

TRIBUTES TO TUMEY

Two Former Students Salute Antonina Tumkovsky, Who Has Retired from SAB at 98

Teacher, Colleague, Friend

by Susan Pilarre



Photo © Michael Halsband

Madame Tumkovsky began her teaching career at SAB in 1949. She always tells me the story of how she got her first and only job when she arrived in this country. Mr. Balanchine watched her teach a class, and then offered her a job on the spot. She was completely taken

aback and said, "You know, I was not principal dancer, I am soloist." At that time, the teachers—Dubrovskaya, Vladimiroff, Oboukoff, Muriel Stuart—were all former stars of different companies in Russia and Europe. "Good," he replied, "you are like me. I was soloist, too. Don't go watch anyone's classes, just do what you do."

This most fortunate meeting of the minds was an incredibly lucky break for all the thousands of students who were to pass through the doors of SAB for the next 54 years. I, being one of them, started my personal journey with Tumey in 1959. I was studying ballet in a school on Long Island that just happened to be run by Melissa Hayden (a Principal in New York City Ballet at that time). The school closed for lack of budding ballerinas in Cedarhurst, but Melissa took me by the hand and delivered me to Tumey's Fourth Division class at SAB. This was a pivotal moment in my career. If I thought I was afraid of Melissa, that was nothing compared to my first class with Tumey. I saw the stick (used to tap the feet into a little tighter fifth position, not to beat children with) and heard a loud voice with a heavy Russian accent counting: "Eeets 1, eeets 2, eeets 3." I didn't audition for the School and I can't imagine how I did well enough for Tumey to say this was

where I belonged, but stay I did. By the third class at the end of the first week, she got close enough for me to see the famous twinkling blue eyes and warm friendly smile.

We only had two different teachers—Tumey and Miss Dudin. They were both wonderful and had two totally different manners of teaching. Miss Dudin was more quiet, and her classes stressed precision and clean footwork. But Tumey's classes were so much about moving large with fantastic jump combinations, which I loved. She taught us to do *entrechat six*—a high jump with many beats. Mr. B loved that she taught that step to the girls. Four years later Mr. B came to watch a class taught by

André Eglevsky (another NYCB principal dancer). Mr. Eglevsky put me right in front of Mr. Balanchine's nose and gave 16 *entrechat six*. One hour later I was in the company. So you see, I have Tumey to thank for taking me into the School and teaching me how to do the step that got me into the Company.



Photo © Arch Higgins

During my Company years, 1963-1979, I didn't get to take many of Tumey's classes, but when I did, I loved the challenge—particularly if I could get through them. In later years, the kids dubbed her

"The Tuminator." She taught Advanced Men as well. Mr. B thought she was fantastic for the boys. She made us all so strong! When I joined the School's faculty in 1987, Tumey and I changed from being student and beloved teacher to colleagues and, more importantly, great friends. I still took her class when I could, but now, in addition to trying to get through it, I was busily writing down all the fantastic combinations she has on some miracle hard drive built into her head. And now I also have the privilege of chatting with her in the dressing room. I listened to all the stories of her life and all her students; she remembers so many of them. She talked about how Patty McBride could *pas de bourrée* so lightly and jump so beautifully, about what an "excellent student" Merrill

Ashley was, and that Darci Kistler, who took class from her three times a week in C2, was such a hard worker. Just to watch her face light up as her advanced girls flew across the room was a treat in itself. "I like to teach the girls," she would say. That was obvious. And what gifts she gave to us.

About fifteen years ago, when she was 85, Tumey finally decided not to teach on Saturday mornings when she still had one Fourth Division class. She hesitantly mentioned it to Peter Martins, and he said, "But who can teach for you?" She said, "Suzy Pilarre was my student in Fourth Division, and she can teach the class." I was so honored that she felt I could handle this responsibility, teaching the class she first taught me so many years ago. About three years ago, she reduced her teaching to three advanced girls classes a week. At 95, she said to me one morning, "Suzy, my schedule is zo vonderful. When you will be my age, get my schedule." I looked at her and said, "Tumey, when I will be your age I will be dead." We both laughed really hard at that. I'm still laughing about it today.

Since she turned 90 and allowed the School to make a fuss about her age, SAB alumni have been aware of her birthday. The cards and faxes come pouring in from all over the world. Because her birthday comes in August when the school is closed, a few of us who are in town go over to her apartment for cake and wine. She sits and reads all the cards (without glasses), and remembers so many names and what their particular attributes were. For example, "nice jump. . . no extension," or "she was always doing too much flirting with the boys." Her memory and her comments are remarkable.

True Grit and Champagne Bubbles by Wendy Whelan

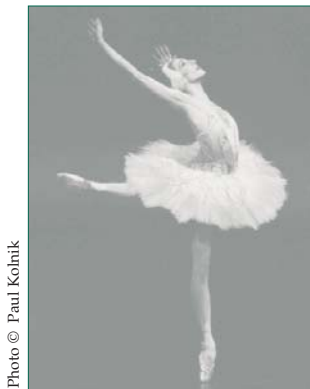


Photo © Paul Kolnik

Great ballerinas seem to be a study in contradiction: they have the steely determination of a bull, yet move with the lightness of a feather; they practice with the devotion of a monk and perform with the freedom of laughter in a child. I have never had a teacher embody this idea more clearly than Mme. Tumkovsky.

This past August, Tumey made a very difficult decision to retire. Last year, because of arthritis in her knees and a bout with pneumonia at Christmas, she found it difficult to walk or stand for any length of time. She didn't feel she could teach her very physically challenging class sitting in a chair. So she informed Peter she would not return in



Madame Tumkovsky, teaching at SAB, 1950s

September. He told her to come in often and watch, and throw out a classic Tumey combination whenever the mood hit her. She's been to the School several times, and when she watches, her face brightens up the room. I know my fellow teachers and I feel the obligation to keep up the Tumey work ethic (especially in the jumping department). So even if today's students don't have her classes directly, they get some of the benefits that we learned from her. She is a total original. Those of us who were taught by her, or merely know her at all, are so lucky to have her in our lives. ♦

Susan Pilarre is a member of the SAB faculty.

She could teach a small child her first ballet class or push the most senior technical wizard to triumph beyond her wildest dreams. She taught them all with the same straightforward honesty and integrity. She always demanded respect and always gave it back.

I studied with Tumey for four years in the advanced divisions of the School. The moment I met her I knew I was in the presence of a rare and extraordinary woman—a woman from another time and place. Her life experience is palpable, and she wears it with radiance and dignity. As I look back on my own experience with Tumey, I see that she is not only a vault of knowledge, but also a treasure trove of insight. For her students, the anticipation of her class lay somewhere between dread and exhilaration,

not dissimilar from the one I get just prior to dancing a full length Odette/Odile or Princess Aurora. I realize now that this was exactly the feeling she wanted us all to have and to work with.

As a professional dancer, I want so much to thank her for her incomparable commitment to the students at the School of American Ballet, the seemingly impossible challenges she put before us, the countless repetitions she asked of us and most of all for the soft smiles and eye twinkles she would offer as reward for work well done. I will never forget this most sought after glisten that would break from her eyes.

I believe one of Tumey's greatest gifts is in shaping the essence of a dancer. She not only promoted physical strength, but tried to instill in us emotional integrity as well. She wanted us to be confident, to learn to handle demands, to be healthy in mind and body. She encouraged us to be excited to try something difficult and not to be afraid. Ultimately she was prompting us to ask ourselves, "Do I have what it takes to make this my life?" What a precious gift to have in a teacher, one that can offer this most subtle and powerful access to one's self. It is a gift whether one continues to dance or not. It is a gift her students will have for the rest of their lives. For this I am truly and forever grateful to her. ❖

Wendy Whelan is a Principal with New York City Ballet.

© School of American Ballet 2003
All rights reserved