

## Ballet Transliteration: Cold War Exchange and Its Intricacies

Mariia Zimina

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Mariia.Zimina@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

### Abstract:

*Ballet in the Cold War: A Soviet-American Exchange* explores the issue of Cold War diplomacy through an investigation of the ballet tours of the Bolshoi Theater and the New York City Ballet in the early 1960s. Anne Searcy highlights the crossroads of dance, music, politics, and their perception. She has successfully applied the concept of 'transliteration' to the specific context of inter-bloc cultural exchange and investigates the topic from a new angle by incorporating unexplored sources.

### Ballett Transliteration: Austausch im Kalten Krieg und seine Besonderheiten

#### German Abstract:

*Ballet in the Cold War. A Soviet-American Exchange* untersucht Formen der Diplomatie des Kalten Krieges anhand einer Auseinandersetzung mit den Balletttourneen des Bolshoi Theaters und des New York City Balletts zu Beginn der 1960er Jahre. Dabei zeigt Anne Searcy die Schnittstelle von Tanz, Musik, Politik und Interpretation auf und wendet das Konzept der ‚Transliteration‘ erfolgreich auf den spezifischen Kontext des interkulturellen Austausches zwischen dem Ost- und Westblock an. Durch den Einbezug bisher unerforschter Quellen betrachtet sie das Thema aus einem neuen Blickwinkel.

### How to cite:

Zimina, Mariia: "Ballet Transliteration: Cold War Exchange and Its Intricacies [Review of: Searcy, Anne: *Ballet in the Cold War: A Soviet-American Exchange*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.]." In: KULT\_online 66 (2022).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2022.1329>



## Ballet Transliteration: Cold War Exchange and Its Intricacies

Mariia Zimina

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Searcy, Anne. *Ballet in the Cold War. A Soviet-American Exchange*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 198 pages, 33.19 EUR, ISBN: 978-0-19-094510-7.

In her debut book *Ballet in the Cold War: A Soviet-American Exchange*, Anne Searcy focuses on American and Soviet cultural diplomacy strategies for the visits of the Bolshoi Theater to the US and of the New York City Ballet to the Soviet Union between 1959 and 1962. Having expertise in the fields of history and musicology, the researcher provides a unique perspective on the intersection of politics, dance, music, and their reception.

The book is comprised of four chapters, each of which is dedicated to specific US-Soviet and Soviet-American tours between 1959 and 1962. In the introduction, the author starts with an argument that different audiences perceive ballet differently. While music and dance are often seen as universal languages, Searcy argues that these art forms, nevertheless, need to be interpreted cross-culturally in order to be understood. Hence, the author introduces the concept of 'transliteration.' Similarly to the process of expressing the sounds of one language in the alphabet of the other (for example, writing English words with the Cyrillic script), one also processes different elements of dance through the prism of one's own culture (p. 7). Consequently, the sensory impressions of one country to another have to be transferred, as they are experienced through the host audience's cultural expectations. Through the concept of transliteration, the author showcases the visible gap between the assumptions of the performers of what to expect from the audience and, vice-versa, the concertgoers, who had a certain idea of beauty in ballet. As Searcy put it: "the American audience did not see these performances in a vacuum. They saw Soviet ballet through the prism of their own cultural expectations. The opposite was equally true; Soviet audiences interpreted and judged American ballet according to the artistic standards they already possessed, not according to Western frameworks of meaning" (p. 2).

The author's approach can be considered innovative because she looks at Soviet documents for her study, unlike many of her predecessors who have researched the topic solely from an American perspective and by only relying on American sources (p. 97). Her source material helps her to question the before unquestioned notion that the tours of the American ballet in the Soviet Union were a success and allow her to see the responses to criticism at the time. With these new sources, the author takes a fascinating path of tracing the ways in which the US used Soviet tour reviews in the Cold War debate by twisting and stripping them of context in order to portray a desirable picture of the supremacy of the American ballet method.

Throughout the book, the author introduces the reader to a wide range of issues that the tours brought to the fore such as gender role criticism, repertoire choices, reflection of classist views in ballet, and much more. At points this endeavor is also quite ambitious and not always successful as her analysis is sometimes lacking in depth due to the variety of issues she addresses in every chapter. For instance, the book does not sufficiently highlight the role of certain dancers as cultural diplomats who were chosen to represent their countries. One of the examples is Searcy's underestimation of the role of race in the cultural diplomacy of the US theater in the USSR. The Soviet Union was proud of the alleged racial equality in the country, simultaneously criticizing racial discrimination in its anti-American propaganda. I believe that this point deserves a closer look to understand the reasons why the Soviet Union did not target its news coverage at the minimal participation of African-American dancers in the tours. Moreover, the role of George Balanchine—who had escaped the Soviet Union and migrated to the US—was also crucial, as he represented the group of people who made a conscious choice to leave and preferred one political system to another. I would argue that the mere fact of choosing him among dozens of American choreographers could be interpreted in both positive and negative ways by the Soviet side. Therefore, the silence of the Soviet tour reviewers on Balanchine has a potential to be another intriguing point for analysis.

Aside from the tour reactions, the author also brings into the spotlight the wave of Soviet discussions about ballet aesthetics and differences between American and Soviet approaches. While the Soviet ballet school was narrative-driven and rather simplistic, George Balanchine's method became famous for its abstract form of dance that relied on music and not on storytelling. According to Searcy, when approving the tours, the Soviet ballet officials were more concerned with the level of exposure to sexuality in American ballet than with the level

of abstraction in it. In my opinion, this conclusion seems peculiar since the Soviet government was not so welcoming to its own avant-garde artists in the 1950s, and most of them were sidelined and silenced. The author explains that this incoherence was the result of the will of the USSR to show acceptance for the American side, as almost all Balanchine ballets were approved. Thus, the level of abstraction did not scare away Soviet officials. Judging by the rejected pieces, the officials only disapproved of the display of sexuality (p. 88). However, I would still claim that the question of different attitude towards the domestic abstract art stands, and it would be fascinating to research the different treatments by the USSR of abstract art at home and abroad.

To sum up, *Ballet in the Cold War* is a must-read for understanding the complexity of cultural exchange between the USSR and the USA in the 1950s to early 1960s. The book offers a wide range of questions and topics that go hand-in-hand with transliteration of dance as art in a complex context of ideological clash. Overall, the research is a good foundation for further investigation into the topics of cross-cultural exchange and the ambiguity of its perception.