

George Balanchine, the Choreographer Who Loved Women

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George Balanchine, age 12, as Cupid in *The Sleeping Beauty*

(image by Martha Swope, in Volkov's *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky*, 1985)

George Balanchine was arguably the greatest choreographer of the 20th century and is by far my personal favorite. I own more than a dozen books devoted to his biography, choreography, ballet technique, and teaching methods and a similar number of video recordings of his ballets.

Jennifer Homans' monumental biography of Balanchine, *Mr. B: George Balanchine's 20th Century*, was published in 2022. It contains a fascinating account that begins with the adolescent Balanchine sneaking into a closed theater:

As he moved through the building, he came upon the dressing rooms and the perfumed scent of powder and fresh makeup. When he was later telling this story, his mind traveled at the same moment to how as a child he

liked to dress up in girls' clothing. "Absolutely, and now you could think that it could be probably perverse, like sissy, but probably I liked girls and wanted to put dress on me--probably something screwy about that, too, that Freud would analyze," he mischievously said. And then his mind moved to how he and his brother would sit in bed at night in their shared bedroom . . . talking about the great seductive beauty of the local woman dentist.

Balanchine's account made me recall a similar experience from my pre-transition boyhood, at about age 12. My female cousin was to be married and I attended the ceremony with my family. At some point I discovered that the room in which the bride and bridesmaids had changed into their dresses was unoccupied. I entered and

quickly made my way through the room, examining the clothing the young women had removed and inhaling the faint scent their perfume, feeling fascinated, excited, and ashamed by my intense interest. I imagined asking my cousin to let me try on one of the dresses. Impossible, but exciting to think about.

Balanchine adored women, especially beautiful young women of a specific physical type. He was devoted to them throughout his life and made them the primary focus of his remarkable creative energy. Homans wrote that "because he was a man who loved women, sensuality and love were always a part of [his dance making]." He married four of his ballerinas, lived for seven years in a common-law marriage with another, and desperately attempted to marry yet another, Suzanne Farrell, his greatest muse. His intense heterosexuality was never in doubt.

Yet according to Homans, Balanchine once remarked, "I am not a *male*, I am water and air." Borrowing a line from Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, he also famously said, "I am not a man but a cloud in trousers." This statement is ambiguous but it implies that Balanchine viewed himself, and perhaps his male body in particular, as somehow insubstantial and vaporous. Certainly it is not an assertion of confident masculine physicality. Homans also wrote that at times Balanchine could appear "almost androgynous or asexual, like an angel."

Balanchine's attitude toward women was deeply reverential. According to Bernard Taper, an earlier biographer, he proclaimed through his ballets that "the only way a man can achieve or approach the liberation of his soul is by the homage and devotion he shows women." At various times Balanchine said or wrote the following:

"In my ballets, woman is first. Men are consorts. God made men to sing the praises of women. They are not equal to men – they are better."

"The ballet is a purely female thing; it is a woman, a garden of beautiful flowers, and man is the gardener."

"Woman is the world and man lives in it."

"Put sixteen girls on a stage and it's everybody – the world. Put sixteen boys and it's nobody."

In two famous photographs Balanchine is shown sitting on the floor while one more of his beautiful young ballerinas are standing and towering over him. The symbolism seems evident: Beautiful young females are the world, and males like him are nobody.

Balanchine attributed his adolescent cross-dressing to his liking girls and acknowledged that it was probably "perverse" and "screwy." Among researchers who study gender identity issues, myself included, there is a widespread consensus that in men who are sexually attracted to women, cross-dressing always reflects an underlying fantasy of being female. Cross-dressing by heterosexual men is an erotic phenomenon, and in the past most psychologists unquestionably would have considered it perverse. And erotic cross-dressing does indeed feel "screwy" to those of us with a compulsion to engage in it: powerful, irresistible, and utterly incomprehensible.

Erotic cross-dressing is the most common manifestation of an unusual sexual orientation called *autogynephilia* ("love of oneself as a woman"), first described by psychologist Ray Blanchard in 1989. He defined autogynephilia as "a male's propensity to be sexually aroused by the thought or image of himself as a female." Autogynephilia is a sexual orientation: If it is present in adolescence it will predictably be present throughout a person's life, albeit with varying intensity. But sexual orientations like autogynephilia are not always apparent to other people, because they feel shameful and are not openly expressed. This was the case with homosexuality until quite recently. Moreover, autogynephilia coexists with and competes with conventional heterosexual attraction: Sometimes autogynephilia can seem to disappear when a man begins a new romantic relationship with a woman, only to reappear when the relationship cools. Based on survey data, nearly 3% of adult males engage in erotic cross-dressing at least occasionally, so autogynephilia is by no means a rare condition.

There is reason to believe that Balanchine not only loved women but also identified with them. He displayed a lifelong interest in feminine attire and costume, and Homans observed that he "dressed the women in his life the way he dressed his wives—the way he dressed up in his mother's finest as a child." The beautiful feminine attire that Balanchine wanted his wives and dancers to wear seemed to be an expression of his own childhood desire to wear beautiful women's clothes. Balanchine also had a habit of giving perfume to the ballerinas he admired, and Homans noted that "he wore perfume too -- a light scent of Coty's Emeraude wafting from a silk foulard." In this Balanchine clearly emulated the women he adored.

It appears therefore that Balanchine probably experienced an autogynephilic sexual orientation of unknown intensity. Autogynephilia is often mild and is expressed only as episodic erotic cross-dressing, usually conducted in private. In other cases it is more severe and is associated with gender dysphoria, intense discomfort with one's biologic sex or gender role. I have not come across any accounts by Balanchine's wives or associates indicating that he engaged in overt cross-dressing during adulthood. This might suggest relatively mild autogynephilic feelings and little or no gender dysphoria. On the other hand, Balanchine repeatedly disavowed his maleness and evidently identified with the women he loved. He believed that women were the only source of beauty and meaning in life and that to be a male was to be nobody. This might suggest more serious gender dysphoria. If Balanchine did experience significant discomfort with his biologic sex or gender role it would have been virtually impossible for him to make sense of his feelings, given the state of knowledge at the time. Indeed, it can be difficult to make sense of such feelings even today.

Balanchine was born in 1904 and spent his adolescence in St. Petersburg, studying ballet at the Imperial Theater School. He graduated in 1921, having survived the Russian revolution and its horrific aftermath. In 1924 he escaped to the freedom and relative prosperity of western Europe. For many years he lived hand-to-mouth, dancing professionally and honing his choreo-

graphic skills. He would have been familiar with effeminate gay men, who then as now were overrepresented in ballet companies, and quickly would have recognized that their form of cross-gender expression was unrelated to his own inclinations. Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld's pioneering book *Die Transvestiten*, published in 1910, described erotic cross-dressing by heterosexual men and might have been a source of insight, but it was essentially unknown outside academic circles. At that time there was no conceptual framework to help men who loved women and fantasized about being women themselves to understand their desires.

In Balanchine's era, how might a man with an autogynephilic sexual orientation try to manage his feelings? One approach might be to engage in serial romantic relationships with beautiful women. Autogynephilic men often believe that if they could only find the right female partner they would be cured of their condition, and it is true that a new romantic relationship often does result in temporary remission of autogynephilic gender dysphoria. Perhaps coincidentally, Balanchine engaged in serial monogamy with five of his ballerinas over the course of his life. A variation of the same strategy would be to habitually put oneself in close proximity to beautiful young women and try to vicariously experience their exquisite physicality. Perhaps coincidentally, that is precisely what Balanchine did throughout his career. Alternatively, one might throw oneself into one's work in an effort to push aside distressing feelings. Balanchine's immense choreographic genius, which he recognized and was eager to express, could have made such a strategy quite effective.

The first significant book addressing gender dysphoria, Dr. Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, was not published until 1966, when Balanchine was age 62. The concept of autogynephilic sexual orientation was first set forth by Blanchard in 1989, six years after Balanchine's death. If Balanchine had been born in 1954 instead of 1904, who could say what his path might have been?

(revised December 2023)