Introduction

This is a book about history—about the many possible histories that get written on a single subject. It is a document of change, marking a future still being written, not a past that is safely settled. It is about choreographic work, and about those who write the history of that work: the researchers and retrievers, the adapters and promoters, the performers and documenters, the critics and scholars. And it is about how the idea of dance evolves in the mind of one spectator over a relatively small slice of time.

The literature of dance relies heavily on personal reflection and anecdote, but serious consideration of dance works requires the application of a critical/descriptive eye, over repeated viewings. Longtime critics return to the great works over the years, understanding that they are looking at subjects in evolution. The works can emerge from this writing process as composites. The critic tries to discern and hang on to some essence that informs every performance of the work. We who are not the dancers, who can’t know the work in our bones, are negotiating between memory, expectation, empirical observation, and subjective response when we report to our readers. They in turn, reading many accounts of many different performances, may arrive at their own notion of what a given work is.

To focus this collection of my reviews and essays from the past two and a half decades and give it a shape, I have centered the narrative around the historical paradox: We confer great power over the past, even though the past has no fixed meaning. I’ve chosen pieces that grapple with the floating identity of ballet, and of particular ballets, and with the expanding environment of spectacle in which ballet competes for an audience. I’ve selected and organized the entries around themes of authenticity and change, rather than notions of chronological progression.

The era of the Diaghilev Ballets Russes is celebrated in our time as a watershed in ballet history, yet the legendary status of the Ballets Russes rests heavily on the personalities of its famous artists and patrons. The innovative ballets themselves are retrievable today as interpretations of the originals, each production asking to be taken as validation of that ballet’s reputation. But since we have no eyewitness experience to judge this, we’re compelled to look at revivals as self-contained events, detached from the legend. Whether we think the revival is faithful or not, the legend stands intact.
The nineteenth-century Russian classics, even more remote from our experience and more subject to the inroads of time, offer a clearer and more readily understood style to the modern audience. These works undergo constant change—from redesigned costumes, rearranged sequences, and rechoreographed numbers, to shifting interpretations of characters and plots, to the routine addition of new material from year to year. The audience has no trouble recognizing these revised editions as Swan Lake or The Nutcracker.

The closest thing in recent memory to a distinct style of ballet was the New York City Ballet repertory under George Balanchine. When Balanchine died in 1983, the company entered a period of transition. The Balanchine ballets occupied a less prominent role in New York, but they appeared more frequently in the repertory of other companies. During the same period, the idea of high art itself was in debate. Contemporary ballets, adopting a free-form assortment of dance models, popular culture references, gender and ethnic reforms, have proliferated. In this climate of anti-elitism, even Balanchine has cycled into legend, along with stars like Suzanne Farrell, Edward Villella, and Mikhail Baryshnikov, whose dancing a diminishing number of balletgoers have seen on stage.

Despite their heavy investment in the past, ballet companies are always concerned with new work, as a repertory refresher and a link to the present. Even at its most formal and abstract, ballet tries to reflect the experience of its audience or propose uplifting models. Today ballet is only one element of a performance spectrum that spans circuses and sports, TV dance competitions, animation movies, and fashion shows. All of this new entertainment has reflected onto theatrical dance, just as the glamour, physical expertise, and artistry of dance have influenced the nondance media. Policies, from gender and ethnic struggles to the agonized questions of environment, war, and class dissonance, has found its way into new choreography.

With the documentation and ready accessibility of dance repertory on film, video, and the Internet, ballets can be deconstructed, translated to another medium, memorialized, appropriated, or refashioned. Classical icons even become the inspiration for new works and new forms.

As a practice and an art form, dance exalts its landmarks and precedents, while it simultaneously, deliberately, overturns these same defining concepts. The writer of dance criticism is poised between realities. How does the appearance of a historical work alter against the backdrop of our current theater life? Is there something fundamental about a work that withstands rethinking, updating, and even cultural obsolescence? Is a hi

\textit{Introduction}
toric work—or any work—to be considered only in the context erected by its producers? Does a work exist when it finally escapes its own mythology?

Dance clings to the idea of authenticity although no one knows what authenticity in a dance performance really is or where its boundaries lie. Big ballet companies today invest heavily in classic works, but this dependency requires that the works be continually refreshed and reconstituted. When one year’s Swan Lake may be different from its predecessors in small details or large concepts, which is the real Swan Lake? Contemporary works—in effect all dances created since 1900—have an even less consistent presence on ballet stages. They are less well known, their “authenticity” is recognized by fewer people, and their audience is ill-prepared for unfamiliar sensibilities.

Given the straitened circumstances of all the arts, especially the expensive theater arts, the unending drive for patrons has intensified during the 1990s and early 2000s. What we read in the papers about dance is more and more the creation of marketing specialists, while the role of critics—responders is shrinking both in the public sphere and within the dance field. But critics leave a record at least as authentic as the testimonials originated by dancers and their spokespersons. Critics document what they have observed on the stage in day-to-day practice. They retrospectively interpret what has occurred over the long run. And they can yield insight into the often clashing claims of art, politics, and popular culture.

Dancers love to assert that what they do can’t be talked about, and this is the irresistible challenge all dance critics address. For us, the talking-about-it in writing is the real conclusion to a performance, the place where loop finally closes between one audience member and the choreographer’s idea, as imagined and taught to the dancers and given by them to the audience. Criticism is an act of reciprocity. It may not match up exactly with the original intent, but art allows for—demands—many responses. I suppose the deepest response to a dance would be another dance, but words can make a dance resonate in other ways. I’m principally interested in conveying a sense of what the dance looked like and how it worked, as well as the context in which the dance takes place—its choreographic, artistic, and political influences. I see myself as both a demystifier and a validator, sometimes an interpreter, but not a judge.

A review can be both an immediate perception and a historical record. My working circumstances have afforded few opportunities to undertake scholarly studies. Some essays of substantial length and depth are included in this collection, but they were all originally intended for general readers. They are all grounded in the empirical experience of the dance at
hand, even when I've used other types of research to contextualize and deepen my ideas. As a writing process this is less deliberate, less goal oriented, than setting out to research an arcane subject or taking a new look at previous scholarship. Regular reviewing has its limitations and advantages. It is a discipline, as rigorous as scholarly writing, but different. Perhaps dance is the art form that needs criticism the most; since it cannot be viewed or heard or read except in the singular moment of performance. After that moment it becomes a translation. Critics take their role as witness very seriously.

Many people think of dance as a cultural process that evolves of its own momentum within the social and political parameters of its time. Increasingly in recent years, I've come to think of dance creation and performance as a more calculated product, a sort of tourist attraction, controlled and conceptualized from within, to suit the immediate dynamics of competition and survival. I think to the general public, dance is a foreign destination, exotic, dreamy and inaccessible, surrounded by myth, populated by idealized characters who engage in secret rituals. The dance field reinforces this projection of its own remoteness. It's these shifting, highly mediated representations of dance that I want to consider in this book.

Underlying the concerns of dance producers and creators, as well as those who observe and comment on dance, is the question of what art itself is in the twenty-first century. Art's value as understood for many centuries has been shaken by the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. But even if we know the dances of the distant and recent past only as representations, we can't allow them to disappear without losing a part of what has made us civilized. We must be able to access them—to imagine how they appeared to their first viewers and account for how they've been entrusted to us. This book tries to see into these representations, while acknowledging that it is, itself, a representation.