



# Barre None

JENNIFER HOMANS PRESENTS BALLET'S UNTOLD STORY

by Amy Rosenberg

In a 1965 article for *Life* magazine, world-famous choreographer George Balanchine wrote, “In ballet, a complicated story is impossible to tell. We cannot use words. We can’t dance synonyms.” This may be true, but the story of ballet itself—its role in history, culture, and politics, its significance, and its development over time—is indeed complicated. Now, with the publication of Jennifer Homans’s *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet* (Random House), that story has been fully told.

Named one of the 10 best books of 2010 by *The New York Times* and called by one *Times* critic “the only truly definitive history” of ballet, *Apollo’s Angels* traces the evolution of the art from its origins in the courts of Renaissance France, through its embellishment in 19th-century Russia, to its most recent apogee with the New York City Ballet in the late 20th centu-

ry. It goes further than that too: The finale of its more than 500 pages is an epilogue titled “The Masters Are Dead and Gone.” In it, Homans (GSAS ’08), a distinguished scholar-in-residence who danced professionally for many years, observes that Balanchine’s death in 1983 marked the start of a slow decline for ballet, a collapse into present-day mediocrity. “[B]allet seemed to grind to a crawl,” she writes, “as if the tradition itself had become clogged and exhausted.” The art, she concludes, is dying. Her remarks set off a fierce debate on blogs and in print, with critics, balletomanes, dancers, and scholars all passionately arguing either that ballet is dead or that it is vibrantly alive.

For her part, Homans is just glad that people are talking about it. Denounced for her grim predictions (one critic accused her of “living in the past”; another of “railing against [her] own mortali-

ty”), she says no one hopes she is wrong more than she does. As she puts it: “I have spent my life devoted to this art form. I, of all people, am going to be standing up when I see something worth standing up for.”

It’s no exaggeration to say that ballet has been her life’s devotion. Homans, who grew up in Chicago, began dancing when she was 8 years old. She liked it and “just kept going,” she says. Like most professional ballerinas, she did not attend college immediately. After graduating from high school, she enrolled in the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and then moved to New York and studied at Balanchine’s School of American Ballet. She performed with the Chicago Lyric Opera Ballet, the San Francisco Ballet, and the Pacific Northwest Ballet, dancing a range of 19th- and 20th-century classics. When she was 26, Homans suffered an injury that



LEFT: BALANCHINE'S PLOTLESS PRODUCTION *JEWELS* (1967), WITH ITS EXTREME EXTENSIONS AND JAZZ-AGE HIP THRUSTS, WAS EMBLEMATIC OF A NEW ERA IN BALLET. RIGHT: IN 18TH-CENTURY FRANCE, DANCE FASHIONS FOLLOWED COURT DRESS, INCLUDING THIS COSTUME INSPIRED BY MARIE ANTOINETTE.

kept her off the stage and in bed for a while. That's when her focus began to shift.

"During that period, I spent all of my time reading," she explains. "Having come from an academic family"—both of her parents taught at the University of Chicago—"I'd always had reading as a part of my life. Also, this was in the mid-'80s, and the dance world was in an uncertain state. I found that I wasn't getting the kind of stimulation I'd been getting earlier on." Homans made the difficult decision to stop dancing professionally. She enrolled at Columbia University, eventually earning an undergraduate degree in French literature, and then went on to get her PhD in modern European history from NYU.

But she couldn't move away from ballet entirely. "It was still a passion," she says, "and studying history made me realize how little I knew about its past." She began

to try to find out more but had trouble locating compelling accounts. "There aren't many good books about the history of ballet," she says. "The more I read the more I realized that what I was looking for just wasn't there, and maybe I could write it."

Fourteen years later, *Apollo's Angels* is proof of the extraordinary effort that went into doing so. The same critics who took issue with Homans's dire outlook praised the depth of her research, her "piercing intelligence," and the "heart" and "feeling" in her words. The bulk of her research took about 10 years, carrying her to archives throughout Europe—but a large portion of her work took place at the barre, too. "In order to tell ballet as an intellectual history, you have to get behind the steps and understand their organizing principals," she says. "For many of the periods I studied, I took ballet masters' notes and fragments I found in the archives and tried to visualize and concretize the dances, to feel what it was like doing them."

Getting behind the steps allowed Homans to place the dances in context—to understand, for example, how the movements changed after the French Revolution because new animosity toward traditional, aristocratic male dancers created unprecedented opportunities for ballerinas. This, Homans believes, is what knowledge of ballet's history should do—increase our understanding of the nuances of history in general. That's why, in her classes on European and Mediterranean culture, she focuses on dance: "It's a marginalized subject within the humanities," she says. "There are introductory courses for literature, art, and theater, but dance has not had a place as a serious academic field." But the story of ballet, she believes, is a crucial part of the story of Western civilization. "In fact," she says, "dance in general is part of our civilization." ■

## ■ bibliofile

FORTUNATE SONS: THE 120 CHINESE BOYS WHO CAME TO AMERICA, WENT TO SCHOOL, AND REVOLUTIONIZED AN ANCIENT CIVILIZATION (W.W. NORTON)

LIEL LEIBOVITZ  
VISITING ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT THE STEINHARDT SCHOOL OF CULTURE, EDUCATION, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND MATTHEW MILLER



While China's quest to become a major power may seem a recent phenomenon, the authors illuminate an earlier era of critical reform. In the 19th century, as its empire teetered amid a brutal civil war and the West's scramble to "open up China" to trade, the Qing Dynasty sent 120 boys to the United States to learn the keys to technological innovation. Their stories—particularly that of Yung Wing, the first Chinese to graduate from Yale College—reveal an influential coterie caught between nativism in America and mistrust for the newfangled ways they brought back home. Nevertheless, this cohort planted the seeds of modernity, engineering railroads into China's hinterlands and reshaping its methods of banking and international negotiations. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* pronounced it a "gripping tale" that "reads more like a novel than an obscure slice of history."

—Nicole Pezold

DAY OF HONEY: A MEMOIR OF FOOD, LOVE, AND WAR (FREE PRESS)

ANNIA CIEZADLO  
GSAS '00



Annia Ciezadlo's memoir is a delicious fusion of literary genres: one dash travel guide, one pinch romance novel, and a hearty helping of Middle Eastern history and food lore. With humor and honesty, Ciezadlo tells the story of her marriage to Mohamad, a Shiite Muslim from Lebanon, and how the newlyweds—both journalists—were touched by the September 11 attacks and the Iraq War, which the couple covered from Beirut and Baghdad for *Newsday*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The New Republic*. The author's entry into her new surroundings is through food as she experiments with the cuisine, preparing such delicacies as *Batata wa Bayd Mfarakeh* (crumbled potatoes and eggs) and *Yakhnet Kusa* (zucchini stew). *Saveur* heralded it as a "warm, hilarious, terrifying, thrilling, insanely smart debut book." —Carly Okyle



# COURT JESTERS

IN THE KINGDOM OF HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS, A PAIR OF SCRIBES WRITES FOR THEIR LIVES

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

**B**ack in 1988, a group of 11 feisty underclassmen started a comedy troupe at NYU that soon transformed into the absurdist MTV series *The State*—a superdry, bitingly sarcastic sketch-comedy show for Generation X that gained a cult following and launched the careers of its young stars, nearly all of whom still work in show business today. Thomas Lennon (TSOA '92) and Robert Ben Garant (TSOA non-grad alum) are two of those now-grown-up misfits, best known for creating the Comedy Central hit *Reno 911!* But the funny-men are also prolific screenwriters—having penned feature films together for almost every major studio over the past 10 years. So when the self-described “manic” scribes needed something to do during the 2008 writers’ strike, they turned to a new medium.

In *Writing Movies for Fun and Profit: How We Made a Billion Dollars at the Box Office and You Can, Too!* (Simon & Schuster), the authors pull back the silver screen to reveal the elation and ugliness of working in Hollywood, based on their experience with both blockbusters (*Night at the Museum*) and flops (*Taxi*). With its combination of brutal

honesty and sage advice, the book has been praised by *Library Journal* as “the first screenwriting manual that is as entertaining as it is informative.” (Plus, some proceeds from the book will be contributed to the USO.) Tales of executives falling asleep in meetings and omnipotent movie stars are coupled

with practical advice on script formatting, pitching ideas, and the messy process of arbitration.

*NYU Alumni Magazine* sat down with Lennon and Garant to discuss their journey from vulnerable freshmen beaten up by muggers to adults beaten down by the studio system.



SCREENWRITERS LENNON (RIGHT) AND GARANT DEMONSTRATE “THE ART OF NODDING” WHILE TAKING NOTES FROM STUDIO EXECUTIVES.

## WHY WRITE A BOOK LIKE THIS?

**Ben:** We just thought that most screenwriting books are theory written by professors, but there’s the other like 90 percent of screenwriting that’s the business and how you sell your idea.

**Tom:** You need to cross-reference those books’ authors and the movies that they’ve written because the answer is almost none. If they know so much about how to sell a screenplay, I assure you from having written a book that they would not be writing books about it, they would be writing movies.

## WRITING FOR THE STUDIOS MEANS HAVING TO COMPROMISE YOUR VISION. IS THAT TOUGH?

**Tom:** We always compare ourselves to [court composer Antonio] Salieri. We’re like the Salieris that never met a Mozart. So we’re not tortured; we’re happy Salieris.

**Ben:** As soon as you understand what the job is, it’s the greatest job in the world. We’ve been around long enough to work with talent-

ed people who are a pleasure, and also with untalented people where it’s a nightmare that crushes your soul. But you keep going. That’s the system.

**Tom:** You just have to get over things very quickly, because you’re going to get fired over and over again. You’re going to watch people throw away things that you’ve slaved over writing, on a total whim, because the actor refuses to wear a hat.

## IN THE BOOK, YOU SAY THAT IT’S IMPORTANT TO BE FLEXIBLE LIKE A REED.

**Ben:** Exactly. So many people with books on screenwriting talk about it like you’re this precious

COMEDIAN PENS FIRST MEMOIR—SORT OF

PHOTO: LEFT © BOB VON SWANK; RIGHT © ZAK ORTH



Funnily enough, another member of *The State* made his literary debut this year: Michael Showalter, writer and star of TV shows such as *Stella* and films such as *The Baxter* and *Wet Hot American Summer*, brings his wit and wordplay to the aptly titled *Mr. Funny Pants* (Grand Central Publishing). The quasi-memoir—which The Daily Beast calls “reminiscent of works by Steve Martin, George Carlin, and Woody Allen”—details Showalter’s struggle with procrastination and writer’s block in an intimate, almost stream-of-consciousness style.

The Brooklyn-based comic found trying to write a serious memoir too nerve-racking, and soon decided that the book would be about writing the book. So rather than recount his life story, *Mr. Funny Pants* weaves together random bouts of silliness, occasional memories, and some harsh dissections of his high school poetry and first head shot. Chapters on “How to Write and Sell a Hollywood Screenplay” align with Showalter’s day job teaching graduate screenwriting at the Tisch School of the Arts, which he says he enjoys more than acting. “It’s almost like doing stand-up because I’m performing and trying to hold everyone’s attention,” he explains. “But it’s an idealistic environment where you’re just existing in a perfect world unscathed by the business.” —R.A.

little Oscar Wilde staring out the window and waiting for a muse—but it’s more like ultimate fighting. You roll with the punches because, man, you’re going to get punched.

**Tom:** Maybe living in the Village in the ’80s was just good practice because we got mugged so much. Wearing a bright yellow bow tie my second week in New York was probably the reason I got beaten nearly to death across the street from [NYU’s] Brittany Hall. Almost murdered—week No. 2. When we came to New York, it was right after the Tompkins Square Park riots and the Village was so dangerous, we would not go to Avenue A after dark under any circumstances,

and Avenue B, never.

**Ben:** Yeah, it was like Somalia, but now it’s cute. There’s like cupcakes, Hello Kitty stores, and ironic T-shirts all over the place.

**Tom:** Now it’s adorable and we can’t afford to move back.

**WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT PERFORMING ON CAMPUS AS STUDENTS?**

**Tom:** Our first paying gig was opening for Dennis Miller at the Loeb Student Center.

**Ben:** We got paid like \$1,000 split 11 ways and then they asked us if we wanted to eat and everybody ordered so much Chinese food that it ended up costing more than they had just paid us, and they were *so* angry. ■

poetry

YELLOW JACKETS—

protect through venom and candor.

While timing their own dinners to mother’s tray, father’s tongs,

or baby’s saucer-sized cheeks,

they can sting any intruder repeatedly unlike the honeybee’s suicidal sortie.

I like that. I like X

who calls people out at brunch

through simple narration:

*your mouth never stops moving.*

*Or, you eat off other plates as if they’re your own.*

*Or, you check your BlackBerry when no one is talking about you.*

*Or, you laugh whenever you insult someone.*

A startling attribute I wish I could emulate if only my sting possessed such integrity.

from *Toxic Flora: Poems*

by Kimiko Hahn,  
NYU Creative Writing Program adjunct faculty

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