
Ballet, Ballroom & the Madame



New York is a microcosm of culture. You can find any musical or artistic performance in New York, and you can find all of the personalities as well.

Looking through the taxi window, I saw the rain beat steadily down on the pavement, forming small glass mirrors which reflected the many lights of the Opera Theater and formed a grand mosaic in the plaza, shining in the wet and cold evening. Paying my fare, I hurriedly raced across the patio, past the fountain, shattering the many small water-mirrors as I went my way. Racing to the box-office I asked,

“Do you have any turn-ins for the ballet?”

“Yes, you are lucky. I have one seat just behind orchestra center.”

“Good, I will take it.”

This was the late ‘80s at the Metropolitan Opera in the center of Lincoln center, just north of Broadway and 60th in New York City, and I had seen the ballet discussed previously in the Times. The ballet was *Giselle*, one of the so-called “White Ballets” (after the nature of the ballerinas costumes) so cherished by lovers of the art. *Giselle* was a favorite of the Balanchine ballets, and is a must-see if you are fortunate enough.

Panting from the outdoor exertion, I quickly found my seat, accompanied by disapproving stares, and plumped down, wet and cold, in-between two monstrous matrons. On the left was a sable mink, and on the right a crystal fox. Both of these exquisite ladies were well fortified against the cold even without the heavy coats (which are supposed to be checked anyway), but to me they were perfect for the time. Warm and snugly, I settled into my position between the two enormous bears, as we waited through the obligatory initial presentations. Since I was so comfortable, I soon fell asleep, occasionally stirred into consciousness by a sharp jab to the ribs.

Just then the girl in front of me suddenly broke into sobs.

“Are you all right,” I asked?

“No – look. Don’t you see who just appeared?”

Amazingly, the lead dancer, playing the part of Albrecht, moved across the stage in gravity defying arcs, which could only have been achieved by Nureyev. When I thought about it, *Giselle* is more of a swan song than even *Swan Lake*. In fact, *Giselle* is often chosen by retiring ballerinas for their final performances. And there he was, in a surprise visit, enabled, no doubt by his soon departure (in 1993, assisted by the AIDS scourge), but welcomed by the appreciative audience.

After that magnificent performance, I wrestled myself loose from the grip of the iron maidens, and headed for the upper balcony during intermission to take in the whole Opera Theater scene.

I really like ballet, but can only handle so much of it. After a while, I seem to tire of the incessant jumps and hovers and presentations. I suppose that is the result of Ballroom training. Ballet is all *up, up, up*, while Ballroom is *down and out*. You can easily see this if you ever try to partner with a ballet trained dancer. First, she will get creepy feelings with you near her (they are trained to dance alone), and the first step always seems to be with a straight leg. They just cannot get the Ballroom technique of smooth lateral movement.



Baryshnikov

You can really see this if you watch ballet trained dancers try a Viennese Waltz. Their attempts at moving in the waltz style are almost laughable. Ballet dancers all jump around when the waltz is a smooth and progressive movement. The fact is, however, ballet training is the very best a ballroom dancer can receive, as long as he can make the transition from *up* to *out*.

After reflecting on this a moment, I turned and slowly walked down the red carpeted balcony steps, brushing against a small figure in a denim outfit passing by.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

“It is OK.”

That was when I realized it was Baryshnikov, here to see his old friend in one of his last performances (I guess I can now say that one of the greatest dancers the world has ever seen told me I was OK).

The next afternoon I made my way to Stepping-Out Studio, just south of Lincoln Center (now moved to 26th Street between 6th Avenue and Broadway). Owned by Diane Lachtrupp, this was one of the more progressive dance studios, and very busy. Just before my Tango lesson with Diane, I stopped by the local dance store on Broadway & 61st and watched the ABT (American Ballroom Theater) students file in and out. You can always spot them. Gaunt and hopeful, they all have that perpetual struggle against weight gain, as they fight for their ballet-body profile. But Diane was waiting, so I climbed the three flights of stairs, banged on the steel door, and heard the four lock assemblies being unlatched (only in New York).



Jaun Carlos Copes



Diane Lachtrupp

Diane was busy, so I made my way to the back to put on my dance shoes, and was immediately greatly alarmed.

In front of me was a group of dark, swarthy men with five O’clock shadows, broad striped suits, and pocket handkerchiefs. I knew I saw this out of a gangster movie somewhere and started scanning for the automatic weapons.

Then the tango music started.

The first gangster in front of me executed an amazingly fluid set of figulettos and filled a common tango grouping. Then the next three gangsters followed behind him with the same exact movement in direct unison. Their actions were like greased machines. What was this?

Laughing, Diane stepped up to me and said, “This is the cast to *Tango Argentino* now re-appearing in the City and taking New York by storm.”

Tango Argentino did indeed take the City by Storm. One of the audience members captivated by the performance was Robert Duvalle, the accomplished actor, who studies regularly in Buenos Aires and sponsored his own movie *Assassination Tango*. One of the *cast* members was Juan Carlos Copes - the first person to choreograph Argentine Tango for professional dancers on the stage. Juan assisted the late choreographer Bob Fosse and taught Tango to many celebrities including Mikhail Barishnikov (He now

performs with his daughter, Johana, and can be seen every May at the Tango Fantasy in Miami, described at www.tangofantasy.com).

New York Time art critic Frank Rich, upon reviewing the performance of Tango Argentino, noted that the male performers did not have dancer's bodies. They were, in general, men in their 50's and 60's, and were not especially thin or tall. His conclusion, after mulling over on this issue, is "It must simply take that much time to become that good."

But Diane had other interesting students for me. "Do you see my student in this ballroom?" she pointed to another room set with a glass partition. "Here, let me introduce you." She was always introducing me to other female students. In those days, when I was calling on investment bankers and major securities houses, I guess I looked the part, with Gucci leathers, tailored Italian suits and a diamond-studded Rado watch. But I learned how to play the New York social scene, and knew how to shop in lower Manhattan, instead of the needlessly plush mid-town.

"Richard. Let me introduce you to Sydney Biddle Barrows."

I was dumbstruck. Sydney Biddle Barrows, *aka* "the Mayflower Madame," had her own agency – a relatively small, but very upscale escort service known as Cachet. Opened for business in May 1979, she prospered until October 1984, when New York's finest closed it down (The officials were not successful in a prosecution, however, as too many of the prosecutors were clients). A movie was later made about her book, *The Mayflower Madame*, starring Candice Bergen.



The Mayflower Madame

"Sydney is now just getting into Ballroom and is working on her Cha-Cha."

"So charmed to meet you, and I am sure you will greatly enjoy Ballroom"

She smiled coyly, with an expression that told she had me sized up immediately.

Diane excused us and led me away to the next Ballroom and hinted, "You know, she could use a nice gentleman to take her to New York dances, as she wants to get into the dance business."

My head was spinning. It is not unusual for a lady, especially a lady of means, to seek a skilled male dancer as an escort to social functions where dancing is prominent. I never accept payment for these activities, but find them amusing on occasion. This, however, was entirely different. Sydney was *connected*. I would be immediately plugged into the entire New York social scene.

As I considered this, I also thought about Sydney, a certified master of seduction, who declared, "I ran the wrong kind of business, but I did it with integrity." I carefully considered my strength of character pitted against the talents of the master of seduction.

I considered this all through my Tango lesson.

Having thus considered and weighed the future, I hastily bid adieu to Diane and Sydney, and caught the next plane home.