

HOUSTON BALLET

STANTON WELCH - ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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HOUSTON BALLET
SALUTES THE LEGENDARY CHOREOGRAPHER GEORGE BALANCHINE IN
A BALANCHINE CELEBRATION

Houston Ballet Joins Companies
Across the World in Honoring Balanchine on the
100th Anniversary of His Birth

Company Premiere of His Early Masterpiece *Apollo*
Highlights Program

Simon Ball, Zdenek Konvalina, and Andrew Murphy
Debut as *Apollo*

Houston, Texas -- From May 27 through June 6, 2004, Houston Ballet honors the centennial of the great Russian choreographer George Balanchine by paying tribute to his towering achievement with *A Balanchine Celebration*, featuring **La Valse**, **Theme and Variations**, and the company premiere of his 1928 masterpiece **Apollo**. The company will give six performances at Wortham Theater Center in downtown Houston.

On the hundredth anniversary of Balanchine's birth, Houston Ballet proudly joins the global dance community in celebrating his life and genius. Major international ballet companies, including those in Miami, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, D.C., Amsterdam, Helsinki, London, Moscow, Paris, St. Petersburg, Stuttgart, Toronto, and Zurich are performing works by Balanchine in honor of his centennial. The epicenter of the celebration occurs in Manhattan as the company that he founded with Lincoln Kirstein, New York City Ballet, performs 54 of his works during its winter and spring seasons in 2004. Performances in January and February were grouped under the rubric "Heritage," and focused on Balanchine's early years and influences in St. Petersburg, Paris,

Copenhagen and New York. Performances from April through June will focus on “Vision,” the repertory of works that he both commissioned and created and his enduring legacy to the world of dance.

In conjunction with *A Balanchine Celebration*, Houston Ballet’s popular *Dance Talks* returns. International dance critic Barbara Newman will be one of the guest speakers for the first weekend of performances. Her recently published book, *Grace Under Pressure: Passing Dance Through Time*, features interviews with leading Balanchine dancers and repetiteurs from around the world. Debuting in September 2003, *Dance Talks* have provided opportunities for audience members to meet notable members of the global dance community such as choreographer Trey McIntyre and guests artist Damien Welch of The Australian Ballet, and to learn more about the upcoming performance. *Dance Talks* are designed to increase the dialogue and further the understanding and appreciation of the art of dance. *Dance Talks* are free to all ticket holders, and will be held forty-five minutes prior to each performance in the Grand Foyer at Wortham Theater Center.

Houston Ballet’s *A Balanchine Celebration* has been generously underwritten by Shell Oil Company Foundation, Fluor Corporation, Andrews Kurth LLP, and The Albert & Margaret Alkek Foundation.

George Balanchine: A Dance Legend

Summarizing his contributions to dance in the twentieth century, *New York Times* dance critic Anna Kisselgoff observed, “More than anyone else, Balanchine elevated choreography in ballet to an independent art. The plotless ballet became a synonym for Balanchine ballet. In an age when ballet had been dependent on a synthesis of spectacle, story-telling, décor, mime, acting, music, and only partly on dancing, George Balanchine insisted that the dance element come first.”

Balanchine, who famously remarked “Dance is music made visible,” is often regarded as the foremost contemporary choreographer in the world of ballet. As a boy, Balanchine studied at the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg. At the beginning of his career as a choreographer, his unconventional works were considered controversial by his traditionally minded superiors. In 1924,

he toured Germany with his own small company and later joined Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, quickly becoming its chief choreographer. Diaghilev commissioned Balanchine's now famous **Apollo** (1928) and **Prodigal Son** (1929). After the death of Diaghilev, Balanchine freelanced as a choreographer in various European countries. At the invitation of the young American arts patron Lincoln Kirstein – whose dream was to create a ballet company in America – Balanchine came to the United States in late 1933. He founded the School of American Ballet and from it formed the American Ballet. In 1946, he became, with Kirstein, one of the co-founders of Ballet Society, which in 1948 became New York City Ballet, with the New York City Center as its home. Balanchine was ballet master and principal choreographer of New York City Ballet until his death in 1983.

A major artistic figure, and one of the most prolific choreographers of the 20th century, Balanchine revolutionized the look of classical ballet. While his hallmark was the plotless or “abstract” ballet, he was equally well known for his action ballets. Taking classicism as his base, he heightened, quickened, expanded, streamlined, and inverted the fundamentals of the 400-year-old language of academic dance. He succeeded in making the United States an international center of dance. “The home of classic ballet is now America,” he once observed.

Balanchine's legacy to the international dance world, comprising of more than 400 dance works, includes **Serenade** (1934), **Symphony in C** (1947), **Agon** (1957), and **Ballo della Regina** (1978). His first work, **La Nuit**, was a pas de deux to music by Anton Rubinstein in which he partnered fellow student Olga Mungalova at a performance given in 1920 at what is now the Vaganova Choreographic Institute. His last ballet, in 1982, was a new version of **Stravinsky's Variations for Orchestra**.

Apollo:
The First of a Series of Legendary Collaborations with Stravinsky

A *Balanchine Celebration* marks the Houston Ballet premiere of **Apollo**, the choreographer's oldest surviving work. Created in 1928, the ballet tells the story of the birth of the god Apollo, and his education by three of the muses in the arts. Calliope personifies poetry and rhythm, Polyhymnia

represents mime, and Terpsichore combines poetry and gesture in dance. In a final dance, Apollo and the muses ascend to Parnassus.

Commented Mr. Welch, “**Apollo** is Balanchine’s masterpiece. It is amazing how extraordinarily modern and relevant it is even today, more than seventy-five years after it was first created.”

The creation of **Apollo** is significant in dance history in several respects. It is the first work that Balanchine choreographed to music by Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky, who possessed a strong interest in Greek mythology, conceived of and composed the score as a ballet. It was with this work, his first ballet set to the music of Stravinsky, that Balanchine, at age 24, achieved international recognition and began his lifelong partnership with the composer. Balanchine once observed, “Stravinsky – anything he writes can be danced to.”

Apollo also furthered Balanchine's development as a choreographer, forcing him to analyze his choreographic style and motivation. Writing in The International Dictionary of Ballet, Jody Leader has noted, “With **Apollo**, Balanchine began to strip down ballet, clearing away the multiple choices to the one choice that was inevitable, unique to each piece. He was influenced by Stravinsky, who believed the highest expression in dance was absolute purity – dancing with no meaning apart from itself....All the choreography he did after **Apollo** was affected by this realization.”

“I look back upon **Apollo** as the turning point in my life,” Balanchine said.

For the next half century, he continued to revise and refine **Apollo**, cutting both music and dance and eventually omitting scenery. It is one of New York City Ballet’s signature works and is also danced by companies around the world. Houston Ballet will perform this landmark ballet with the birth scene and apotheosis, both part of the original work, intact.

Performances Include Many Role Debuts

Houston Ballet’s premiere of **Apollo** will feature role debuts by three of the company’s male principals: Simon Ball, Zdenek Konvalina and Andrew Murphy. Simon Ball, who is looking

forward to performing this masterpiece, described the challenges that the role presents: “Being that Apollo is a god, there is little room for error. Every step, angle and motion must be calculated for maximum effect. Another challenge is the sheer amount of time on stage – there is not really a time to leave the stage and shake out the muscles.” Mr. Ball continued, “I think **Apollo** is one of the best ballets Balanchine ever created for a man. **Apollo** and **Prodigal Son** are not only two of the best roles for men in the Balanchine repertoire, but also in all of ballet.”

Zdenek Konvalina, agreeing with his fellow dancers, said “I think that **Apollo** is Balanchine’s best ballet. The role was created for and danced by the world’s best dancers, so the challenge for me is to follow in their footsteps. I look forward to making my mark with this ballet.”

The chance to dance Apollo was a strong incentive for new principal Andrew Murphy to join the company. When he discovered that Houston Ballet would perform the work, he said that it “was one of the things that made me decide to come to Houston. **Apollo** is one of Balanchine’s works that I’ve always wanted to do.”

La Valse:
An Evocative Mood Piece Set to the Music of Ravel

Set to the music of Maurice Ravel, **La Valse** received its world premiere by New York City Ballet at City Center in New York on February 20, 1951, featuring Tanaquil LeClerq, Nicholas Magallanes, and Francisco Moncion in the principal roles. The work entered Houston Ballet’s repertoire in May 1988 and was revived in September 1996.

The first part of the ballet, set to the eight “Valses Nobles et Sentimentales,” is a series of extremely elegant *divertissements* which require the polished, and sometimes mannered, dancing of several soloists. Solos, duets, and small groups, all waltzing, move through a variety of designs and delicately tinted moods. Each waltz is used by Balanchine to strike a different mood and to project a growing eerie undercurrent as a prelude to the second part of the ballet.

In the second movement, set to Ravel’s “La Valse,” a sense of doom intrudes. A ballerina, dressed in dazzling white, enters with her partner, and they engage in a soft and tender dance. A male

figure, clad all in black, enters and slowly approaches the girl. The girl in white is attracted to this figure of death. As she approaches him, he offers her a jet black necklace. She puts it on and gazes at herself in a horrifyingly cracked mirror. Completely under the spell of the stranger, she puts on the long black gloves and black overdress he has provided and accepts a bouquet of black flowers. He takes her in his arms and spins her around the ballroom until she falls dead in his arms.

La Valse:
A Young Dancer in the Spotlight

Houston native Erin Patak, who is nineteen, will dance the role of The Girl in White. An apprentice with the company who trained in Clear Lake, Texas, this is Ms. Patak's first leading role with Houston Ballet. Ms. Patak commented, "This is a tremendously exciting opportunity for me. It's rare for somebody at my level be cast in the lead, and everybody in the company has been extremely supportive and encouraging. Dancing with Andrew Murphy is fun, and I'm really excited about performing the role." Pacific Northwest Ballet co-artistic director Francia Russell, the Balanchine repetiteur who staged **La Valse** for Houston Ballet, recalls casting Ms. Patak: "The first thing that struck me about Erin was a wistful expression in her beautiful, dark eyes. Discovering later her musicality and fresh, but secure, technique, I became convinced that she was made for the role of The Girl in White." Principal Barbara Bears will be featured as The Girl in White on opening night.

Theme and Variations:
A Tribute to the Imperial Russian Ballet of Balanchine's Youth

Rounding out the program is Balanchine's **Theme and Variations**, the grandest tribute to his alma mater, the Imperial Russian Ballet. Balanchine created the work for American Ballet Theatre Principal Dancers Alicia Alonso and Igor Youskevitch, and it premiered on November 26, 1947 at the City Center in New York City.

Although Balanchine once said, "I am more American than Russian," he still turned to the music of the great Russian composers, notably Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky, for his ballets. In fact, Balanchine had a mystical kinship with Tchaikovsky. In Solomon Voklov's Balanchine's

Tchaikovsky, Balanchine stated, “The world Tchaikovsky lived in no longer exists. I’m not very old but I still remember that world... I was born some ten years after Tchaikovsky’s death. My teachers were people who knew Tchaikovsky, who talked with him....My first time on stage was in a Tchaikovsky ballet....Thanks to **The Sleeping Beauty**, I fell in love with ballet. [Tchaikovsky] is like a father to me. In everything that I did to Tchaikovsky’s music, I sensed his help.”

Set to the music of Tchaikovsky’s Suite No. 3, in G, **Theme and Variations** is an obvious homage to **The Sleeping Beauty**, replicating the classical pas de deux. Another aspect Balanchine explored in this ballet is the classic ballet training, focusing on preparatory movements that were developed to train and warm-up the dancer's body. Taking these steps further, Balanchine produced some very challenging choreography.

Notable Balanchine Repetiteurs Work with Houston Ballet

Patricia Neary, the American-born dancer, ballet director, and teacher, staged **Apollo** for Houston Ballet. Appearing from 1960 - 1968 with New York City Ballet where she rose to the rank of soloist, Ms. Neary created roles in Balanchine’s version of **Raymonda Variations** (1961) and in **Jewels** (1967). Ms. Neary stages Balanchine ballets internationally for The Balanchine Trust, an organization which is devoted to preserving the integrity of George Balanchine’s works. In this capacity, she has staged over 34 of Mr. Balanchine’s works in 40 European and Far East cities as well as throughout the United States. Ms. Neary has a very fruitful history with Houston Ballet, having staged Balanchine’s **The Four Temperaments**, **Theme and Variations** and **Agon** for the company over the past eight years.

Francia Russell, co-artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet with her husband Kent Stowell, staged **La Valse** for Houston Ballet both at the company premiere of the work in 1988 and again in 2004. Ms. Russell joined New York City Ballet as a young dancer in 1956, appeared in the premiere of Balanchine’s legendary **Agon** in 1957, was promoted to soloist in 1959, and was named ballet mistress of the company in 1964. One of the first ballet mistresses chosen by Balanchine to reproduce his works, Mr. Russell has staged over 100 of his ballets throughout the United States

and Europe. During the 1988-1989 season of the Kirov Ballet in Leningrad, she staged the historic first authorized performances of Balanchine's works in his homeland.

Victoria Simon, another New York City Ballet dancer selected by George Balanchine to restage his ballets, set **Theme and Variations** on Houston Ballet. As ballet mistress for The George Balanchine Trust, she has staged over 25 of his pieces for more than 80 companies around the world. A former soloist with New York City Ballet, Ms. Simon is one of the most sought after re-creators of Balanchine's ballets.

The French dancer and ballet director Violette Verdy will be in Houston in May 2004 teaching company and academy classes at Houston Ballet. Another Balanchine star, she premiered several of Balanchine's works, including **Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux** and **Jewels**. She began her career with the Ballets des Champs-Élysées in 1945, and later joined Roland Petit's Ballets de Paris in 1950. She was a principal with New York City Ballet from 1958 to 1977, and was the director of the Paris Opera Ballet from 1977 to 1980.

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A BALANCHINE CELEBRATION
FACT SHEET

WHAT: **APOLLO** (1928) (Houston Ballet Premiere)
Music by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)
Choreography by George Balanchine
Costumes by André Bauchant
Lighting by Christina Giannelli

LA VALSE (1951)
Music by Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
“Valses nobles et sentimentales” and “La Valse”
Choreography by George Balanchine
Costumes by Karinska and Jean Rosenthal
Lighting by Tony Tucci

THEME AND VARIATIONS (1947)
Music by Peter I. Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Choreography by George Balanchine
Costumes by Karinska
Lighting by Tony Tucci

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**ABOUT THE
PROGRAM:**

From May 27 - June 6, 2004, Houston Ballet honors the centennial of the great Russian choreographer George Balanchine with *A Balanchine Celebration*, featuring the company premiere of **Apollo**, which tells the story of the sun god, the elegant **La Valse**, and **Theme and Variations**, Balanchine’s tribute to the grandeur of the Imperial Russian Ballet.

WHEN: **At 7:30 pm on May 27, 29 and June 4, 5, 2004**
At 2:00 pm on May 30 and June 6, 2004

WHERE: Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center
Texas at Smith Streets in downtown Houston

TICKETS: \$11.50 -- \$115.50, Call (713) 227 ARTS or 1 800 828 ARTS
Also available at Houston Ballet Box Office at Wortham Theater Center downtown
at Texas at Smith Street, or purchase tickets online at www.houstonballet.org.

FOR MORE

INFORMATION: Visit Houston Ballet on the World Wide Web at <http://www.houstonballet.org>