

The Critic and the Artist

A CRITIC'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ART OF DANCE MAY TAKE MANY FORMS

by MINDY ALOFF

"Those who can, do; those who can't, write reviews."

—Novelist Lisa Zeidner reviewing Mayra Montero's novel *Deep Purple*, translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman. Its subject, according to Zeidner, is "the classical music critic Agustin Cabán... [who] cares so deeply about music that he has embarked on a lifelong campaign to bed every great virtuosa."

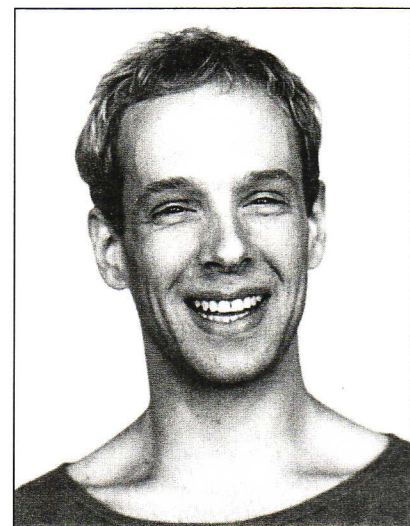
WHEN I AGREED TO WRITE something here on the topic of how, as a critic, I've helped choreographers and dancers outside the act of reviewing, it was suggested that the relationship between critics and their subjects is typically adversarial. Really? So much for *les jeunes hommes* of France's New Wave, who began by writing about the movies and ended up directing them. The enchantingly dyspeptic drama critic George Bernard Shaw was an intimate friend (to say the least) of several of the most esteemed actresses of the 19th and 20th centuries—to the extent that, out of his friendship for Eleonora Duse, he wrote the most excoriating analysis of her major rival, Sarah Bernhardt, that exists in the English language (an analysis that is also one of the most vivid documentations of Bernhardt's acting and stage presence ever to appear in print). Although Montero's novel may lend a little desperately needed glamor to music critics—who, like dance critics, tend to have the reputation of being old sticks-in-the-mud—a number of music critics have actually been at least as accomplished, if not far better musicians, than most of the musicians they reviewed. One was Claude Debussy. Another was E.T.A. Hoffmann, a teacher of music, who composed operas and *singspiels* himself. In the century just past,

Virgil Thomson wrote music for the theater, the movies, and the concert hall; for his day job, he served as chief music critic at *The New York Herald Tribune*.

There have even been dance critics and editors who, while writing, have related happily to their subjects.

Théophile Gautier, a contributor to the libretto for *Giselle*, had more than a passing acquaintance with Carlotta Grisi, the original exponent of the title role, whom he also reviewed. Edwin Denby would sometimes be invited to rehearsals of works-in-progress by such choreographers as Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor. Both Arlene Croce and David Gordon have published reminiscences concerning the years when Croce would serve Gordon as a Virgil, taking him to ballets he might not otherwise have seen. David Vaughan serves as the archivist for the Cunningham Dance Foundation. Joan Acocella's biography of Mark Morris, whom she has continued to review both positively and negatively, is routinely sold at Morris company performances, thereby benefiting both dance company and critic. For several years during the last century, Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of *The New Republic*, moonlighted as the formidably knowledgeable musical advisor for Twyla Tharp.

The world of dance is so small, in fact, that a critic of 20 years or more experience as an observer in the theater has to work strenuously not to offer advice off the page: critics of considerable experience and high taste



Christopher Caines

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often know more about what works in the theater—i.e., what might be useful to keep over subsequent seasons—than many young artists who are starting out or mature artists who are trying to broaden their range, simply because the critics have sat in the audience and studied the results of theatrical experiment so often. In the 30 years or so that I've been publishing essays and journalism, I've given considerable help to dancers and choreographers (most of it in the form of editorial assistance and referrals),

and I imagine that I'm just typical. Some don't know that I've helped them by forwarding their names for awards, residencies, and fellowships. I was also glad to help individuals who asked for advice directly, such as Allegra Kent, whose autobiography I read in various incarnations and for whom I found an editorial advisor who could counsel her in dealing with an editor's demand that she rewrite the book in the style of John Dos Passos. Occasionally, I've taken the initiative, too: in the 1990s, I sent Paul Taylor the CD of a score by the young composer David Israel.

The choreographer

used it to make a dance called *Prime Numbers*, and he also commissioned a new score from Israel for a dance that became *The Word*. Yuriko Kikuchi, the choreographer and Martha Graham dancer, has actually published an essay on a topic that I suggested (her work with Jerome Robbins on the Broadway and Hollywood versions of *The King and I*) and that I had the privilege of editing. In the case of a few artists, though, the friendship is such that I can't look at their work without being ineluctably influenced by my good feelings toward them. The choreographer Sally Hess—whom I first met nearly 35 years ago, when we were both

studying with Dan Wagoner and Ernestine Stodelle, in New Haven—has become such a good friend that I no longer review her dances. Sally has given me moral support and guiding wisdom in very dark moments. Review her dancemaking? I wouldn't have the distance.

What I did for Sally was to introduce her to the choreographer Christopher Caines, who devised for her choreography that was both deeply musical in itself and exquisitely fitted to her qualities as a dancer. I'd met Christopher in the latter part of the 1990s, when he was the Assistant Editor at Oxford University Press for the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, to which I'd contributed the entry on dance photography. He said that he was also a choreographer, and I added him to the group of youthful dancemakers whose work I followed in the theater. In 1999, he produced *Arias*, an evening of solos, duets, and larger ensembles to ravishing live music, much of it from the Italian Baroque period but also by Handel, Fauré, Schönberg, and other composers of lieder and songs. No one else under 40 I'd seen in New York had demonstrated such commanding musicality and sensitivity to the strengths of individual dancers and also produced works that cohered in an overarching structure from beginning to end. I wrote an essay about *Arias*; then, instead of continuing to review Christopher, I chose to help him as an advisor.

Below is the transcript from a conversation between Christopher and myself, conducted for this article in order to give you a sense of the quality and scope of our friendship, of the situations in which he has sought my advice, and how he thinks I have influenced him as an artist:

MINDY ALOFF: So, Christopher, this interview is about what used to be called being a nuisance or a busy-body on the part of a critic, who storms into the studio, saying, "I think you should do this and that!" When you ask a critic to come look at something [before its premiere], what is it you expect?

CHRISTOPHER CAINES: First of all, I should say that you're the only critic I've ever had a relationship with remotely like ours. I met you first in another context, working for Oxford. You thought I seemed like a nice fellow, and you said, "I'd like to see your work [for the stage]; invite me." So I did. Something a critic can provide is encouragement. It's hard to believe in yourself when you go through the hardships of making dances, in this town anyway.

It's absolutely vital for a choreographer, when dealing with dancers, to be precise and clear, and economical in the use of language, to prevent misunderstanding and to save time.

You've recommended things that I should see, which has made a big difference. And you've very kindly asked me to accompany you to the theater to see, especially, a lot of ballets, which I really needed to see and could not afford.

There is another critic, Elizabeth Zimmer [at the *Village Voice*], who's been very encouraging to me, both in print and vocally, whom I've talked to and gone to the theater with a couple of times.

You're the only critic I've ever invited to come and see my work in rehearsal. Generally, you mostly just say, "Keep on keepin' on," which sounds banal, but is very helpful. Because doubts tend to plague one, like bats at twilight, just before a première.

In one instance, you certainly saved me from a crucial aesthetic mistake: the way I'd conceived of the ending of the *Jánacék* [Snow, 2002]. It's really hard to be [a dancer] in your own dances. I'd wanted, for emotional reasons, to plonk myself down by the pianist and drop my head in my hands. And you said that, in that instance, breaking the frame that way was not wise. The pianist was upstage left. She had a kind of immaculate zone of untouchability around her. So you saved me from one very silly idea.

I always run my titles by you.

MA: I was an editor. Titles are also so personal, especially for choreographers.

Now, I came to the dress rehearsal two days before the opening of your *Italian Suite* [2003]. And it was the first rehearsal [of a dance I'd attended by CC] where I mentioned that a gesture didn't read [wasn't clear in its literal significance].

CC: You thought it misread. [Dancer Sabra Perry] was defiant [holding up a clenched fist].

MA: It looked like she was holding something invisible.

CC: Right. Which is not how I'd made it. Of course [since CC was also performing in the work], I hadn't been watching [the entire stage picture]. I told that to the dancer the next day, and she was a little puzzled. She said, "Well, what do you want?" I said, "It just has to not look as if you're holding something. You're making this defiant gesture with your arm, but you're not gripping anything." And she said, "Okay."

The most important thing I've had from you, really, is general encouragement. Also, a climate of discussion

about my work, both in print and in person, that helps me understand what my aspiration is as an artist, some of which is always hidden from one.

MA: But you're unusually verbal. Many choreographers are not so ready to [speak about their work]. And there's no reason why anyone should. You just seem to enjoy words, you have a background as a linguist and a writer. Your day job is as an editor.

CC: Actually, I don't think there's any excuse for choreographers being inarticulate. I think sometimes that's kind of a pose. The very first exercise that Claire Mallardi, whom I studied with [at Harvard] would do in choreography class, was one in which she'd have all the class except one person go on the stage or in the studio space, and the choreographer had to sit, or kneel, whatever, in the front, from the audience's perspective; and without using any gesture, or any demonstration physically at all, make a dance, a brief one, about a minute long, and instruct the dancers using nothing but language. Her point in doing this, which is frustrating and very artificial, was that dancing is a language of movement, motion, gesture, travelling-steps. That it's absolutely vital for a choreographer, when dealing with dancers, to be precise and clear, and economical in the use of language, to prevent misunderstanding and to save time. Because in the real professional world, you don't have forever to gab.

MA: Do you interpret your own work?

CC: To myself. But I'm reluctant to interpret my work in public or to audience members. If you were to interview me in public about my dances, I wouldn't accept questions from you or the audience about the meaning of my work. In general, it's not fair to the audience. If artists are interpreting their own work, then you limit the audience's response. You make people feel wrong.

MINDY ALOFF's reviews, essays, profiles, and interviews on dance, books, music, and movies have been published internationally in many periodicals, including *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Threepenny Review*. She serves as a consultant to The George Balanchine Foundation and teaches dance history, dance criticism, and First-Year Seminar at Barnard College.