


[Wheelwright on Kattner, 'Finding Balanchine's Lost Ballets: Exploring the Early Choreography of a Master'](#)

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Elizabeth Kattner. *Finding Balanchine's Lost Ballets: Exploring the Early Choreography of a Master*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. Illustrations. 192 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), [ISBN](#)

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Unlike his later works with the Ballet Russes or New York City Ballet, George Balanchine's early Soviet ballets have been largely lost. Between his time as a student at the Imperial Theatre School in Saint Petersburg in 1920 and his flight from the Soviet Union in 1924, the ballets Balanchine created during this experimental postrevolutionary period were minimally documented. Given the ephemeral nature of the art form, how can one approach a ballet that is unrecorded? In this book, Elizabeth Kattner focuses on Balanchine's ballet *Funeral March* (*Marche Funèbre*, 1923), the best-recorded ballet of this era, excavating sources—including oral histories, memoirs, photographs, newspaper reviews, musical scores, and other historical documentation—to reconstruct the lost ballet while also detailing the process of embodied and collaborative scholarship. In this approach, Kattner seeks to fill the gap in scholarship on these early years of Balanchine to both contextualize his works in the rebellious spirit of the era and to give clues to his later, more thoroughly analyzed works.

There are already numerous biographies on Balanchine and scholarship on his ballets. Of note are Jennifer Homans's recent *Mr. B: George Balanchine's 20th Century* (2022) and Elizabeth Kendall's *Balanchine and the Lost Muse: Revolution and the Making of a Choreographer* (2013), the latter of which focuses on the same era as Kattner's book. However, Kattner offers less a biographical portrait of the young choreographer than a roadmap of how to reconstruct a ballet. As Kattner points out, the Soviet ballet critic, Yuri Slonimsky, was the sole source of published information on Balanchine's early works, which, along with *Funeral March*, include *Night* (*La Nuit*, 1920), a *pas de deux* from his student days, and *The Twelve* (*Dvenadtsat'*, 1923), which he created for the Young Ballet. Choreographed to Chopin's *Sonata pour la piano* (1840), *Funeral March* premiered June 1, 1923, at the Duma Auditorium in Saint Petersburg and reflected, abstractly, the grim reality of daily life—funerals amid the deprivations and chaos of the era. Despite the harsh conditions of the early 1920s for dancers and audience members alike, ballet performances (and attendance) increased in number, as they provided a welcome respite from the harsh conditions off stage. Kattner pieces together the lost choreography using Slonimsky's writings and accounts from Vera Kostrovitskaya, Alexandra Danilova, and Tamara Geva, all of whom danced in Balanchine's ballets.

Accompanying this desire to reconstruct *Funeral March* lingers a central debate: can a ballet be reproduced, and, perhaps, more important, should a ballet be reproduced? Kattner, as a professor of

dance and dance practitioner, argues that “as a kinesthetic art form, dance cannot be understood absent of movement,” and therefore her research is not limited to written scholarship (p. 19). Instead, the book outlines both the traditional research involved in dance history along with staging the ballet with dancers and presenting it to an audience. In discussing the scholarly debate on reconstruction in the second chapter, Kattner emphasizes that no ballet is truly ever presented as the original. Ballets change with casts, performing spaces, or the choreographer's choice to make a change. Moreover, when reconstructing a ballet from so many decades ago, the technical capabilities of the dancers is also an issue, as today dancers resemble each other in terms of technique and training more so than a hundred years ago. Ultimately, Kattner sees reconstruction as dance's opportunity to retain its history: “if choreographers, dancers, and audiences cannot access our history, our art cannot attain the depth that other forms have, such as visual art and music” (p. 36).

The majority of the book follows the collaborative process of reconstructing *Funeral March* with dancers in the studio, both in a workshop format and with the professional dancers of the Grand Rapids Ballet. Kattner combines her own background and familiarity with Balanchine's choreography as a dancer with her academic research, allowing dance scholarship and dance practice to enrich one another. However, while these sections offer some historical background to *Funeral March*, the emphasis falls more on the personal narrative of artistic collaboration as Kattner plays detective with partial accounts and translates these from the written word to the dancing body.

The book consists of six chapters. The first chapter provides the historical background to *Funeral March* and the second chapter covers the above-mentioned debate surrounding dance reconstructions. The third chapter begins the choreographic reconstruction of the dance, covering the sources available to provide artistic direction, namely, photographs of the dancers in costume and of the Duma Auditorium where the performance was staged, as well as accounts from the dancers. There are only two photographs available, both studio rather than performance photographs of dancers posing in costume. The costume design is conflictingly attributed in personal accounts to either Boris Erbshtein (1901-63) or Vladimir Dmitriev (1900-48), both painters and scenarists. The costumes were sewn by the dancers themselves and featured a minimalist gray sleeveless tunic with short skirts for the women and shorts for the men, and gray caps with black and silver embroidery that hid the hair for all the dancers. The costumes, covering dancers' individual traits, reflected the “theme of death, in which every person becomes equal to every other person” (p. 42). Kattner infers much from Balanchine's later works as well as existing scholarship that details, for example, his influence from the choreographer Fyodor Lopukhov (1886-1973), who sought to create a dance symphony, or a dance where the images correspond directly to the music.

The fourth and fifth chapters continue the reconstruction, focusing on the physical process within the studio. Within these chapters, the book switches from a historical view of Balanchine's ballets to a puzzle solved through collaboration. Kattner details a workshop organized for university students where the dancer-participants use Kostrovitskaya's written account, photographs, and Slonimsky's description of poses to develop the opening entrance to the ballet. She notes during this process, despite the dancers coming from different schools and backgrounds, “the common technique of their training brought them to do the step the same way” (p. 62). Kattner then begins working in the same manner with Grand Rapids Ballet, whose artistic director, Patricia Barker, is a Balanchine repetiteur. Whether or not Kattner's method is useful for reconstructing the most accurate version is not the point. Instead, she dissects each pose and possible movement to the pose as a means of examining

the development of Balanchine's aesthetic.

Of the three sections of *Funeral March*, some are less documented than others, requiring Kattner to infer the choreography based more on the reputed capabilities of the dancers and their unique traits; for example, Danilova had quick footwork and a classically trained style while Geva was more open to experimentation. Once again, attempting to reconstruct a ballet based on very little documentation is a contentious issue, and it is also important to note that Balanchine's ballets are carefully protected by The George Balanchine Trust, from which Kattner had to gain permission. Due to the lack of documentation and the process she uses, the trust allowed her to create a "vision" of the ballet, as opposed to a reconstruction, given the amount of guesswork involved in her choreography (p. 12). Yet, as she argues in the final chapter, the process of reconstruction, or envisioning, is a necessary component of dance history, allowing a scholar to combine kinesthetic and academic knowledge. Grand Rapids Ballet premiered Kattner's "envisioned" version in 2018 at Oakland University, and while Kattner acknowledges that a ballet can never be perfectly reproduced or that it "could not have the *same* meaning it did for the original audience, it did have meaning" for the contemporary audience (p. 76).

For scholars interested in Balanchine, the early Soviet arts, or the roots of neoclassicism in ballet, this book provides an alternative approach to dance history. Artists—choreographers, scenarists, and costume designers—involved in reconstructing ballets will benefit from the book's more instructional steps of applying archival sources to a work's restaging. Historians of costume design may find the sections on the costumes to be of interest given their novel style that can be found in later ballets. While those seeking a robust historical lens of Balanchine's early ballets will not be satisfied, Kattner offers fellow dance scholars a guide to how embodied knowledge, both as dancers and choreographers, can enhance the understanding of this art form.

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