

# The Suzanne Farrell Ballet: *Deconstructing Divertimento*

Friday, November 20, 2009  
11 a.m.—12 p.m. ET  
Grades 9–12

Curriculum Connections: American History  
National Standards for Dance: 1, 2, 3, 5

Photo by Paul Kolnik



## About Suzanne Farrell

*When you dance, you  
are rearranging gravity.*  
—Suzanne Farrell

Suzanne Farrell is regarded as one of the greatest ballerinas of the 20th century. She has danced in more than 100 different ballets, nearly one-third of which were created expressly for her by choreographer George Balanchine, known as “the father of American ballet.” Her numerous performances with Balanchine’s company (more than two thousand), her world tours, and her appearances in television and movies have made her one of the most recognizable and highly esteemed

artists of her generation. She is also the recipient of numerous artistic and academic accolades. After retiring from the stage in 1989, Ms. Farrell emerged as one of the world’s most inspiring ballet teachers and directors.

## About the Company

In 2001, Ms. Farrell created the Kennedy Center’s own ballet company, The Suzanne Farrell Ballet, and serves as Artistic Director. The Company is committed to carrying forth the legacy of George Balanchine through performances of his classic ballets.

Since 2001, The Suzanne Farrell Ballet has performed annually at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and has toured both nationally and internationally. Notably, the Company accepted an invitation to perform as a tribute to Ms. Farrell, a 2005 Honoree, as part of the nationally televised Kennedy Center Honors gala. To date the Company has over thirty-five ballets in its repertoire including works by Balanchine, Maurice Béjart, and Jerome Robbins.

## About Balanchine

George Balanchine was the most prolific—and often considered the most influential—ballet choreographer of the 20th century. He revolutionized classical ballet by eliminating complex plots and emphasizing movement that expressed the music. Balanchine created more than 400 ballets and founded the New York City Ballet. His artistry and fresh approach helped popularize ballet in the United States.

## About the Program

### *Agon* (1957)

Music by Igor Stravinsky  
Choreography by George Balanchine

*Agon*, which premiered in 1957, is a very athletic work, small but epic. The word is Greek for “contest,” though there’s no literal sense of competition in the ballet.



Natalia Magnicaballi and Momchil Mladenov in *Agon*. Photo by Paul Kolnik.

Balanchine commissioned Stravinsky to write the score for *Agon*, which he composed between 1953 and 1956. They worked very closely together, creating the choreography and the music in conversation with one another. The work broke new ground by combining Igor Stravinsky’s complex meter changes with Balanchine’s vision of 17<sup>th</sup>-century court dance.

## About the Program (cont.)

### The *Pas d'action* from *Divertimento No. 15* (1956)

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart  
Choreography by George Balanchine

Balanchine's variations and *pas de deux* seamlessly follow the spirit of Mozart's fragile score—a divertimento written to “divert” and amuse audiences at social occasions in the 1700s.



Company in *Divertimento No 15*.  
Photo by Paul Kolnik.

#### FUN FACT

The tutus for this ballet have metal hoops in them for support (a homage to court clothes of the time)—making them heavier and less flexible than regular tutus. Imagine the challenges, such as working harder against gravity, of wearing such a costume.

## Instructional Activities

### OBSERVE & REFLECT

In *Agon*, notice the simple and body-hugging practice clothes—these signature Balanchine costumes reveal each movement for its own pure athleticism. How would more traditional ballet costumes affect your reaction to the piece?

In the *Pas d'action* from *Divertimento No. 15*, the stage is never empty as dancers overlap their entrances and exits to and from the stage; each solo and *pas de deux* differs from one another in style and spirit; and the eight dancers come together at the end. How do the movements of the dancers relate to changes in the music?

In both ballets, watch for the expressive quality of the dancing, how the dancers seem to defy gravity, and the partnering — how the male dancer provides support to the female dancer to allow her to maintain balance and execute steps she could not do alone.

### RESEARCH/HISTORY

The movements of *Agon* are named after French Court dances of the 17th Century, including the *saraband*, *galliard*, and *bransle*. Investigate the history and styles of these dances. Can you identify moves in *Agon* that are influenced by each dance?

#### VOCAB

##### *Pas de Deux*

This short dance for two, *pas de deux*, is a display of the technical skills and talents of its dancers—both as partners and as individuals.

The dance between Wall-E and Eve in outer space in the 2008 Disney Pixar film WALL-E is another example of a *pas de deux*.

## Resources

### Internet Resources

Suzanne Farrell Ballet: <http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/ballet/farrell/index.cfm>  
George Balanchine: <http://www.nycballet.com/company/history/balanchine.html>

### Select Books

Balanchine, George & Francis Mason. *101 Stories of the Great Ballets*. (Dolphin Books, NY) 1975.  
Farrell, Suzanne & Toni Bentley. *Holding On to the Air: An Autobiography* (University Press of Florida) 2002.

### DVD

*Suzanne Farrell—Elusive Muse* (Winstar: 2001).