

read more...

Continued from July 2013 CTI Newsletter

In The Wings With George Balanchine

My lighting career began in the ballet world more than 40 years ago as a truck driver with [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#). I quickly worked my way up through their ranks to become an electrician, and later technical director, stage manager, and lighting designer. DTH was founded by [Arthur Mitchell](#), a lead dancer with the [New York City Ballet](#), and many of the ballets the company performed were given to Mr. Mitchell from [George Balanchine](#) of the New York City Ballet.

I flashed back on all this on my drive to work this week when I heard a radio piece on NPR about preserving the ballets of George Balanchine. ([Listen to the radio piece here](#))

The thing that amazed me early in the radio program was a statement by Balanchine ballerina [Franca Russell](#). Although she hasn't performed in 50 years, she says as soon as she hears the music for George Balanchine's Concerto Barocco, her body starts to move.

The music is *Bach's Concerto For Two Violins in D Minor*, and the two lead dancers each dance one violin part. I probably watched that ballet from backstage a few hundred times over the period of five years, and it is so deeply etched into my mind that I can also see the steps in my mind every time I hear the music. ([Watch this YouTube video to see and hear the story of the ballet](#))

Around 1974, DTH was installing the [Jerome Robbins](#) ballet *Afternoon of a Faun* (music by Claude Debussy) and I was charged with recreating the set and lighting from the originals by [Jean Rosenthal](#). I visited the New York State Theatre and met with NYCB's lighting designer, [Ronnie Bates](#), who showed me the great set, original scenery plans, and lighting design notes from Jean Rosenthal. The set is a white china silk ballet studio on stage (ceiling with skylight and three walls) made in forced perspective, with a white ground cloth, in front of a blue cyc. The original lighting design notes mentioned things like "the light changes as if a cloud passes in front of the sun." The set and lighting are simply stunning and the ballet is a classic.

This was pretty heady stuff for a young so-called lighting designer like myself who was untrained and knew basically nothing about lighting or scenic design. My entire lighting education came from copying a [Jennifer Tipton](#) dance light plot and trying to figure out how to make it work.

That evening, I was planning to watch *Faun* from backstage as unobtrusively as possible. Sometime before the curtain went up I was introduced to Mr. Balanchine, who watched every move in every ballet every night from backstage. When I told him I was there to learn *Faun* for DTH, he said "Come with me", and we walked to his viewing spot, which was in the first wing stage right, onstage of the stage manager's position, just a few feet from being on stage. We stood together watching the ballet.

The NPR program swept me back to the ballet world for a few minutes this week, and it was a reminder of what a beautiful, quiet, artistic, and interesting world it is, and how different it is from Broadway and other areas of entertainment I worked in after leaving the ballet world.

George Balanchine died over 30 years ago. He created the neo-classic ballet world that is known today, and has influenced generations of dancers and designers.



George Balanchine, shown here in 1965, was born in St. Petersburg Russia, but moved to New York when he was 29. (Rowntree/Getty Images)



Afternoon Of A Faun - New York City Ballet



Jean Rosenthal is considered a pioneer in the field of theatrical lighting design.