

Title: The Prodigal Son Returns: Balanchine in the Soviet Union
Author: Megan Race, Yale University

Abstract:

In 1962, George Balanchine brought the New York City Ballet to the Soviet Union on a tour sponsored by the State Department. It was a triumphant visit for the company and for American ballet in general; the New York City Ballet's performance of Balanchine's choreography demonstrated that a divergent choreographic tradition had emerged in the United States. This American ballet was rooted in the classical training perfected under the imperial Russian system, but it did away with many of the hallmarks of classical ballet that continued to develop in the Soviet ballet theaters over the course of the twentieth century. Ultimately the New York City Ballet tour showed that Balanchine's American institution was a worthy adversary for the Soviet ballet juggernaut. I examine the way in which the U.S. State Department and Balanchine strategically planned the tour, and how critics in the Soviet Union received the company. Additionally, I look at how the New York City Ballet represented the preeminent American balletic institution during the Cold War, especially in light of the fact that its chief rival for this title, the staunchly classical American Ballet Theatre, had already toured the Soviet Union in 1960. I question the importance of Balanchine's Russian roots; whether Balanchine's "formalist" neoclassical choreography presented during the tour posed a threat to the socialist realist/classical tradition that dominated Soviet ballet of this period; and how the introduction of Balanchine's neoclassical choreography influenced the wave of defections of Soviet dancers to the West in the 1960s and 70s.