

Beauty and Health: The Creative Art of Perfume

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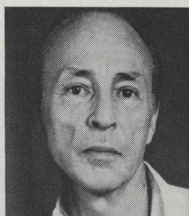
ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

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The Creative Art of Perfume



Here, for the first time, George Balanchine, one of the world's great creative geniuses, talks about his lifelong love affair with the great perfumes of France

BY JOANNA BROWN

It surprises us every time! Maybe we forget because it seems too good to be possible . . . that one person, supremely gifted in one creative field, is gifted in other senses as well. Take George Balanchine, the greatest choreographer today (or forever?), who is a remarkably sensitive connoisseur of music, food, and wines.

Now, it turns out, George Balanchine is, in addition, a first-rate "nose" (perfume-business language for a few top-of-the-field professional sniffers). His appreciation of French wines—which requires a honed sense of smell—might have clued us: George Balanchine knows French perfumes by heart . . . and sometimes gives them to dancers in the New York City Ballet Company. He believes in the importance of a single scent that irrevocably establishes an identity. In fact, this pursuit of a fragrance identity has become so universal among the girls in his company that classes, hallways, and stage are filled with the fleeting aura of a thousand flowers. As Balanchine explains it, his interest in perfume started long ago: "On the stage in Russia, all the ballerinas had a perfume. That's where I first got the idea. Kchessinska would pass by . . . oh, the smell! then another, and another! With us now it's the same. Onstage, you would be amazed—it's like a flower garden. And you can get in an elevator when it's empty and know who's been there before you."

This sense of the power of a personal fragrance is very strong among his dancers, and Balanchine's story of what happened several years ago when Suzanne Farrell left for a career in Europe illustrates it well.

"Years ago, I gave Suzanne Raphael's Replique. She was alone in the company to wear it. No one else did. But when she left, everybody started using it. I'd come in a room and say, 'Oh, where's Suzanne?' Someone would say, 'It's me.' 'Oh, my God, you smell like Suzanne.' And I would chase them away." For Suzanne herself, the identification had happened almost by accident. "I'd been using Replique for a while when one day Mr. Balanchine noticed that someone else was wearing it in class. Right away, he said, 'That's Suzanne's.' So it came to be mine. I did like it—it was kind of fun and an honor to have someone associate a perfume with me. It was like a game. Then, when I went to Europe, I was still wearing Replique, but I took along my bottle of Nina Ricci's L'Air du Temps. It was the first thing my husband had ever given me, and I'd always admired the bottle with the doves on it. Since then, I've worn them both. I feel that onstage, I'm Replique, but offstage—in reality—I'm L'Air du Temps. Onstage it's a fantasy, offstage, it's real . . . but it's nice to change. Of course, everyone in the ballet associated me with Replique and when I came back, they all said 'You don't smell the same, Suzanne.' I felt so awful that I ran out and bought some Replique."

Balanchine is not only passionate about perfume but knowledgeable. "I love perfume—the way it looks. In Monte Carlo I was twenty years old and I'd come into the shops; they'd have all those bottles—beautiful bottles—and I didn't know what to take. I know almost all the old perfumes—from Houbigant, Coty, Worth, Guerlain, Patou, Lanvin, Chanel . . . they're great perfumes and absolutely individual."

Balanchine's first intimate contact with French perfume happened in Russia when he was eighteen. "During 1922, when Lenin made NEP—the New

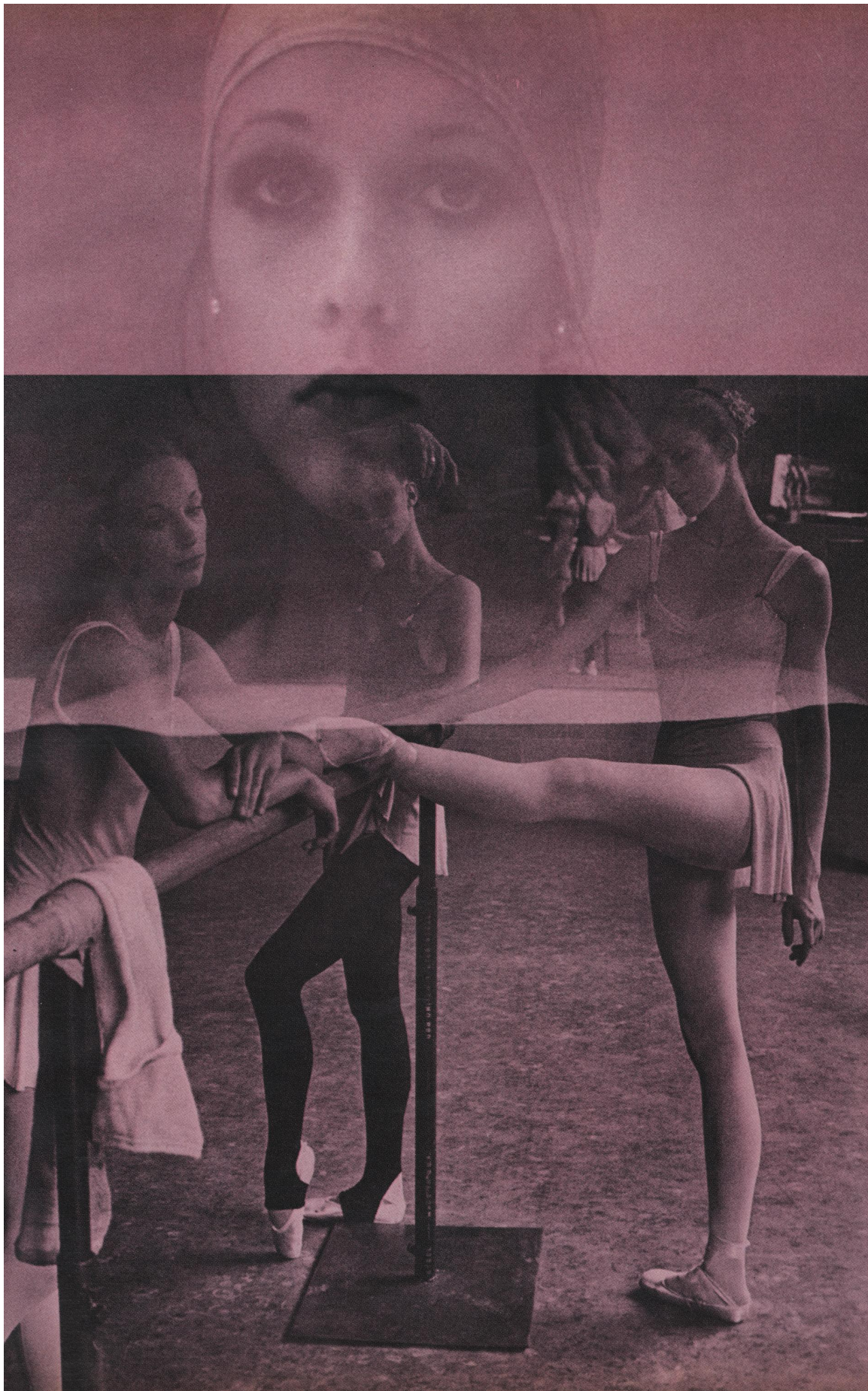
Economic Policy—he decided to ask the Europeans to come back. Immediately—the next day—everything was there. They also started an artistic exchange and the Germans came in and brought perfume. I was married to a girl by the name of Tamara Geva who could sing German songs—she sang very well. I accompanied her on the piano and we sometimes played in the nightclubs. One night, someone from Europe came in and gave Tamara a bottle of L'Origan by Coty. It was the most fantastic, the most feminine, the most beautiful scent—it's like a queen. Like Château d'Yquem is a queen in wine, L'Origan is a queen in perfume and no one can reproduce it. Years ago I gave it to Karin von Aroldingen. She is German—blond and German, so I immediately said, 'That's L'Origan, there's absolutely no question!' I bought up everything I could find in Paris." Karin says, "It's like an identity, it really is . . . it's like dancing, too—you have your own style. People always ask me what I'm wearing, and I always wonder what to say because I don't want them to wear it."

The competition over who wears which perfume has sometimes become quite intense. Balanchine tells a story of the two Neary sisters, Patricia and Colleen:

"The way it always starts is, someone comes to me. 'What do you think I smell like? Will you find for me something?' I gave Via Lanvin to Colleen Neary. She loved it, but her older sister, Pat, liked it, too, and said, 'I want that perfume.' Of course, Colleen came to me and complained, 'Pat took my perfume! She smells like me!' I said, 'Don't worry, I'll find something.' The next time I went to Paris, I found her Caline by Patou—it's delicious and now she has her own smell." It seems to be the urge to "have her own smell" that prompts many of Balanchine's dancers to start out using very heavy, obvious perfumes—something that will make a definite statement. One such is Carole Sumner. She received Narcisse Noir by Caron three years ago as a replacement for a strong, gardenia-type of fragrance. She remembers, "I was wearing the gardenia scent because my skin absorbs perfume very quickly and that was the only thing that would last on me. I was surprised when he gave me Narcisse Noir because I didn't think Mr. B thought of me as this type. I consider it a sort of smoldering, passionate scent, and I didn't imagine, with my blond hair, he would think of it—but that's exactly what I wanted."

That depth of knowledge of his dancers is one of the things that comes through clearly in talking to Balanchine and the members of his company. As Susan Hendl said, "He knows everything about everyone. He really does. He knows when you were born, he knows if you've had trouble with your parents. He makes it his job to know. The company is not just a company to him—his dancers aren't just bodies—he thinks of us as a family and that's the way he treats everyone."

Balanchine, when asked what it is that makes him continue to care, continue to bring home a small fortune of perfume from Paris every year, has no real answer. He can only say, "If you are a man—and though I'm old already and not supposed to believe it anymore—but I still have this—I know what woman is. I know how beautiful they are. . . ."



MR. B. SAID, "WHAT IS THAT AWFUL SMELL?"
Christine Redpath, top, used to wear a strong, heavy scent until Balanchine brought her Guerlain's Chant d'Aromes. "I've always liked just wearing one perfume—like being trademarked—someone will walk down a street and turn around, thinking you were there."

HE ALWAYS SUITS YOUR PERSONALITY

About four years ago, Balanchine brought Susan Hendl, far left, her perfume—L'Heure Bleue by Guerlain. Susan remembers, "He said, 'I have just the perfume for you, dear. This is you. It's very subtle and yet strong at the same time.'"

HE KNOWS WHEN YOU'VE BEEN THERE

Kay Mazzo, center, wears Je Reviens by Worth. "I was using lots of different things, and I think Balanchine hated them all. Now, he'll come in and say, 'You were in the elevator two minutes ago, weren't you?'"

"HE SAID TO SPLASH IT ALL OVER,"

Colleen Neary, near left, says. "When Mr. Balanchine first gave me my perfume, I used to just put on a dab or two; but he said, 'No, no! You must spray it completely over your hair, over your whole body, so we can smell as you walk down the hallway.'"

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