

LINCOLN
KIRSTEIN
ALCHEMIST

The Vincent Astor Gallery
The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center
October 31, 2007 – January 30, 2008

Lincoln Kirstein was born one hundred years ago. Throughout 2007, New York City cultural centers have presented exhibitions of the paintings, sculpture and photography that he collected and made available to the public. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, for its part in the celebration, honors seven institutions that he variously co-founded, transformed and maintained as his gifts to New York and the dance audiences of the world. They are the School of American Ballet, American Ballet, Ballet Caravan, American Ballet Caravan, Ballet Society, the New York City Ballet, and the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. A poet, novelist, art and film critic, Kirstein envisioned and promoted these projects employing his facility with well-selected words and images. Each selection of designs and photographs illustrates a stage in his progress towards the goal of creating a major American ballet school and company in New York City.



Serenade performed by members of the American Ballet at its first public appearance, White Plains, New York, June 10, 1934. Jerome Robbins Dance Division



School of American Ballet (1934 –)

The first step towards his goal of a major ballet company was the founding of the School of American Ballet to train dancers.

“The purpose of the school is to develop trained American dancers who will continually provide material for a permanent company, which will create the combined gifts of the best American painters, musicians, poets, and choreographers... The School of the American Ballet has been founded for one purpose only: to provide dancers as well-trained as any other technician, whether it be surgeon, architect or musician, to maintain a permanent company.” (1934, from the founding proposal)

“Twenty years ago, the idea of a school of the dance, comparable to the great European state-endowed schools, yet supported entirely by its own students, to be used as a continuous support of a world-famous professional ballet company which would establish a criterion of the art for our epoch, was only an enormous promise. ... The School of American Ballet has an extraordinary faculty of teachers, all of them models of the highest tradition of the absolute academic technique. The discipline and methods they have developed have not been rigid, but are, as demonstrated by the present success of their graduates, firm, resilient and efficient...The School of American Ballet looks forward to further service to the art of theatrical dancing and to many as unborn generations of native and foreign dancers whom it will have the honor of training.” (1954, from the anniversary souvenir brochure)



The American Ballet (1934 – 1938)

The American Ballet was Balanchine's first company in the United States. It offered performance opportunities in concerts and as a resident ballet at the Metropolitan Opera. His *Serenade*, created for the first appearance, was his first ballet produced for America.

“...the American Ballet company brought a spectacular new type of artistic expression and entertainment to the theatre. Never before has an American organization undertaken to carry the art of the dance, in genuine ballet, to its culmination in a manner comparable to the kind that Europe has enjoyed for centuries...International in its scope, yet inimitably American in its portrayal of realistic, lyric and graphic native scenes and subjects, it brings to the footlights a fresh impetus, as exciting as it is memorable, and as that eminent critic Burns Mantle declared, ‘a new public for a new art, and quite mad about it.’.. In inviting George Balanchine, Diaghilev's last maître de ballet, the greatest living choreographer, to its chief creative post, the American Ballet has achieved the unique distinction of complementing its highly individualized repertory with finished performances and the foremost character...” (1935, from a promotional flyer)



Ballet Caravan (1936 –1938; as American Ballet Caravan 1938 – 1940)

Ballet Caravan was Kirstein's own company, dedicated to developing new American works by teaming its dancer/choreographers with America's best young artists and composers. Ballet Caravan commissioned works from Paul Bowles, Elliott Carter, Virgil Thompson, and Aaron Copland. *Billy the Kid* (choreographed by Eugene Loring to Copland's score) remains in the repertory of ballet companies around the world.

“The Ballet Caravan is a young troupe of the top rank of American-born, bred and trained classic dancers. They hail from as many sections of this country as they represent the numerous racial stocks which settled the continent. They dance in dramatic ballets based on life in the United States as



Ballet Caravan souvenir program, 1937–1938
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

we live it today, and as today we imagine it has been lived through our long history. The steps they dance are based on rhythms that this land brought into being, the hauling chantey of Clipper ships, the pulse of Indian drums, the cowboy's nasal twanging lilt, down to rhumba, tango and the jazz steps of contemporary swing music. These haunting melodies are framed by spectacular stage-dancing of an international tradition. The tradition of classic ballet is the greatest language of movement and gesture our theatre has known. Here the brilliance and elegance of the Old world is combined with the energy and precision of the New. The Acrobat, the Athlete, the Actor and the Musician are fused in one body to be the finest dancers America has produced...."

"The Ballet Caravan dedicates itself to the future of our theatrical dancing through modern American music and painting. Its collaborators are pre-eminent among our younger musicians and mural-decorators. While respecting the music and dance of the great past, the Ballet Caravan as a native organization feels the United States can give new meanings and new frontiers to the classic form." (1937/38 season brochure)



The American Ballet Caravan (1941)

The American Ballet Caravan, formed by Kirstein and Balanchine, for a Latin American tour in 1941, combined Ballet Caravan repertory with new works by Balanchine, among them *Concerto Barocco*.

"Never before in the history of American dance has an aggregation of native dancers, musicians, composers, and artists been gathered together in a large group to present an American form of ballet. The man responsible for this group is Lincoln Kirstein, ballet's most vital figure in the United States. Mr. Kirstein has been a crusader for an all-American dance company for many years and it was he who founded the organization known as The American Ballet Caravan and its director and guiding genius. Foreign dance groups attempting to interpret the American scene have often gone far astray and it is Mr. Kirstein's belief that we should break away from European concepts of the ballet...."

The American Ballet Caravan is the birth of a native art form that sings and dances of America and our times. It is making a place for itself in our life as an entertaining and vigorous expression of our people and our land." (1941, Press book for the Latin American tour)



Concerto Barocco performed by William Dollar, Marie-Jeanne, Mary Jane Shea and members of the American Ballet Caravan, 1941

Photograph by George Platt Lynes. Jerome Robbins Dance Division
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Ballet Society (1946 – 1948)

Following his return from service in World War II, Kirstein re-focused on his goal. His 1946 charter for Ballet Society summed up that goal as “(1) to make a new repertory for a contemporary lyric theater; (2) to educate an audience for such a theater; (3) to educate young artists for performing in such a theater.”



Orpheus performed by Maria Tallchief, Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Moncion
Photograph by George Platt Lynes. Jerome Robbins Dance Division
Copyright Estate of George Platt Lynes

The first step was Ballet Society, a subscription series of new ballets, primarily by Balanchine. Kirstein commissioned new scores and designs from both world famous and emerging talents. *The Four Temperaments* and *Orpheus* were created for this company.

“The productions offered by Ballet Society in its first year combined unfamiliar works by eminent composers with new works by musicians, choreographers, painters and dancers who are embarking on their careers. The performances of these works were a fusion of professional standards and amateur taste (the word amateur understood in its original meaning of careful selection, a cultivated taste, but an absence of timeworn formulae of production intended to guarantee safe commercial success.).

Not in the last fifteen years have so many first performances been offered by a single sponsoring unit in this company. The pro-

grams, however, were presented not for their newness alone, but because performing them offered a threefold experience in education. Collaborating musicians, choreographers and painters learned how to work with each other in unsuspected ways; dancers could develop themselves through the performance of the results; while the audience accustomed itself to unfamiliar aspects of the youthful spectacle." (1947, from the souvenir yearbook)



New York City Ballet (1948 –)

The success of *Orpheus* led directly to Morton Baum's invitation to Ballet Society to form the New York City Ballet, as a partner at the City Center for the already established New York City Opera. The New York City Ballet took up residence at the City Center of Music and Dance in 1949 and moved to the Lincoln Center facility, the New York State Theater, in 1964.



George Balanchine and Igor Stravinsky watching Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams in rehearsal for *Agon*. Photograph by Martha Swope. Jerome Robbins Dance Division



The Jerome Robbins Dance Division

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of The New York Public Library is the largest and most comprehensive archive in the world devoted to the documentation of dance. Chronicling the art of dance in all its manifestations - ballet, ethnic, modern, social, and folk - the Division is much more than a library in the usual sense of the word. It is part museum, part film production center, and part consulting service to the professional dance community. It preserves the history of dance by gathering diverse written, visual, and aural resources, and it works to ensure the art form's continuity through an active documentation program.

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division's mission is to connect artists, scholars and dance lovers to the world of movement. The Division's commitment is to preserve and provide free access to its unequalled collections of resources, ranging from multi-camera recordings of dance performances to rare manuscripts. As the active memory of the dance community, the Dance Division honors the past and offers inspiration for the future. (Current mission statement)

The Dance Collection, as it was then known, was founded in 1944 as a separate division of The Research Libraries of The New York Public Library at the insistence of staff, dancers, and dance historians and writers. The founding curator was Genevieve Oswald. Lincoln Kirstein was a frequent user, friend and supporter throughout the next fifty years, expanding the Library's service through donations of rare books, prints and designs, and endowments for preservation and conservation. In its Lincoln Center home since 1965, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division is used regularly by choreographers, dancers, critics, historians, scholars, journalists, publicists, filmmakers, graphic artists, students, and the general public.

This exhibition was co-curated by Nancy Lassalle, Director Emerita, New York City Ballet, Secretary of the School of American Ballet and Madeleine Nichols, Curator Emeritus, The Jerome Robbins Dance Division.



Engraving of stage machinery from Lotto Lotti's *L'idea di tutte le perfezioni...*, 1690. Gift of Lincoln Kirstein. Jerome Robbins Dance Division



Credits and Acknowledgements

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Artifacts in the exhibition are from the archival collections of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division and Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. We are grateful to Jacques d'Amboise, The Museum of Modern Art, the New York City Ballet, and the School of American Ballet for their loans of additional material. Quotations from the writings of Lincoln Kirstein are © 2007 or the year of original publication by the New York Public Library (Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations) and may not be reproduced without written permission.

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Filling Station, performed by Ballet Caravan's Harold Christensen (left) and choreographer Lew Christensen, 1938. Photograph by Roland Harvey. Jerome Robbins Dance Division



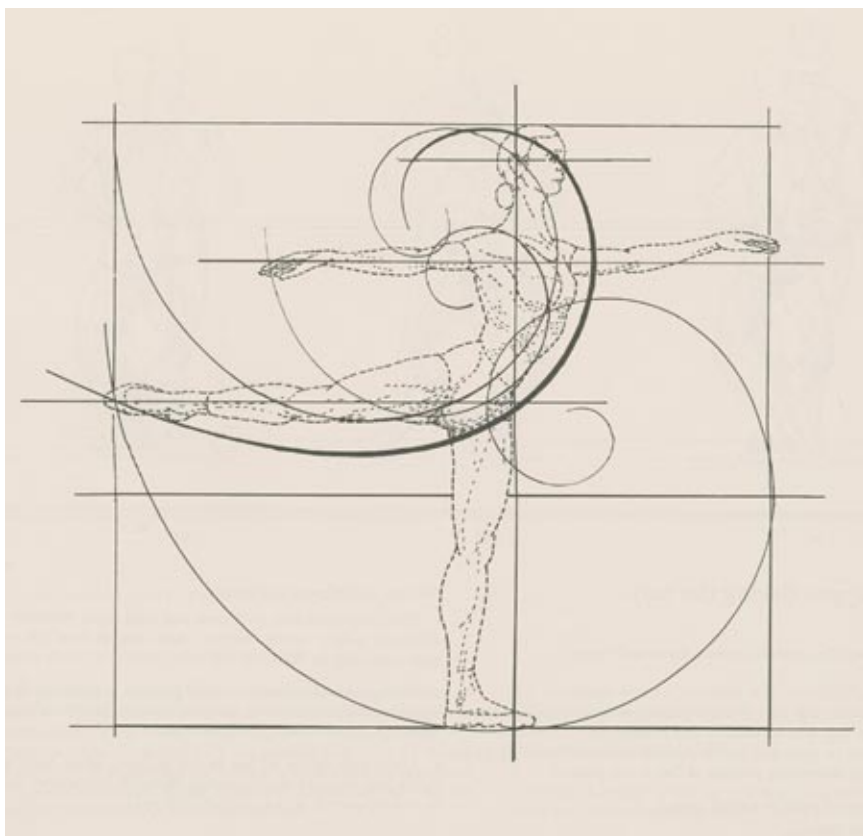
Public Program

Thursday, January 24, 2008 6:00 p.m.

Bringing Balanchine to America:
Chick Austin and "the Hartford Catastrophe"
Lecture by Eugene R. Gaddis

Mr. Gaddis is the William G. DeLana Archivist and Curator of the Austin House, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

Programs take place in the Bruno Walter Auditorium, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Admission to this program is free and first come, first served. Call (212) 642-0142 for information about the Performing Arts Library's public programs, or visit www.nypl.org/lpapprograms.



Above: detail illustration by Carlos Dyer from Kirstein's *The Classic Ballet*, 1952
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

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