine and returned to the New York City Ballet in January of 1975. A new, more mature dancer confronted the American audience, “a Farrell who dances with a new grace of deportment and sensitivity of phrasing” (Croce, 1975). Farrell now assumed her place at the center of Balanchine’s last large-scale creative burst, which included such

broad, full-company spectacles as *Union Jack* and *Vienna Waltzes*, as well as multiple smaller-scale works for the unprecedentedly elaborate festivals honoring composers Ravel (1975), Tchaikovsky (1981), and Stravinsky (1982). Balanchine’s full-blown choreographic career culminated in a last major one-act ballet, the 1981 *Mozartiana*, named after its Tchaikovsky-Mozart score, which he created for Farrell and Ib Anderson: a spare, haunted revisiting, in 18th century dress, of many of his lifelong choreographic tropes: the ballerina, her cavalier and her corps de ballet, together with an atypical figure, the master of ceremonies, seemingly orchestrating the onstage action.

After Balanchine died in 1983, Farrell continued her stage career, serving as muse for Jerome Robbins, Helgi Tomasson, and Peter Martins (1946 -), among others. In her last years of performing she was plagued by a hip injury, but after a successful operation in 1989 she returned to the stage several times, dancing her signature role in the white-on-mirrors final act of *Vienna Waltzes*, leading the white-gowned, black-tuxedoed New York City Ballet in its full strength.

Over many summers, Farrell and Meija have directed a small-scale intensive dance course on the island they own in the Adirondacks. After her retirement, Farrell expanded her teaching activities to include intensive ballet workshops for aspiring dancers at Washington D.C.’s Kennedy Center. She also began a formal career as a repetiteur for the George Balanchine Trust (the organization founded after his death by the heirs to his ballets). Her first task was the symbolically important one of setting Balanchine’s *Scotch Symphony* on Balanchine’s former home company, the Kirov Mariinsky Ballet of St. Petersburg, Russia—one of the first two Balanchine ballets acquired by that company. She has since set Balanchine ballets on ballet companies all over the world, at home and abroad. In 2000 she joined the faculty of the University of Florida, Tallahassee, where she

remains today as the Francis Eppes Professor of Dance. In 2001, she created, from the Kennedy Center dance workshops, a small resident company, the Suzanne Farrell Ballet, which in 2011 celebrated its 10th anniversary with performances in eleven theaters around the country, including in Washington D.C. and New York. "Among Washington's cultural lights, the modest Suzanne Farrell Ballet is undeniably one of the classiest," wrote Sarah Kaufman in the *Washington Post* in November, 2010. "Farrell schools her dancers in the kind of understated glamour, alluring reserve and attention to detail that is no longer much in fashion but which can work a slow, captivating spell on an audience."

Farrell has won many artistic and academic awards, the highlights of which are the 2003 National Medal of the Arts and the 2005 Capezio Award. Her autobiography, *Holding On to the Air*, was published in 1990. A documentary about her career, "*Suzanne Farrell: Elusive Muse*," received an Academy Award nomination in 1997 for Best Documentary Film.

NOTE: A primary source for this essay was an interview with Suzanne Farrell by Elizabeth Kendall, Sept. 28, 2011.

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

Elizabeth Kendall is a New York-based dance and culture critic and author of four books: *Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art-Dance*; *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930's*, and two memoirs, *American Daughter* and *Autobiography of a Wardrobe*. She is at work on *Balanchine and the Lost Muse*, about George Balanchine's youth in Petersburg/Petrograd, Russia 1904-24, slated for spring 1913, from Oxford University Press. She is a tenured Associate Professor at Eugene Lang College of

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