



Suki Schorer teaching Chinese ballet students.

Balanchine In China

By Edward Swift

In 1984, Violette Verdy and Maryellen Cabot lead a group of Americans on an *Earthwatch* expedition to China. The purpose of the trip was to make a study of the resurgence of dance after the ten-year Cultural Revolution which ended in 1976. Among the group were Joan Goldhamer, a social scientist who studies ballet and lives in Los Angeles, and Joan Wohlstetter, a dance teacher from New York. Little did they know at the time that they would become fund raisers for a cultural exchange that would send ballet masters to China to teach the Balanchine style and to stage ballets.

"So much was lost during the Cultural Revolution," Joan Wohlstetter said in a recent telephone interview. "On our trip, we found that the Chinese had a real hunger to learn. For the most part, the ballets they danced were heavily influenced by the Soviets. They had heard of Balanchine and were anxious to catch up on all the things they had missed. So when we came back home we wanted to do more to help them."

With the approval of Barbara Horgan, Executrix of the Balanchine Estate, the two Joans set out to raise enough money to send ballet masters to the Central Ballet Company of Beijing and to the Shanghai Ballet. The Center for

U.S.-China Arts Exchange at Columbia University agreed to operate as the umbrella organization and to accept grant money, and the Chinese agreed to cover the expenses of the ballet masters while in China. Three American companies, ITT, Occidental Petroleum Corporation and The H.J. Heinz Company Foundation, made generous financial contributions.

Then Francia Russell, Suki Schorer and Karin Von Aroldingen, all teachers of the Balanchine style and former members of NYCB, were selected to carry out the project. Ms. Russell, now Co-artistic Director of the Pacific Northwest Ballet, made two three-week trips to Shanghai. The objective of the first trip (November 1986) was to teach company class and assist in selecting a Balanchine ballet to be performed. In January of 1987 she returned for another three weeks to continue teaching and to stage the chosen ballet.

On the first trip Ms. Russell took videos of six ballets, *Concerto Barocco*, *Allegro Brillante*, *Chaconne*, *The Four Temperaments*, *Theme and Variations*, and *La Valse*; ballets that illustrate the major characteristics of the Balanchine style.

Recently in New York to audition dancers for her own company, Ms. Rus-

sell took time out to discuss her trips to China. "I decided that the best ballet for them would be *La Valse*," she said. "Two minutes into the tape they agreed. It was a good choice because there are many solo parts. That gave me the opportunity to work individually. Twelve different dancers have solos, which is very unusual for any ballet."

On that first trip she discovered that the Shanghai Ballet Company was already doing a version of *Allegro Brillante*.

"I said, 'Wait a minute,' I thought I was the first person to teach a Balanchine ballet in China. 'You are,' they said. 'We learned *Allegro Brillante* from the TV.'"

Since Balanchine had restaged the ballet for the "Dance In America" series, the patterns were different from the actual stage version. "So, I helped them clean it up while I was there," Ms. Russell said. "Then toward the end of the first trip I began teaching some of the solos from *La Valse*."

She made the second trip to Shanghai in January to stage *La Valse* which was also performed later in the month. "The principals were absolutely excellent," she said, showing off a photo album the Chinese had given her. "The soloists were all good too. It was working with individuals that was so thrilling. They

were so responsive and cooperative. The Chinese respond very much to being singled out."

The strong teacher-student relationship was particularly apparent to her. "This is a very important relationship to the Chinese," she said. "It is inherent in their culture. With the dancers I worked with most closely, I developed a strong rapport, and in a strange way it excluded the others. I never play favorites in my company, and I didn't intend to do that in China, but it happened like water running downhill. There was no way to stop it. The dancers that I chose for parts became very attached to me. One of the boys said, 'We know you will forget us, but you will be our teacher forever.'"

"And," Ms. Russell added, "I will never forget them. How could I? I have never seen dancers improve so much in so short a time."

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In March, Suki Schorer was sent to the Central Ballet in Beijing. We discussed her three-week trip in the Green Room of the New York State Theatre. "The purpose of the trip was to introduce them to a way of moving and dancing that they hadn't met," she said. "Basically I was sent there to teach ballet class. We didn't know exactly what ballet Karin was going to stage, so I brought videos of her teaching repertoire."

Ms. Von Aroldingen felt that the best ballet for the Beijing company might be *Serenade*, and when Ms. Schorer saw the dancers she agreed. "I gave them steps out of the ballet just to get them used to doing certain combinations together. They found some of the combinations a little bit difficult at first. For example, in *Serenade* and *Symphony in C*, Balanchine has his dancers do *sauté*, step, *jeté battu*. The dancers at Central Ballet had never done the steps in that order. (They had always practiced a *glissade* instead of simply stepping.) That was awkward for them at first. But they caught on fast. I also gave them *chassé* turns and other steps from *Serenade*. I wanted to show them how in class you can develop what you need on stage."

One of the first combinations she gave was rather fast. The dancers simply looked at her and laughed, a typical reaction for any dancer who is being exposed to the Balanchine speed for the first time. "Tell them that's the tempo I want to see," Ms. Schorer told the interpreter. Everyday, thereafter, she gave

the combination, and everyday the dancers improved. By the second week, they no longer laughed; they did the step perfectly.

"We also worked on landing from jumps and *relevé* on pointe, going through the foot," she explained. "It was their tendency to come down from pointe directly onto the heel so the *plié* stopped. They developed the control of slowly coming down from pointe, so the *plié* becomes a continuous movement."

During the second week, the Chinese assigned a dance teacher to observe Ms. Schorer's classes. The teacher notated some of the combinations at the barre. She also notated tempo, and corrections, accents and phrasing of steps. The notation was done in Chinese at the Central Ballet, but in Shanghai, they had worked out their own system of dance notation. "Their notation is just beautiful," Ms. Russell recalled. "They used a combination of little drawings,

cally the same.

Both companies are self-contained in that they have their own housing, their own toe shoe makers, costumers, and at the Central Ballet, they even have their own photographer. "In Beijing," Ms. Schorer recalled, "the photographer was an older dancer. He had his camera in class. He would just run around between combinations and take pictures. Then he would return to the barre."

"What I'd like to do is take about seven or eight of these dancers home with me," Ms. Schorer said. "I mean, I'd like to teach them everyday here at SAB and let them see how other dancers work. I think that's very important."

For two of the Chinese dancers, studying in the United States is about to become a reality. On Francia Russell's invitation, and due to the success of her own fund raising efforts, the Shanghai Ballet is sending two dancers to work



Francia Russell in rehearsal with Chinese students.

very expressive stick figures, Chinese characters, and French. They use a pen, not a pencil, so they can't erase, and they don't seem to feel the need."

At the Central Ballet the dancers live in a dormitory. Those who are married live in small apartments with little kitchens. Those who are single have a room and a roommate. Everything at the Central Ballet starts early. The classes begin at eight-thirty a.m. and end around ten-fifteen. At eleven-forty-five, they break for a two-hour lunch. The dancers can either eat in the cafeteria or in their rooms. After lunch, they go back to class or to rehearsal and work until about five o'clock. Their evening performances also start early, around seven-thirty, and end by nine-fifteen. At the Shanghai Ballet Company, it is basi-

with the Pacific Northwest Ballet. "I explained to them," said Ms. Russell, "that it is very important for Americans to see that Chinese dancers are not short and inadequately trained, and that they have long legs and beautiful feet as well as technique."

With the arrival of the Chinese dancers in Seattle one might think that this cultural exchange has come full circle, but in reality it is only just beginning. Next, Karin Von Aroldingen will stage *Serenade* in Beijing, and after that, who knows what else might be in store?

It is a tremendous understatement to say that this project has come a long way since that *Earthwatch* expedition in 1984, when Joan Goldhamer and Joan Wohlstetter decided to try their hand at fund raising.