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## Book Review

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# Ballerina fights for her art against the drug counterculture

by Christina N. Huth

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### **Dancing On My Grave: An Autobiography**

by Gelsey Kirkland, with Greg Lawrence  
New York: Doubleday and Company  
Illustrated. 286 pp. \$17.95

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At age 34, celebrated ballerina Gelsey Kirkland has published her autobiography. This would seem an inappropriately early age to undertake such a task, but for the fact that Kirkland's recent appearance in *Romeo and Juliet* with the Royal Ballet of London, marks her 25th year on the stage, a career which began with her role as an angel in *Nutcracker Suite*, for George Balanchine's New York City Ballet.

*Dancing On My Grave* paints a sordid picture of the professional dance world over the past two-and-a-half decades. The sharply drawn experiences of Kirkland, in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, give the reader a rare insider's glimpse at the sorry state into which American culture has fallen, under the dictates of the immoral notion of "art for art's sake."

Kirkland describes the tortuous physical training of young ballerinas at New York City's American School of Ballet, which was overseen by Russian-émigré superstar choreographer George Balanchine, to produce dancers for his troupe. To achieve the "turned out" position of the leg and hip joint, considered essential to the aesthetic of 18th-century classical ballet, young dancers were drilled and grilled in a technique which virtually ensured serious injury, and forced retirement by their mid- to late twenties. Balanchine's orders to young dancers-in-training ranged from advice to imagine themselves as puppets on a string, to addressing them as "Zombies!" to the admonition, "Don't think, just do."

In 1968, Kirkland left high school and became a full-time member of Balanchine's company. She avoided the worst

excesses of his training program by working with independent coaches and physical therapists. But she could not so easily avoid the problems of a degenerated repertory. One of her first, and most lauded, major roles was that of the Firebird, in Stravinsky's ballet of the same name. In *Firebird*, the longtime partnership of Russian émigrés Balanchine and Stravinsky ("they shared faith in Russian orthodoxy and a fierce allegiance to their Russian homeland," according to Kirkland), produced succor for neither the artists nor the audiences—both subjected to the "savage rhythm" of Stravinsky's impressionist music, Balanchine's modernist choreography, and the "floating images" abstractionist kook Marc Chagall provided for stage sets.

Writes Kirkland of her performance in *Firebird*: "Stravinsky replaced the thematic development of classical music with a range of sensations that alternately jolted or lulled the mind. . . . The stage design was ultimately as insurmountable as the stumbling blocks in the music. I had vertigo when I looked at the set. Chagall's alteration of perspective caused an almost surreal sense of disorientation. I found an obstacle course rigged to trip the dancer at every turn."

But a Balanchine ballerina was supposed to dance, to dance, in fact, with gymnastic virtuosity, and this Gelsey Kirkland did, to high critical acclaim, and partnered with the most famous of male counterparts, for more than a decade after the production of *Firebird*. The self-perceived limitations of her accomplishment within the ballet world left her frustrated, personally insecure, anorexic, and, finally, addicted to cocaine.

Kirkland remained on the stage, in prima ballerina roles, for six years after she was introduced to cocaine by dancer Patrick Bissell, and had become an addict. She toured, partnered with the lionized Mikhail Baryshnikov and other leading male counterparts, for the New York City Ballet and the American Ballet Theater, while consuming up to \$600 worth of cocaine each and every week.

Although Kirkland does not say it in so many words, her narrative makes quite clear that her cocaine addiction, and the life-threatening medical problems it created (brain seizures, convulsions, and blackouts), were well known to the company's management. They were, to put it most politely, ignored. Kirkland headed toward bottom, confined in a psychiatric facility, whose doctors pronounced her incurable and fit to be institutionalized indefinitely, while conniving to get her bills paid by allowing her out to dance on "temporary passes" from the institution. She hit bottom, when, securing release from the hospital, she signed a contract with a manager that included an unwritten clause guaranteeing her supply of drugs—to be delivered by Federal Express, if necessary, when she was on tour.

Gelsey Kirkland saved herself from professional ruin, drug addiction, and a probable early death, by deciding to kick cocaine, take a leave of absence from dancing, and study the classics of music, literature, philosophy, and natural science, in a search for an understanding of dance that was not to be found on the New York City stage. She undertook this course of study in spring 1984, in collaboration with her husband, ex-cocaine addict Greg Lawrence, co-author of *Dancing On My Grave*. The transformation of her life by the great thinkers of history is apparent in her book, as is her conscious choice to embrace the classics and discard the culture of soap operas, popular music, and drugs.

### The liberal critics howl

Kirkland's story of stubborn determination to bring art to ballet, an intellectual drive that saved her life, should make readers happy. It has made most of the critics of the liberal news media unhappy.

One of them calls it "hot stuff," recommending the book for its rendition of Kirkland's unhappy love life. The *Washington Post's* Suzanne Gordon scorns Kirkland's self-determined course of classical studies as pretentious, and characterizes Kirkland's collaboration with her husband as a new form of addiction, traded for dependence on cocaine.

These are mild abreactions, however, compared to the shrieks of horror emanating from the *Baltimore Sun*. The howls are from one Katie Gunther Kodat, no doubt a failed danceuse, trapped in the body of an art critic at a second-string metropolitan newspaper. Kodat really rattles her cage over Kirkland's description of how the international drug cartel delivers its poison into American society: from the International Monetary Fund's promotion of cash-crop drugs in the Third World, to the Tavistock Institute's "sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll" counterculture, to the laundering of hundreds of billions of dollars of dope profits through the biggest banks in the world. This picture of a global drug conspiracy, which helped Kirkland to understand the infestation of American art circles by drug abuse, is nothing more than self-delusion, Kodat raves. It insults the reader, according to Kodat, only slightly less than Kirkland's use of quotes on the nature of art



Farrell Grehan/Life Magazine

Gelsey Kirkland at 18, with Balanchine (left), in the costume fitting for Stravinsky's "Firebird." She describes the costume as "a flaming gold and red abomination. It was something that an overgrown canary might wear, not something a ballerina should ever have to put on, or dance in. The plumage was crippling. . . . Stepping into this contraption, I was a little ball of rage, not a Firebird. As the fitting session was prolonged for photographers, I spent the time glaring over my shoulder at Mr. B, giving him the old evil eye." Kirkland reports that Balanchine "actually identified the hero (of the ballet) with Stalin." (Reprinted by permission from "Dancing on My Grave.")

from Helga Zepp-LaRouche, Friedrich Schiller, and Saint Augustine.

By what means ballet may achieve the rank of art is an implicit subject of Kirkland's book, but settling the question remains beyond the scope of both *Dancing On My Grave* and this review. It can be said however, that Kirkland's story, often concerned with elevating the ballet, takes a few steps in the right direction.

No doubt, ballet will continue to be a morose shadow of art, as long as the dance is partnered not with music, but with noise—be it the romantic sensationalism of Tchaikovsky, or the modernist cacophonies of Stravinsky. Great music is a prerequisite to the task of uplifting an audience with drama, expressed through the harmonic movement of the human form. Suitable dramatic material is needed as well: It's time for the tripe produced by the godfathers of New York's culture mafia—the Balanchines, the Jerome Robbinses, the Twyla Tharps—to go out the window, preferably on the thongs of pitchforks brandished by an infuriated audience.

Finally, there are needed dedicated dancers, willing to take responsibility for not only their own performances, but for all the essential elements of the ballet, and thereby for the audience, and the society, which they serve as artists. *Dancing On My Grave* indicates that Gelsey Kirkland is struggling to make such a commitment, and is possessed of the determination and intellectual drive which may allow her to carry it out.