



Kirstein, Lincoln (1907-1996)

by Teresa Theophano

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Best known as the leading impresario of the American ballet world, Lincoln Edward Kirstein contributed immensely to the fields of dance, visual arts, and literature. He was a significant influence in the development of twentieth-century American culture.

Born into a wealthy, close-knit Jewish family in Rochester, New York, Kirstein was raised alongside two siblings by his parents Rose and Louis. His father was chief executive officer of Filene's Department Store in Boston and his mother the daughter of a clothing manufacturer in Rochester.

Kirstein showed artistic leanings from an early age and had his first taste of ballet at age twelve, when he was exposed to Anna Pavlova's performances in Boston.

An unexceptional student, Kirstein was nonetheless accepted to Harvard in 1926. There, in 1927, he founded the influential literary magazine *Hound and Horn*, which he edited until 1934 and for which he reviewed dance and theatrical performances. He also co-founded the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, a forerunner of the Museum of Modern Art.

After earning a bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1929, and a master's in 1930, Kirstein traveled to Europe, where he saw performances of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In London in 1933, he also met the choreographer George Balanchine, whose work he admired immensely.

Kirstein persuaded Balanchine to return to the United States with him to establish an American form of classical ballet equal in quality to the Russian tradition. Drawing on his family fortune for funding, Kirstein opened the School of American Ballet in New York City in 1934, with himself as president, an office he would occupy until 1989.

Together Kirstein and Balanchine founded a series of dance companies. The first troupe they established was the American Ballet Company, which, from 1935 to 1938, served as the Metropolitan Opera's resident ballet troupe. Then Ballet Caravan was formed in 1936 as a touring company; American Ballet Caravan came next and successfully toured South America in 1941 before it disbanded.

During this period Kirstein wrote a number of influential (and polemical) books about dance, including *Dance* (1935) and *Blast at Ballet* (1938), in which he articulated his ambitions for creating a grass-roots classical dance tradition in America. He also wrote a number of libretti for ballets, including *Billy the Kid* (choreographed by Eugene Loring to music of Aaron Copland, 1938) and *Filling Station* (choreographed by Lew Christensen to music of Virgil Thomson, 1938).

In 1941, Kirstein married Fidelma Cadmus, the beautiful sister of painter Paul Cadmus, a friend and artistic collaborator. While the marriage was by all accounts a happy one, it did not prevent Kirstein from having a number of homosexual affairs. He maintained liaisons with several male dancers while living with Fidelma, and some of his lovers even shared the couple's living space. In her later years, Fidelma was

institutionalized for mental illness, and she died in 1991.

Kirstein joined the Army and served as a private first class in Europe during World War II. With the division of Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives, he helped to recover stolen artwork from the Nazis and was honorably discharged in 1946.

With Balanchine, Kirstein then founded another dance company called Ballet Society, whose 1948 performance of Stravinsky's *Orpheus* is considered a landmark of modern dance. That year, the troupe that would become known as the New York City Ballet was invited to be the resident company of the City Center of Music and Drama.

Kirstein served as director of the New York City Ballet, America's most influential ballet company, from its founding until 1989. With the success of New York City Ballet, Kirstein fulfilled one of his early ambitions--to create a ballet company that could perpetuate a vital tradition of classic dance.

Kirstein was also a prolific writer. He authored many articles and books on various aspects of the arts; wrote criticism, novels, poetry, biographies, and historical works; and founded *Dance Index* magazine, which he edited from 1942 to 1948.

Kirstein received a number of prestigious awards, among them the Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of Arts, the Benjamin Franklin Medal of Britain's Royal Society of Arts, and (with George Balanchine) the National Gold Medal of Merit Award of the National Society of Arts and Letters.

Despite the visibility of his affairs with men, Kirstein did not come out publicly until 1982, when he published an article in *Raritan* about his early-1930s relationship with writer and merchant seaman Carl Carlsen, a former lover of poet Hart Crane. The essay was republished in both of his memoirs, *By, With, To and From* (1991) and *Mosaic* (1994).

Kirstein died on January 5, 1996, at the age of 88.

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www.nycballet.com.

About the Author

Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).