

Gelsey Kirkland: The Dark Side of Dance and the Price of Perfection

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Abstract: Award-winning ballerina Gelsey Kirkland struggled with eating disorders and drug addiction caused by George Balanchine and Mikhail Baryshnikov's demanding coaching style. This case study examines her difficult decision between continuing to dance at great physical expense or giving up the art and career she loved to advocate for change. Using qualitative data and anecdotes from Kirkland's memoir, *Dancing on My Grave*, this paper explores how her childhood made her susceptible to the pressures of the ballet world and how she navigated her potential exit. Additionally, it considers broader issues of eating disorders and drug use in professional dance. Her story highlights the persistent challenges within dance, questioning the responsibility of the industry to protect its artists. By exposing these systemic issues, this case study emphasizes the need for reform in the dance industry to prevent the glorification and encouragement of harmful perfectionism and its devastating effects on dancers' health.

Perfection or Poison?

I occasionally fantasized about my funeral. I imagined Misha standing over my grave, belatedly realizing what had been good about me. The fantasy was not far from reality: I was dying. That I was a dancing corpse should have been clear to anyone in the company, to anyone who knew me. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 261)

Everything in ballet is about perfection: having perfect turnout, perfect hair, perfect tutus, perfect pirouettes, and a perfect body. However, the ballet industry's promotion of drug abuse and eating disorders has proven this perfectionism deadly. For years, ballerinas have endured abuse in the wings and on the stage at the hands of artistic directors and choreographers with unrealistic visions for how they want their dances and, subsequently, their dancers to look. Gelsey Kirkland was one of these ill-fated ballerinas.

One of the key male figures in Kirkland's life was George Balanchine, born in 1894 in St Petersburg, Russia. He started dancing at the Imperial School at nine years old and was only 16 when he began choreographing (Taper 1996). During World War I, Balanchine fled the Soviet Union to Paris, where he met Sergei Diaghilev, founder of Ballet Russes; he became the chief choreographer at this dance company at only 20 years old (Reynolds and McCormick 2021). Before World War II, Balanchine moved to America, where he worked with Lincoln Kirstein to establish the School of American Ballet (SAB) and the New York City Ballet (NYCB) (Garner 2022). The new position of co-founder and choreographer allowed Balanchine to expand his choreographic pursuits and develop his neoclassical style of ballet, something that hadn't been seen before (Reynolds and McCormick 2021). He quickly became one of the most influential choreographers of the twentieth century.

Balanchine is most well-known for his astounding successes and the major contributions he made in bringing ballet to America, including choreographing works like *The Nutcracker*, *Agon*, *Don Quixote*, and *Firebird*. He is revered by the dance community, however, his god-like status obscures the dark reality of his power. He became obsessed with his dancers and fetishized them, and as he got older, the dancers he had affairs with got younger (Garner 2022). Balanchine was incredibly misogynistic but disguised it through his artistic talent, allowing him to abuse his dancers.

Man is a better cook, a better painter, a better musician, composer. Everything is man—sports—everything. Man is stronger, faster. Why? Because we have muscles, and we're made that way. And woman accepts this. It is her business to accept. She knows what's beautiful. Men are great poets, because they have to write beautiful poetry for women—odes to a beautiful woman. Woman accepts the beautiful poetry. You see, man is the servant—a good servant. In ballet, however, woman is first. Everywhere else man is first. But in ballet, it's the woman. All my life I have dedicated my art to her. (Gruen 1976, n.p.)

Balanchine was incredibly tough on his dancers' physical and mental well-being, breeding breathtaking ballerinas at a devastating cost. One of these dancers was Gelsey Kirkland, a perfect specimen for Balanchine to mold however he wanted. With a difficult upbringing and already low self-esteem, it was incredibly easy for Balanchine to make Kirkland into a ballerina so perfect it seemed as though she came straight from a jewelry box. Though she succeeded in becoming one of the best ballet dancers of the twentieth century, she had to give herself up to the doll in a tutu she became onstage.

Another dancer, incredibly important to Kirkland's story, Mikhail Baryshnikov, was born in 1948 in the Soviet Union (Meyer 2024). At 12 years old, he began his ballet training, quickly becoming well known for his extraordinary skills in classical ballet; he joined the Vaganova ballet school, world-renowned for its grueling training practices, just three years later (Meyer 2024). When one thinks of classical ballet in the twentieth century, Baryshnikov is one of the first names that comes to mind for his incredible artistry and virtuosity.

Had Kirkland not been under the influence of her coaches, George Balanchine and Mikhail Baryshnikov, would she have submitted to the habits that perpetuated decline in her mental and physical health? The habits that plagued her youth and followed her throughout her life? Her final dilemma caused Kirkland to ask herself if she would have the strength to abandon the art of ballet that provided her with validation to work to improve conditions for future generations, or be glued in a cycle of pain that would end in certain death?

Making Gelsey Kirkland

Gelsey Kirkland grew up on a farm in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the 1950s (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 13). The town's sprawling fields of lush green grass mirrored the picturesque view Kirkland's parents had for their daughter's future. Daughter of Jack Kirkland, a playwright, and Nancy Hoardley, an actress, Kirkland was raised in an environment where artistic pursuits were not only encouraged but required for her father's approval. Her father had exceedingly high expectations and a hunger for perfection (13). This shaped her young mind and caused Kirkland to adopt similar values, leading to her obsession with becoming excellent (15). Kirkland struggled to fully understand the intimidating figure that was her father. His emotions

oscillated between fiery outrage and tender playfulness, and “to find a balance between the good and bad memories of [him]” was an impossible task (18). Kirkland’s siblings, Johnna and Marshall, and half-siblings, Christopher, Robin, and Patricia, also experienced these pressures.¹ Johnna confirmed this in a 1987 *Los Angeles Times* interview, saying, “The bottom line is that Gelsey and I were destined to be self-destructive. No one could come out of our neurotic family unscarred” (Perlmutter 1987).

When Kirkland was four, her family moved from her beloved farm to New York City due to financial hardships and the lack of artistic opportunities for Jack and Nancy in Pennsylvania (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 16). The family’s dwindling finances, caused by Jack Kirkland’s wasted years spent writing an autobiography that would never be published, not only led to Gelsey Kirkland’s life being uprooted, but also to the beginning of Jack Kirkland’s alcohol addiction. His drunkenness caused Gelsey and his other children to view him as more of a dictator than a father figure, leading them to act out against him. During his drunken rampages, Gelsey Kirkland “dared not raise [her] voice against [her] father, but [would] def[y] him in a battle of wits” (18). Having a parent who wrestled with addiction was only one of countless struggles that would define Kirkland’s childhood.

Kirkland’s young self was plump and uncoordinated, bumbling around like “the tiniest of ugly ducklings” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 15). In comparison, her older sister Johnna’s beauty was undeniable, often at the forefront of their fraught relationship. Kirkland idolized Johnna, feeling envy that she had not been endowed with the same kind of attractiveness (21). This beauty rivalry wasn’t the only pressure Kirkland felt from her sister; once Johnna was accepted into the School of American Ballet, the fierce competition between the girls was intensified when “ballet [became] the center ring in the arena of our sisterly warfare” (21-22).

Once Kirkland realized she couldn’t rely on achieving good looks to impress her critical family, she became eager to prove herself as talented. To verify her worth, a young Kirkland participated in many activities, including horseback riding and ice skating. When she didn’t excel at either of those undertakings, eight-year-old Kirkland auditioned for the SAB, where she was accepted into their first division, the level for beginning youth dancers. This was an acceptance that she did not initially want, but would change the course of her life. Feeling as though she had only received the spot because of her sister’s talents made her furious; she “was forced to join. The anger that [she] felt after that first audition became one of the guiding emotions for [her] entire career” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 22-23). Kirkland had no choice but to accept the position if she wanted to prove herself valuable to her family. Thus began Kirkland’s entrance to the ballet world.

The Beginnings of Ballet

In 1960, at the age of eight, Kirkland began ballet training, kickstarting an era of Kirkland’s life that would involve countless hours of training under the fluorescent lights of the dance studio (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 25). Her family, struggling to make ends meet, did whatever they could to offset the high costs of sending Gelsey and Johnna to SAB. Her mother began working for *Sports Illustrated*, Kirkland briefly worked as a child model, and their family received scholarships for both sisters to continue dancing.

Though Kirkland initially rejected ballet due to her insecurities over Johnna’s talents, ballet gave her a way to avoid her drunken father’s abuse and directed her anger into a productive hobby. She dedicated herself to the art, finding the classes to be a captivating and puzzling test of her abilities, which became increasingly complex as she moved up the ranks and increased her

hours of training (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 27). Due to the high temporal demands of SAB's training regimen, she attended the Professional Children's School, a place that allowed young actors, dancers, and musicians to continue their studies in an alternative way, providing more time for students to focus on creative pursuits (Professional Children's School 2025). Kirkland did not care for traditional education and often neglected her studies, as she considered them a mere distraction from dance (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 27).

Kirkland's childhood was defined by her insecurities, leading her to feel as if she was never deserving of praise. In an attempt to hide her legs, which "resembled a mosquito's," Kirkland began incorrectly tying her ballet slippers, pulling the ribbons up to her knees (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 28). Johnna made fun of her for the act, something that struck a nerve in Gelsey. Their fraught relationship led to a rivalry, both backstage and onstage, that would follow Gelsey Kirkland throughout her life. Yearning for her father's approval and striving to be the best, Kirkland was motivated to work harder in her dance classes.

As [Johnna] seemed to have all the natural advantages, I had no choice but to fight on the only front I had a chance to win—I would learn to dance rings around her. The rivalry with my sister applied to boys as well as to ballet ... Her physical charms were exaggerated by the distorting lens of my insecurity ... In ballet school, it was as if the rivalry had been multiplied by the number of girls in my class. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 28)

These early days in ballet and Kirkland's rivalry with her sister only exacerbated her self-doubt. Though Johnna would eventually move to the West Coast and fade out of Gelsey's view, she would go on to transfer this competition from dancer to dancer throughout her career, constantly comparing herself to their poise and talents. Her career was built on a foundation of self-hatred and competition. Every dance was a battle; she was constantly at war, with other dancers, but mostly with the dancer in the mirror.

Meeting "Mr. B"

It was at this time that Gelsey Kirkland had become aware of George Balanchine, the director and founder of SAB and the New York City Ballet. To Kirkland and most of the American ballet community, his status was so holy that 10-year-old Kirkland wrote him a fan letter (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 28). Almost 50 years older than Kirkland, she considered him "the stern master of [her] daily li[fe], the patriarch of [her] extended family" (29). She looked up to Balanchine, or "Mr. B" as most of the students would call him, admiring his choreography and revering him as a hero for ballet.

One of Kirkland's first interactions with Balanchine occurred during a costume fitting. Kirkland was about to be fit for an angel costume when Balanchine and several other male investors for SAB came into the dressing room. Balanchine asked 10-year-old Kirkland to model the costume for them. He believed that "The woman's function is to fascinate men," which is exactly what he expected of Kirkland in that moment (Lewis 1976, n.p.). She was filled with embarrassment at the thought of changing in front of the adult men and knew "there was something not altogether right about the way those grown men giggled" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 29). Due to his position of power, she quickly publicly disregarded the event, delighted that Balanchine had chosen her for a role in *The Nutcracker* in the first place, though the discomfort of the moment stuck with her privately for several decades after. This would be one of many incidents that Kirkland would push to the back of her mind and ignore in order to continue

dancing. She couldn't speak out for fear of losing ballet. In retrospect, this should have warned her of the life she was entering, but all Kirkland knew at this age was that she was worthless unless she was perfect, a lesson her father taught her and Balanchine reinforced. Sadly, this incident was just the beginning of the harm that ballet and Balanchine would bring Kirkland.

Even when Balanchine was not physically in the studio with Kirkland, his influence still had a firm grasp on her. Balanchine had a very specific idea of exactly how his dancers needed to look: white, tall, and thin, with small heads and child-like qualities. He believed that "The ballet is a purely female thing; it is a woman, a garden of beautiful flowers, and man is the gardener," and he expected his female dancers to look and act the part (Balanchine 1965, n.p.).

Insecurities about her appearance were frequent for Kirkland: "I was long-legged but not pretty or sleek enough to fit the image of a 'Balanchine ballerina.' So I set about to alter my natural shape" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 33). Kirkland improved her flexibility by having friends force her into contorted positions that left her in immense pain and strained her growing muscles, often causing her to weep in agony (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 33). Although Kirkland improved her extension and turn-out, the practice proved dangerous.² In a study of dancers ages eight to 16, 8.6% of dancers experienced paratenonitis, which is the swelling of the tissue that covers the Achilles tendon, in their ankles and feet (Cleveland Clinic 2024). They found that hyperpronation, or excessive inward rolling of the feet to increase turn-out, was one of the main factors contributing to increased injury in dancers (Steinberg et al. 2011). Kirkland's teachers at SAB would often stop class until she exhibited the ideal 180-degree turn-out that Balanchine wanted from his dancers, causing her excessive pain and debilitating her as early as the age of 12 (Kirkland 1986). This was just the beginning of the torturous effects of being a Balanchine ballerina.

As her coaching progressed, Kirkland faced a new obstacle: pointe shoes, which require cramming ten toes into a space built for half as many and long hours dancing on pointed feet. Her feet paid the price of the excessive strain on her young bones. She experienced paratenonitis and severe bunions that caused her immense pain and eventually led her to seek out an orthopedic surgeon, who gave her the advice that many injured dancers hear from medical professionals: quit ballet. This is an idea that seems simple from an outside perspective, but is preposterous to someone whose life revolves around the art. Having an injury in dance is the body's way of telling the dancer to walk away, to take a break, and to change something about the stress being placed upon their anatomy. However, when a dancer is injured, the culture of ballet dictates that they must push through the pain and continue dancing because the corps and partners rely on every dancer's presence to bring a story to life. This was particularly exacerbated by Balanchine's rigorous coaching style that demanded perfection no matter the cost. For Kirkland, the strain of her early training was one of the first signs that her dance career was not sustainable. However, ballet was the first realm in which Kirkland finally felt successful and gained the praise she desperately craved throughout her childhood. For her, dance wasn't just a hobby; it was an escape and the opportunity to have an extraordinary career. Thus, Kirkland was resolute in her decision: quitting was not an option. She would have to dance through the aches, blisters, and cramps until her body gave out.

The injuries she sustained early in her ballet career progressed through Kirkland's life, establishing a new normal in which she was constantly in pain. Through all this pain, she continued to work for Balanchine's approval. After all, "it was said that Balanchine cherished the aberration of line induced by bunions, that they contributed to the impression of winged feet" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 35).³

Kirkland worked hard to gain the affection of Balanchine and eventually became one of his favorite students, a position that would prove to be a blessing for her dancing abilities and a curse for her mental and physical health. Though her talent led her to speed through the levels at SAB, her attitude towards her teachers held her back; she constantly disrespected them and refused to follow instructions. By the time she was 12, her disregard for the authority of her superiors was a main concern of the teachers at SAB. Kirkland, however, did not seek their approval. It was Balanchine whom she sought to impress the most. She earned roles in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Harlequinade* by staying in his good graces, which provided opportunities for her to continue to prove herself as a dancer.

Intensified Insecurities

As Kirkland got older, she was faced with a new struggle: puberty. Her childhood insecurities about her looks intensified as she rapidly changed through her teen years. Stricken with acne, she tried every cure she could: antibiotics, diets, birth control pills, and rubbing alcohol, none of which cured her hormonal teenage skin. Kirkland reflects on this time in her life when “the turmoil of puberty turned my preoccupation with my looks into a nightmarish obsession. In my fanatical pursuit of beauty, I was at war with myself, driven by vanity and mortified by my appearance” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 39).

Kirkland felt the need to be perfect and alter her appearance to please the male eye (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 39). When Balanchine discovered the up-and-coming ballerina, Suzanne Farrell, he was ecstatic because she perfectly fit his mold of a Balanchine ballerina. With her big lips, small face, striking eyes, and childlike expression, she became the new blueprint for what his female dancers should look like. Kirkland envied Farrell's beauty and its effect on Balanchine, so she attempted to imitate Farrell's features by cutting her eyelashes, dyeing her hair, and wearing extreme makeup. Ballet had stripped Kirkland of her identity, with her self-worth in the gutter, she was impressionable enough to do anything that Balanchine would ask for, no matter how harmful it would be.

When Kirkland began menstruating and growing pubic hair, she felt shame and embarrassment over her new body. In addition to the growing physical changes she was experiencing, Kirkland's mental warfare was intensified by constant self-inflicted comparison to her sister, Johnna. Older and more developed, Johnna began to sneak out to spend time with boys while tormenting Gelsey Kirkland for not growing breasts and being unattractive.

At 15 years old, Kirkland was invited to join the company at SAB, a commitment equivalent to a full-time job that was so strenuous on her mind and body that she consequently dropped out of school. This was not a cause for concern for Kirkland; she would give her life to become the best, including sacrificing her education. The increased time commitment also meant taking more classes with Balanchine, and she became aware of his reputation within the company. Rumors of gifts for sexual favors, a scandalous divorce, and his sexual inadequacy began to swirl. Nonetheless, the dancers endlessly sought his approval, hoping he would find one of them to be his muse, and Kirkland was no exception.

The war Kirkland fought against her insecurities raged on, fueled by Balanchine's comments. He commented on her head being too large and compared her to a racehorse on several occasions (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 50). Mentally and physically, he continuously beat Kirkland down. His high expectations for Kirkland caused her to push her body further, continuing to overstretch her muscles and force more extreme turnout, worsening her injuries. When she confided in him about her pain, he told her, “Young people don't have injuries ... try little red

wine” (51). He easily dismissed Kirkland’s strife, and due to her belief that Balanchine knows best, she dismissed it herself, burying her pain and her needs.

When Kirkland’s father passed away in 1969, she felt numb, which she attributed to the years of abuse that he inflicted on her. His death caused Kirkland to turn to Balanchine as a father figure. Much like her actual father, he was a man in power whom Kirkland had to work relentlessly to impress; he was a man whom she loved. This parental relationship was beneficial to Kirkland, who recognized “that surrogate paternity was preferable to the kind of [sexual] inclination he displayed towards other dancers that he favored” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 53).

At age 16, Kirkland began to develop patterns of disordered eating, encouraged by Balanchine. Upon inspection of Kirkland’s body during class, Balanchine stated that he “must see the bones” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 56). Though she only weighed under 100 pounds, she would take extreme measures to acquire the thin body that Balanchine saw as a prerequisite to being a woman in ballet. Methods Kirkland used to achieve this included diet pills, anorexia, and taking emetics to induce vomiting after eating. Kirkland was not the only one of her peers who struggled with disordered eating. Over the course of their lives, 8.6% of women will experience an eating disorder, a statistic that is two times more likely than men (Deloitte Access Economics 2020). The pressures inherent in the dance world significantly contribute to the prevalence of eating disorders among women in aesthetic sports, with reported rates as high as 42% (Currie 2010). This significant increase in prevalence is due to a few factors, the first being that a weight and performance-focused coaching style, like Balanchine’s, causes more anxiety surrounding weight and food than a more uplifting coaching style, which lowers rates of eating disorders among athletes (Bratland-Sanda and Sundgot-Borgen 2012). Another reason why dancers develop eating disorders more frequently than the general population is due to uniforms. A typical ballet uniform consists of close-fitting, sheer tights and a skin-tight leotard. This, coupled with hours of training in front of a mirror, leads to increased body image issues and, eventually, eating disorders (Petrie and Greenleaf 2015).

The race for who could have a better body also furthered the competition between Gelsey and Johnna. In the show *Reveries*, both sisters performed solos for NYCB at ages 16 and 18. Reviews of the performance emphasized how Gelsey was thinner than Johnna and recognized Gelsey’s solo as more exceptional than Johnna’s, but this was still not enough for Gelsey to recognize her own “Balanchine beauty” and talents.

Gelsey found another way to diminish her own achievements by comparing her dating life to Johnna’s. Awkward around her male partners and always striving to look like Balanchine’s latest muse, Gelsey Kirkland sought to feminize herself by changing her appearance. When she was 16 years old, she underwent her first medical procedure to inject silicone into her breasts. In the coming years, she would endure masses of plastic surgery, including silicone injections, dental realignment, and other medical procedures, all of which came with high costs and even higher risks (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 57-58). Though these risks seemed unnecessary and outrageous to her doctors, there was no procedure too dangerous to outweigh the benefits of becoming the kind of woman that would please Balanchine. Kirkland’s obsession with perfection for Balanchine stemmed from his ethereal reputation as the father of American ballet. If Kirkland could satisfy one of the most elite choreographers, then she would finally be able to deem herself a successful dancer, though Balanchine’s standards were unreasonably high, meaning she never truly saw herself as worthy.

These risks seemed to pay off for Kirkland, who began to land principal roles in the company and gained the attention of the audience. At 17 years old, in the show *Firebird*, the child prodigy became the youngest person in the company to have a solo choreographed for her. Though *Firebird* received astounding reviews and was a technical success, Kirkland struggled to meet Balanchine's high expectations of her in the role (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 63-67). Nothing Kirkland could do pleased Balanchine, yet she would continue to work harder and harder until she could gain his respect and approval, not yet considering that it would have been more beneficial to seek her own approval instead.

A year later, Russian choreographers Rudolf Nureyev and Natalia Makarova moved to New York, eager to train American dancers in their style of ballet. This threatened Balanchine's standing as one of the only major ballet choreographers in America. Kirkland snuck into their company's performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, and she "was instantly in love ... overwhelmed by the sheer romantic spectacle, by the eloquent virtuosity of their partnership" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 70). She had found "a direction and model that left New York City Ballet in the dust" (70). Overcome with jealousy of the Russian pair's success, Balanchine publicly berated their company's dancers, whom Kirkland greatly admired. These comments were a catalyst for Kirkland, and after years of abuse under Balanchine's coaching, Kirkland finally reached her breaking point and refused to continue taking classes with Balanchine. She never returned.

Kirkland was still performing her role in *Firebird*, so she stayed in Balanchine's company but transitioned to taking classes from Maggie Black. Black's fresh perspective, which was less judgmental of the appearance of ballerinas, helped her realize that if she did not alter her training regimen, she would have to stop dancing due to her severe injuries (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 69-70). The time Kirkland spent training with Black began to undo the damage she had done to her body, and Black's uplifting coaching style helped her improve more than she ever had before. Balanchine was infuriated by her perceived betrayal and the fact that he had not played a part in her improvement. He stopped casting Kirkland in new roles and refused to acknowledge her for over a year (71).

Kirkland decided it would be more beneficial to continue her training with Black in secret, telling Balanchine that she would be doing classes on her own and performing at his company. After a few years, even Balanchine couldn't deny her impeccable skills. Despite his anger towards her, he began to use her profitable skills, and between 1971 and 1972, Kirkland performed in over eight of Balanchine's ballets. Between rehearsals, classes, and performances, Kirkland had little time to think about anything but ballet. Her anxieties never ceased and infiltrated every aspect of her life, even her dreams (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 86).

Kirkland's Russian Revelation

In 1972, at the age of 20, Kirkland went on tour to Russia with Balanchine's company. The shock of being in a new place caused her to further doubt herself. She faced many challenges throughout this trip, the first being that, because she refused to take classes from Balanchine, she had to conduct her own training. This, coupled with a new high-protein Russian diet, caused Kirkland to gain weight and feel ill-equipped for the demands of performing (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 88). Kirkland felt inferior to the Russian dancers, who trained in the birthplace of ballet. She was unfamiliar with her surroundings, and obstacles like raked stages further exacerbated her feeling out of place.⁴ Kirkland felt like a failure. In an effort to regain whatever control she had left, she began to starve herself. Though Kirkland was not new to disordered eating, anorexia became her obsession in Russia (90).

Living on candy bars and coffee, Kirkland was emaciated by the time the company had reached the last leg of the tour. Several other dancers noted Kirkland's condition and expressed their concern over her ill state and green skin to Balanchine, who had no response, believing that she looked more like a ballerina than ever. One day, while Kirkland was applying makeup to hide the unsightly tint of her sickly skin, Balanchine entered her dressing room, where they had the following interaction:

He asked me, "Dear, how do you feel?" I whispered, "Not too good." He put something in my hand, saying, "Take this. Is vitamin. Take now. You feel much better." I followed his instructions. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 96)

Kirkland went on to perform *Scherzo Fantastique* and instantly felt better, flying across the stage, flawlessly executing the steps. After the performance, Balanchine offered her more "vitamins" to take when she felt unwell. The next morning, she felt just as terrible as before the performance, experiencing fever and chills. One of Balanchine's worried assistants approached her and advised her not to take any more of Balanchine's "vitamins." Suddenly, Kirkland realized the pills were not vitamins. They were undeniably amphetamines (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 97).

Weighing just 90 pounds, Kirkland returned to America inspired by the Russian ballerina's bodies and artistry that she had observed overseas. Their feminine small waists and long limbs, coupled with their expression and stability, became the new point of comparison for Kirkland.

Misha's Return

At a turning point in her career, still young enough to adjust to a new style of teaching, Kirkland began to seek alternative training. She was invited to join the American Ballet Theater (ABT) but turned down the opportunity because she feared the independence that a touring company would give her, saying, "I was afraid that I would not be able to dance without the constant companionship and support of my coach, Maggie Black. I was afraid to leave Mr. B. I was afraid to fail" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 99).

Kirkland didn't want to risk a week without training, so when Black went on vacation, she returned to SAB to take a ballet class from Stanley Williams, a renowned Balanchine-style instructor. When Black returned, Kirkland informed her that she had taken classes from Williams, who enforced a style of ballet that Black rejected. Kirkland's action offended Black, who responded by telling her not to come back (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 100). At a loss, Kirkland sought the advice of David Howard, a choreographer at Harkness House who trained at the Royal Ballet in London, who agreed to be her new mentor. While training with him to perform in *An Evening's Waltzes*, she broke her foot after landing incorrectly during a poorly executed lift. As she tried to maintain her figure through the injury, she worsened her eating disorder.

I hobbled to the bathroom scale and balanced on one foot to check my weight several times a day. I went on a ration plan to stay at ninety pounds. In the morning I sliced one green apple into four pieces. Each piece constituted one meal, with a tablespoon of cottage cheese for dessert. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 104)

After a few months of recovery, cut short by Balanchine's request for Kirkland to go on tour with the company, she returned to Howard's class, where she was faced with her regular demons of inadequacy once again. Feeling insecure compared to Natasha Makarova, a dancer at the American Ballet Theatre and one of Kirkland's inspirations, Kirkland submitted to another round of plastic surgery, including getting her earlobes snipped and undergoing risky and illegal silicone injections into her ankles and lips (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 108).

Around this time, Mikhail Baryshnikov, a dancer at the Imperial School whom Kirkland met while on tour, defected from the Soviet Union and requested that Kirkland dance with him upon his arrival in America (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 116). As one of the biggest names in the Russian ballet scene, this was the opportunity of a lifetime for Kirkland. She built up the courage to tell Balanchine that she was leaving his company to dance with Baryshnikov at ABT, and he responded by calling her a traitor (120). While waiting for Baryshnikov to receive his American visa, she tried to rapidly lose weight to live up to the expectations of being Baryshnikov's partner. Kirkland, at only 21 years old, began to dance with 26-year-old Baryshnikov, a man who would be her partner on stage and behind the curtain for most of the 1970s (121).

Kirkland revered Baryshnikov, or Misha, as she nicknamed him, and quickly fell into a professional and personal relationship with him. Together, they performed *La Bayadere*, *Don Quixote*, *Coppelia*, and *Theme and Variations* at ABT (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 129). While rehearsing, Kirkland struggled to keep up with Baryshnikov's classical Russian training, pushing herself harder than ever before. She became a better dancer, but remained insecure about dancing with him, feeling inferior to his impeccable skills (134).

While dancing with Baryshnikov, Kirkland went on several tours, performing in Washington DC, Paris, Venice, and other major cities. However, the lack of consistent classes and unfamiliar food associated with touring caused her to gain weight. Kirkland quickly fell below Baryshnikov's unreasonably high expectations of extreme athleticism coupled with exceptional looks. This caused him to ignore her, upsetting Kirkland, who had fallen in love with him (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 148). Their relationship had many faults; a mainly sexual endeavor for Baryshnikov was a love affair for Kirkland. They often fought, getting into screaming matches at the dance studio and arguments at after-parties (160).

In 1976, Kirkland was offered the opportunity to work with Twyla Tharp and Baryshnikov in *The Turning Point*, a film about ballet. Kirkland didn't like the script because it was overly dramatic, and she didn't want to distort the image of herself to the world. She tried to say she didn't want to film the movie but faced so much pressure that she eventually agreed. Kirkland would go to any length to achieve Baryshnikov's approval because his star status offered her a way into the world of elite dancers. Caught in a difficult situation and unable to resign politely, she reverted to her old ways.

I would vanish into thin air ... There would be nothing left for the camera to photograph ... I was simply returning to Balanchine, finding myself at the mercy of both anorexia and bulimia. Receiving no support from Misha, who seemed to have no problem with the script or with the producers ... I starved by day, then binged on junk food and threw up by night; I took injections of pregnant cows' urine, reputed to be a miraculous diet aid; I stuffed myself with laxatives, thyroid pills, and celery juice; I emptied myself with enemas and steam baths. During the wee hours, I often made desperate trips to the drug store to pick up ... the emetic that I use to induce vomiting. I became an expert with

the technique of shoving two fingers down my throat. The blood vessels around my eyes erupted with the constant strain ... I knew that I was sick. I watched myself helplessly, always trying to pretend that I was in control ... I was a prisoner inside my body. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 166-167)

Kirkland reduced her weight to 80 pounds, which ironically granted her wish, as she was too thin and sick to perform in the film, causing Tharp to replace her role with another ballerina. The impossible standards of women in the industry were causing her health to diminish, yet she still couldn't escape the almost deadly cycle of abuse. Kirkland's relationship with Baryshnikov worsened, and with it, her mental health. The two dancers did not talk to each other, causing great mental strain for Kirkland. She had already reverted to old ways of eating, but her insecurities about her appearance continued to worsen. She started to wear more makeup and became further obsessed with her appearance to the point where she looked in the mirror and claimed, "I was no longer Gelsey" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 168).

Kirkland's constant arguments with Baryshnikov led her to cut off their relationship, initiating his decision to go back to NYCB to train under Balanchine. Kirkland was lost once again in a cycle of abuse where she was left with "no inspiration, no friends, no lover, no support, no muscular power, no prospects, and no ... sense to quit" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 205). Kirkland became so unhappy that she lashed out at her friends and family and faked an injury to go on sick leave.

Off the Stage and in the Streets

Around the same time as Kirkland's leave, the American Guild of Musical Artists (also known as the dancers' union) went on strike, and she began to see that the conditions her community was working in were abusive. This was a catalyst for Kirkland because other dancers were validating her feelings and hardships; she realized that she was not alone in these struggles and began to understand that the only way to induce change was to provoke action. This led to Kirkland finally speaking out about some of the abuse she had endured, though she did not entirely reveal the terrible secrets of the industry for fear of Balanchine and Baryshnikov's retaliation. After all, if she burned all of her bridges, she would become unemployed and would have to leave the world of ballet. The world that she had revolved her life around since she was eight, that she had changed her body over and over again to fit into. The world that was her everything. The dancers' union strike was mainly focused on providing dancers with adequate pay, employment benefits, and better working conditions. The request was not well received by ABT's management, who forced the dancers into a lockout (Dunning 1979). Though Kirkland, a star in the company, was getting paid well above the other dancers, she participated in the strike and provided support for them at a protest, stating, "I'm here because I'm totally sympathetic with their problems and I hope by being here to help in some way" (n.p.). Kirkland continued to use her sick leave to advocate for the improvement of the poor working conditions, lack of pay, and lack of support that dancers endured (See Appendix A). Additionally, she publicly addressed ABT's misdeeds, implying Balanchine's compliance, in an interview for Suzanne Gordon's book *Off Balance*.

If you can't choose to stay off your feet, someone should choose for you ... But this is not the case now. There are some injuries you can dance through and some you cannot. Someone should say, "It's not wise for you to dance, and we'll reschedule you so

you won't be penalized.”” If companies would do this, it would help immensely. Dancers would feel valued, and they wouldn't constantly have to prove themselves. (Gordon 1983, 141)

After Kirkland's leave of absence, she had gained a sense of courage given to her by the outrage from the rest of the dance community. When she discussed her return to ABT, she defined her terms: she wanted to have the ability to bring her teachers to the studio, and she wanted better artistic support. Her requests were immediately denied by ABT, who tried to suppress her needs by offering her a contract with higher pay (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 207). After hearing this, Kirkland decided to offer her resignation, not wanting to be a part of an organization that would not hear her opinions and see them as valid (208).

The 1980s were the beginning of a fresh start for Kirkland. She had a new sense of independence and confidence that was absent in her early career, leading her to pursue performing in Europe (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 209). She took on the challenge of performing as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Stuttgart Ballet, a role initially created by John Cranko, a prominent South African dancer and choreographer, who had passed away a few years before Kirkland's rendition of the role (209). The hole the company at the Stuttgart Ballet felt from his loss was comparable to the hole Kirkland felt after leaving ABT, making her feel at home and able to see past the abuse of her adolescent life for the first time (210). The self-growth Kirkland experienced at this time finally made her feel worthy.

The performance was quite a success. After [the artistic director] came to the theatre and watched my portrayal, she came backstage to say that Cranko would have loved me. I accepted her compliment without a fall from grace. To accept my own dancing without making apologies was major progress. I had taken a first tentative step toward finding value on the stage and in my life. I was proud of myself. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 210)

Upon her return to New York City, Kirkland heard the news that Baryshnikov would be taking over as artistic director for ABT (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 210). He quickly tried to convince her to come back to ABT and dance under him. Kirkland, with her newfound confidence, felt prepared enough to resume her position at ABT, believing she was strong enough to contest any issues he would bring about (211). Baryshnikov used this acceptance of his offer as an opportunity to rekindle their personal relationship. Kirkland's moment of clarity slipped away, and she was charmed, once again, by his charisma and sucked back into a cycle that had burned her before (215). He reassured her that his new position at ABT would be beneficial to her, saying that things would be different this time; thus, they once again became intertwined (216).

During the first few months of his new position, Baryshnikov went against his word to Kirkland and made several changes to the company, including firing dancers who weren't young enough or thin enough for his standards, placing attention on amateur dancers, and emphasizing expression over virtuosity (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 217). Kirkland did not recognize the new Baryshnikov and was upset with all the changes to the company, including Baryshnikov's choice to make another ballerina the star of the next season's performances.

From Stardom to Rock Bottom: Kirkland's Addiction

In the late summer of 1980, Patrick Bissell, Kirkland's dance partner from the previous year's performance of *The Tiller in the Fields*, visited 28-year-old Kirkland in New York and

confessed that he had been infatuated with her since the time they danced together (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 223). Bissell spent more time with Kirkland and decided to move back to Manhattan to be with her, reintroducing her to cocaine at their reunion (224). Having used cocaine a couple of times before and not feeling its effects, Kirkland decided to engage in drug use with Bissell, but this time was different from her past drug experiences (224).

The euphoria of cocaine was different from the intoxication of alcohol ... I experienced a strange kind of mental clarity ... I was a child again. My thoughts seemed to organize themselves without conscious effort ... I was in complete control. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 225)

This was the beginning of what would turn into a severe drug addiction. Kirkland continued to use the drug, only hoping to feel the freedom it granted her. However, “the pleasure of the high was evanescent, elusive. What went up invariably came down. There was an undercurrent of anxiety that always led to the next line,” and the negative effects of the drug began to take hold (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 225). Kirkland’s peers also suffered from substance abuse issues, as it is highly prevalent among dancers. A study done in 2016 found that 30% of female ballet dancers frequently use painkillers, and 35% of dancers, male and female, use other drugs (Peric et al. 2016).⁵ Substance abuse is common among dancers due to factors like the immense physical pain they experience and anxiety related to working conditions (Peric et al. 2016).

After moving back to New York City, Bissell started dancing at ABT, and the amount of cocaine Kirkland was using increased, as well as her use of alcohol, barbiturates, cigarettes, marijuana, benzodiazepines, and amphetamines. She justified her drug use with her eating disorder. In her mind, cocaine’s appetite-suppressing qualities turned it from a dangerous drug into a simple medication that would allow her to obtain the feminine figure ballet required of her (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 228). Worsened substance abuse is directly related to eating disorders, especially in the dance community. Around 20% of people with eating disorders develop substance abuse disorders during their lives (Bahji et al. 2019). Additionally, 35% of ballerinas smoke cigarettes daily to increase their metabolism, damaging their respiratory systems for the sake of an ideal body type (Peric et al. 2016). Kirkland was no exception.

It was at this time that Kirkland had her first brain seizure after doing five grams of cocaine in one night with Bissell. She had no recollection of the event, so the severity did not strike her as something that needed attention. Throughout her addiction, she would often experience other negative side effects like skin boils, swollen legs, and amnesia, where she would have to ask her friends and colleagues to remind her who she was and where she was. Kirkland’s drug use eventually followed her to work.

The first time that Patrick and I rehearsed under the spell [of cocaine] ... I was struck by one extraordinary fact, an unprecedented occurrence: I had not stopped. I had not paused to analyze my work even once. It was painless for the first time. I felt no need for refinement, for perfecting each moment, for tedious argument. I did not have to think about the dance. I did not have to think about my partner, about the drama, about the steps. I was dancing by instinct ... All of the sudden, after all those long years, Balanchine's advice not to think made sense. (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 230)

Kirkland quickly became dependent on the drug, and when she rehearsed without it, she could not perform at the same level and would experience severe withdrawals. She began seeking dealers to supply her with a steady stream of cocaine. Soon after, she did her first performance on the drug and received rave reviews from critics. However, the new habit made Kirkland often miss rehearsals and classes due to sleepless nights, running errands to buy more drugs, and her loss of motivation. This led to her termination from ABT, the official reason being that she was tardy to and absent from rehearsals. ABT never said or did anything about her drug addiction. Additionally, Bissell was fired from the company, after being arrested for instigating a drunken brawl, with no mention from ABT of the drugs he had been taking at the time (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986).

After her termination, paranoia set in, and Kirkland sought the help of a psychiatrist. She continued to take drugs before their sessions and misled the doctor into thinking she was more stable than she was. At this time, she would do anything to be able to procure cocaine, stating that “random promiscuity has advantages which I found irresistible. Sex could be exchanged for coke; coke could be exchanged for sex. I was no stranger to such physical transactions. Had I not always been asked to sell my body?” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 264). Kirkland’s abuse had become so normalized that she couldn’t see a world in which she could escape ballet. She was unable to leave the dangerous world she had entered because she needed the funds and connections it provided to perpetuate the addiction that ballet had initially caused. Thus, the cycle of mistreatment Kirkland was a victim of continued.

Kirkland, out of money and a job, turned to Bissell’s manager, Alex, who supported her until she could get work. Alex was able to abuse Kirkland’s situation, where if he provided her with the funds to support her lifestyle, he could profit from her talents. During this time, Alex was able to hire out Kirkland for a few concert performances and television roles. However, in March of 1981, a performance in Maryland went awry after her cocaine supply went missing before the show, causing her partner, Bissell, to go onstage without her after she refused to dance without the drug. Her mysterious absence was publicized, which led to the rise of her negative public image (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 244). In a *New York Times* article, the company’s artistic director, Gene Hammett, was interviewed after the event, stating, “She will never dance with us again ... We can’t have that kind of unprofessional attitude. She’s one of the most beautiful artists we have in America, but it was a tragic event. She needs help immediately” (Thomas and Krebs 1981, 8). While the article did not share the specifics of Kirkland’s disappearance, it was clear that she was no longer a trustworthy performer.

Despite their disastrous performance in Maryland, Kirkland and Bissell were rehired at ABT in the spring of 1981 after their five-month leave. The company provided no rules regarding drug use in their contracts. Kirkland experienced another brain seizure and an optic seizure from drug use, still denying the severity of her condition. Baryshnikov said nothing about her behavior, and despite his role in her collapse, he was “still the ultimate authority for [her] ... [she] was still trying to please him” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 248). Due to her relentless drug use and inability to arrive at performances and rehearsals on time, Kirkland’s contract at ABT was not renewed that summer. Still, Alex was able to keep her in miscellaneous jobs, often dancing with Bissell. Cocaine use caused her to be emotionally unstable, and Kirkland lashed out when managers complained of her dancing, giving companies more reasons not to hire her.

Kirkland had a third brain seizure, this time causing her to seek medical attention. She stayed in the hospital for several days until her mother arranged to have her committed to the Westchester Division of New York Hospital. Kirkland soon realized she was not being placed in

an addiction recovery center, but rather a psychiatric facility. After a while, another patient informed her that she had the legal right to check herself out on temporary leave for a weekend. Kirkland used this loophole to return to Manhattan and go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, finally appearing to be improving in the eyes of her family and the press. After her brief return to normalcy, she went back to the facility to check herself out for good. The chief psychiatrist at the facility determined that Kirkland was unfit to leave and had her committed to the hospital for being a danger to herself and others. Kirkland attended sessions with the psychiatrist, however she once again faked stability, intending to leave the facility as soon as possible. Eventually, she successfully fooled the psychiatrist and was able to obtain permission to go back to Manhattan to take a dance class on the condition that she would return to the psychiatric facility. Kirkland turned to Alex to help her escape after the class and contact a lawyer to keep her out of the facility. After her successful escape, she continued her cocaine abuse and became dependent on Valium, which they had prescribed to her in the hospital for antisocial behavior (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 251).

Weakened by her drug problems and malnutrition, Kirkland told her manager that she could no longer perform the fast-paced and arduous roles she was known for and requested only to be cast in slow and expressive pieces. By this time, the press knew of her drug problems and her stay in the psychiatric facility. The scandal subjected Kirkland to a media firestorm, making her unable to receive work, causing her to break her contract with Alex and seek new opportunities in familiar places. She went to NYCB and begged Balanchine to allow her back into the company, but he rejected her pleading, claiming he did not want her to negatively impact his other dancers or the reputation of the theater. Next, Kirkland turned to Baryshnikov. Needing the revenue from a renowned ballerina such as Kirkland, he rehired her to work for ABT. She continued her drug abuse, but this time, kept her habits more private, careful to hide her struggles from others at the company. She also began talking with another psychiatric specialist, Dr. Robert Cancro, who was recommended to her by Alex. During their sessions, she openly discussed her addiction but downplayed the severity of her problem (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 263).

Kirkland, unreliable as ever, received a warning from Baryshnikov for missing performances and rehearsals. Her transgressions eventually led him to suggest she resign from ballet, claiming that it would be better for her and the company, though he only intended to save ABT from a scandal. Kirkland refused to resign, and although she was difficult to work with, her dancing generated so much money for the company that they had no choice but to allow her to continue dancing (See Appendix B). While performing, other dancers would weep in the wings, terrified that she might die onstage (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 265).

Shortly after Kirkland's return to ballet, one of her first mentors, Balanchine, died from a progressive brain disorder. His passing greatly affected Kirkland, whose emotional state was further worsened by her confusion over her reaction to the death of a man who had abused her for years (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 268). He was a symbol of her lack of perfection, and she had never been able to become the ballerina or woman he had wanted her to be. She was lost as she had thought that if she could appease Balanchine, then maybe her insecurities could fall away. Now she would never be given the chance to prove herself to him, or to herself.

In 1983, after being awake for days on a typical cocaine binge, Kirkland experienced another brain seizure in the Metropolitan Opera's (The Met) cafeteria, causing her to fall and cut her head. Baryshnikov found her and took her to the hospital to stitch her wound, but she still continued to abuse cocaine (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 268) (See Appendix C). The abuse began to worsen as her dealer started to sell her cocaine laced with amphetamines, making her

addicted to amphetamines on top of the cocaine she already regularly took. The situation was dire: she was spending thousands of dollars a week on cocaine, she was always temperamental, and her teeth started falling out (275).

One night in 1985, Kirkland met a man named Greg Lawrence at her dealer's house. Lawrence was a fellow drug user, although he was less reliant on cocaine than Kirkland. The two instantly bonded over their shared habit. She felt understood by Lawrence instead of being belittled, as she had been with previous male partners and authority figures such as her father, Balanchine, and Baryshnikov. She felt inspired to dance again, and while on tour, her box office sales increased by 25% (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 274). She realized that she had begun to fight the effects of cocaine rather than enjoy them and considered leaving the habit behind.

Kirkland and Lawrence's budding relationship was equally beneficial and destructive. Kirkland encouraged Lawrence's drug use, even as she recognized its detrimental effects. The strength of her addiction overpowered her love for him; she "was killing him, and [she] knew it. The cocaine would destroy [their] love" (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 278). Lawrence initiated serious conversations about her future, as she needed to get clean or would probably wind up dead. After consuming over two ounces of cocaine in three weeks and staying awake for a "three-day nightmare" with Lawrence, Kirkland performed at The Met in *The Leaves Are Fading*, what would inevitably be her last show (278). Kirkland walked onstage, and as the music began to swirl around her, the steps left her satin-covered feet. She began to feel another seizure coming, and with nowhere to run, she thought of the only thing that truly mattered: Lawrence. By convincing herself that her partner onstage was the man she loved, she fought off the seizure and completed the performance. The disastrous show was a wake-up call for her (278).

Epilogue: Kirkland's Impact and Current Regulations in Dance

Finally, Kirkland decided to leave ballet. What had once been an artistic love but had turned into a toxic workplace, and Kirkland resigned from ABT on May 4, 1984 (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 279). She left town to stay with a friend and Lawrence in upstate New York. She stopped using cocaine but continued to take Valium to avoid withdrawal seizures. During this time, Kirkland gained 20 pounds, felt more energized than ever, and began to think more clearly. After a month, she stopped taking Valium, making her officially clean of all drugs. After six weeks of painful withdrawal, Kirkland began to spend her time working out in a barn, but this time, it wasn't with the goal of dancing or perfectionism; it was with the goal of health and mental well-being (282).

Once the haze of drug abuse cleared, Kirkland began to look introspectively into what went wrong in her life. She began to understand that her childhood had led to her deep-seated need for perfectionism, and Balanchine's words and actions had left her more damaged than she wanted to admit. Her toxic relationships with Baryshnikov and Bissell had been a product of her need for male validation that she had sought since her youth. Instead of living her life in the past, she finally realized the kind of person she wanted to be and the kind of life she wanted to live, one that looked to the future. In 1985, things continued to improve for Kirkland when she and Lawrence were married in a small ceremony (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 285). At the first stable point in her life, she was at a crossroads: should she become an advocate and expose the atrocities that were normalized in the dance world, or stay silent and protect those she worked with and possibly return to dance?

In 1986, Kirkland published her first book, *Dancing on My Grave*, a shattering exposé of the dance world and its dark ties to the drug world, abuse, and eating disorders. In her book, she

speaks with a manager who had worked at ABT when she was dancing there, who said over 12 other dancers in the company at that time had severe drug problems like Kirkland's that he had known about. However, due to the prevalence of drug abuse in ballet and the clandestine nature of the habit, it is impossible to know how many more dancers struggled with the issue behind the scenes (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 244). When the book was written, change had already begun at ABT, where Kirkland's drug problems were never acknowledged. One dancer in 1986 received routine drug tests, leading Kirkland to reflect that, "perhaps my experience has already contributed to change, at least for my generation," which was exactly what she continued to do through advocacy work and publicizing the reality of ballet behind a screen of beauty (245). Kirkland deduced that the infantilization of dancers makes them more susceptible to negative outcomes because of prolonged dependency, and "starvation and poisoning were not excesses, but measures taken to stay within the norm, both professionally and aesthetically" (245).

Additionally, Kirkland participated in interviews, speaking out about the trauma she endured at the hands of her male colleagues and managers and highlighting the need for change in the dance industry, much like she had done during the dancers' union strike. She spoke out in an interview for Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and the news company received many calls and letters complaining that Kirkland was blaming the ballet industry for her problems, but they received even more responses praising Kirkland for speaking out and sharing similar experiences female viewers had in ballet (Kirkland 1986). In a *60 Minutes* interview, she watched videos of her dancing and speaking on drugs and reflected that it was immensely obvious she had been abusing drugs and questioned why there was no policy about drugs in the company (Kirkland 1986).

In December of 1987, Patrick Bissell died of a drug overdose, sharing a similar fate to many dancers who weren't able to escape the vicious cycle like Kirkland did (*The Washington Post* 1987). It was not just the dancers at ABT who struggled. Maximiliano Zomosa, a dancer at the Joffrey Ballet, died by suicide in 1969 at only 31 years old, and Joseph Duell, a dancer who had trained under Balanchine at NYCB, died by suicide at the age of 29 in 1986 (Dowd 1986; *The New York Times* 1969).

Though not as many suffered such a gruesome fate, other dancers continue to share their stories of drug abuse. Eugene Barnes, a dancer at the Carolina Ballet, a company that uses the Balanchine technique, shared that he had to leave the dance world in 2014 due to drug abuse. Shortly after leaving, Barnes wrote an article to share his story and his struggles, able to talk out honestly because of the generations of dancers who came before him and broke the stigma, including Kirkland (Barnes 2019).

Kirkland published two more books, *The Shape of Love* in 1990 and *The Little Ballerina and Her Dancing Horse* in 1993, continuing to share her experiences with the world. She received a *Victory of the Spirit Award* and the *Gerard Manley Hopkins Theatre Award* for her exceptional work (Gelsey Kirkland Academy of Classical Ballet 2011). She began teaching at ABT, The Royal Ballet, and other schools, training students in a way that undid her own abusive upbringing, creating new practice techniques that "encourage young dancers to use their minds and minimize the damage to their bodies" (Kirkland 1986, n.p.). From 2002 to 2005, she trained students at the Victorian College of the Arts and became artistic director of a dance program (See Appendix D). After that, she returned to ABT to stage *Sleeping Beauty* with her husband, Michael Chernov, even performing a small role in the ballet (Gelsey Kirkland Academy of Classical Ballet 2011).⁶ In 2010, she founded the Gelsey Kirkland Academy of Classical Ballet and now teaches new students in a less abusive and more forgiving way, placing less emphasis

on the ideal ballerina body (Harss 2016) (See Appendix E). Currently, Kirkland teaches at The Met, the same place she had performed her last dance almost four decades ago, ensuring the dancers of the future do not relive her story (Gelsey Kirkland Academy of Classical Ballet 2011).

Gelsey Kirkland's tale of immense personal struggles through her years at ABT and NYCB highlights the dark side of dance, exposing common struggles many dancers face, such as disordered eating and drug addiction. Despite Kirkland's stellar abilities, she never felt as though she could be good enough because of the way she had been beaten down by systemic pressures and male influences in her life. The demands for perfection that these influences placed upon her nearly destroyed her health, career, and life. Kirkland was ultimately able to break free from the toxic world that surrounded her, something many dancers couldn't bear or dare to do, and spoke out by advocating for reform in the dance world. She was able to procure this happy ending with the help of Lawrence and other peers who shared similar experiences to hers. The sense of camaraderie she had gained from dance had been invaluable and one of the only things about ballet that had a positive effect on Kirkland's life. She used her strife as a lesson to teach the next generation of dancers and focus on creating healthier environments for dancers.

Speaking out against George Balanchine, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and the American Ballet Theatre gave Kirkland power and proved that women can challenge toxic systems by recognizing abuse in male-dominated, hierarchical industries. Kirkland redefined female leadership in ballet by changing her role as a passive subject under others' control to an active leader who influenced the pedagogy of dance. By using vulnerability as strength, Kirkland was able to reduce stigma in conversations on eating disorders, addiction, and abusive training practices. The policy changes catalyzed by Kirkland's testimony enable safer practices in dance, offering dancers healthier habits and increased support. Now, the American Ballet Theatre has a strict no-tolerance policy on drugs, stating that "the use of illegal drugs or alcohol is strictly forbidden and is grounds for immediate dismissal" (American Ballet Theatre 2019, n.p.). There are now also resources available for struggling dancers, such as access to a nutritionist who provides intermittent workshops, counselors who do group workshops with younger pre-professional dancers and individual sessions for older trainees and company members, as well as an injury prevention team of specialists (American Ballet Theatre 2024). The broader implications of Kirkland's tale show that women who lead change often face backlash when exposing uncomfortable truths, but such truth-telling is essential for systemic transformation.

Kirkland's journey through the world of ballet is a testament to the destructive forces of perfectionism and the toll it can take on dancers both mentally and physically. Her personal battles with eating disorders, drug addiction, and abusive industry standards reveal the harsh realities that many dancers face in their pursuit of an idealized image. However, Kirkland's resilience and advocacy for change within the dance community have led to reforms that now offer greater support and protection for dancers. Through her experiences, Kirkland has not only shared her pain but also helped create a more compassionate and understanding environment for future generations of dancers.

I am ready to fight for my ideas, to turn my tears and laughter into something rare: an honest and unflinching love. I cannot lose ... I am not afraid of what may come. I have already seen my grave, my place of birth as a ballerina and an artist. Though this season may be my last, the steps continue after the body has been stilled. *The dance goes on forever. So shall I. So shall we.* (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 285-286)

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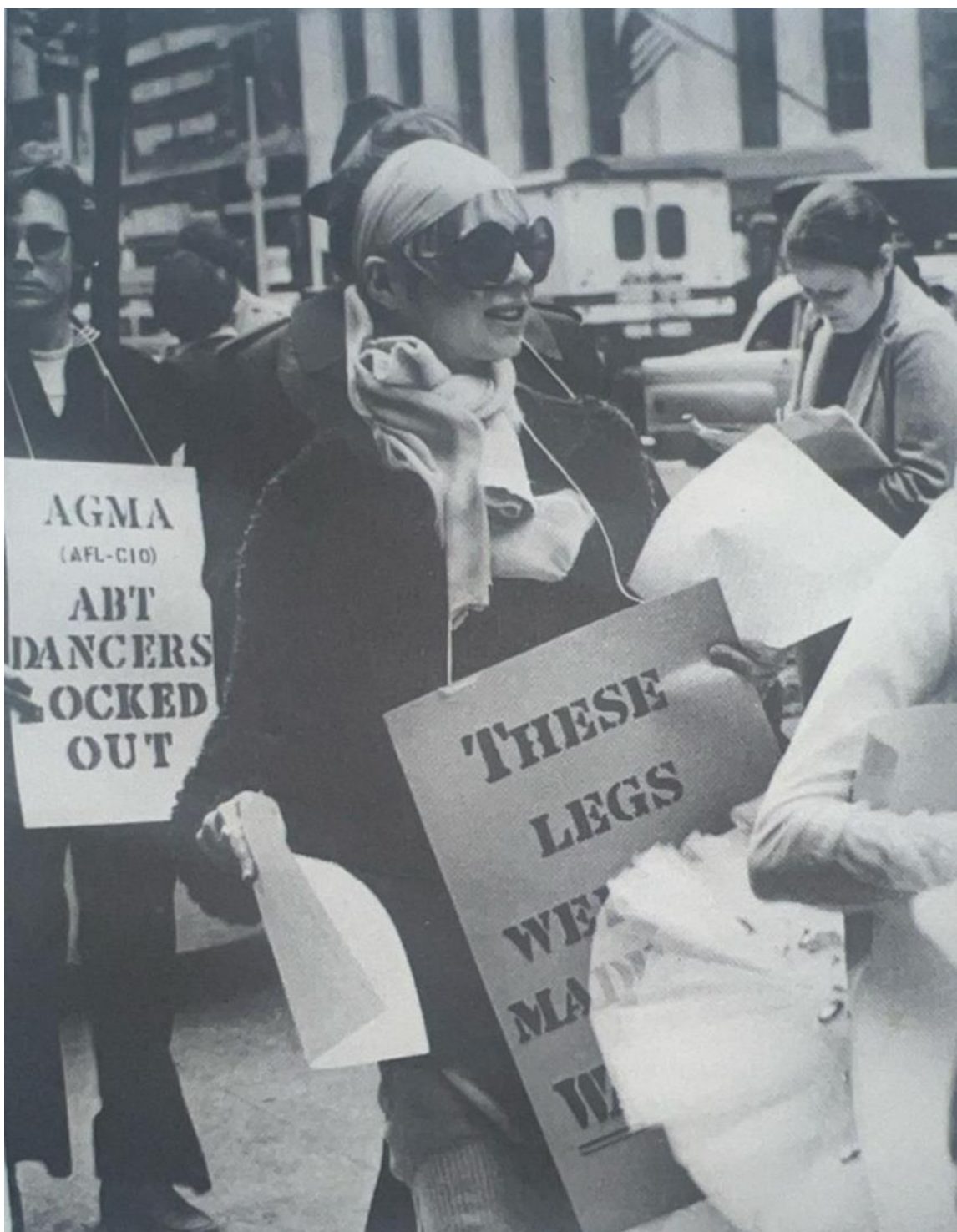
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Appendix A: Photograph taken by Nina Alovert of Kirkland protesting for fair wages and treatment with the American Guild of Musical Artists in the fall of 1979. She holds a sign that reads “These legs weren’t made for walking” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 192D).



Appendix B: Kirkland and Baryshnikov performing *Don Quixote* in 1981. Kirkland was using cocaine regularly at this time (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 192G).



Appendix C: Kirkland in a rehearsal under the influence of drugs (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986, 192H).



Appendix D: Kirkland on Dance Magazine cover in September 2005 (Lydon 2005).



Appendix E: Kirkland instructing young students in 2012 at the Gelsey Kirkland Academy of Classical Ballet (Gelsey Kirkland Academy of Classical Ballet 2012).

