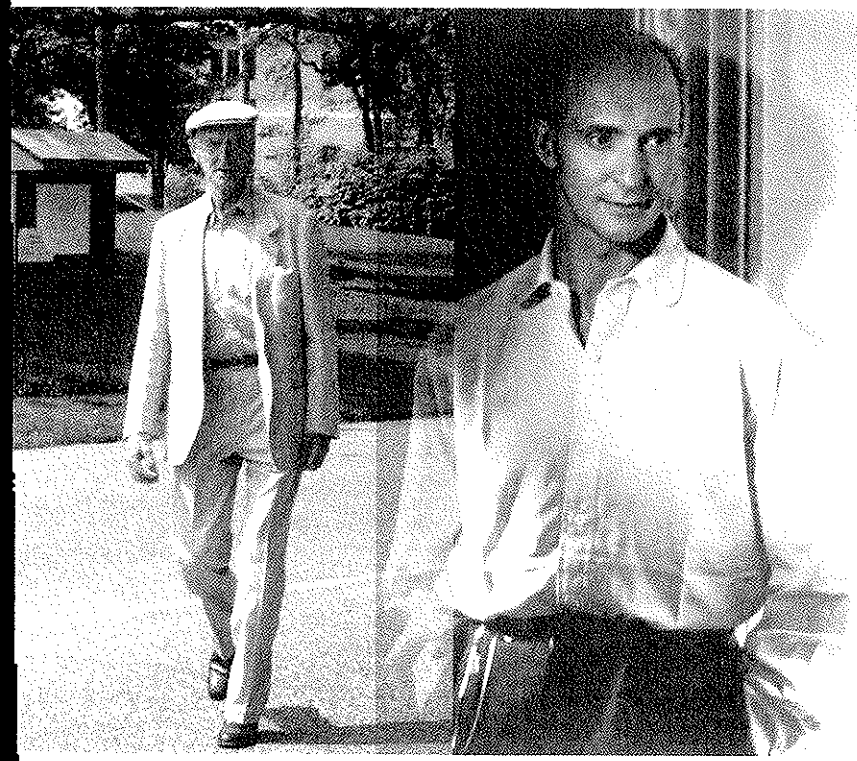


ZEN NOTES



Tudor Centennial



Anthony Tudor

The Overgrown Path: **Finding Tudor Through Zen**

By Ian Spencer Bell

I am not a great Zen student. But Antony Tudor was. I learned this from Michael Hotz, president of the First Zen Institute of America. He sat me down in his office on the ground floor of the Institute's brownstone on 30th Street and Park Avenue and told me about Tudor's meticulous timekeeping and sitting and walking practices. I had feigned interest in the choreographer since I first heard he was a practicing Zen student and resident from 1963 until his death in 1987. The house members had brought Tudor up on several occasions during the tea service in the library that follows Wednesday night zazen, or formal seated meditation. But during the seven years I studied on and off at the Institute, I barely listened. I had grown up on Balanchine. And I was a neoclassicist at heart.

Hotz sat tall in his chair and kept a steady dialogue going about Tudor as he thumbed through old pictures and newspaper clippings. My favorite item was a glossy, black and white headshot of Hugh Laing, Tudor's life-long lover. There were other things too: pictures from the Kennedy Center Honors, good and bad reviews, and scores of Tudor's letters and writings on Zen.

Tudor had been timekeeper during the early morning and evening sittings, sounding a bell at the beginning and end of two 25-minute periods of silence. In between, Tudor led walking meditation, or *Kinhin*, around the perimeter of the Zendo for 5 minutes. Tudor could be terribly cruel then. The younger students' legs would often have fallen asleep, having been tucked underneath their robes in lotus position, and they would hobble and limp as if walking on needles to their place in line before the walking practice began. Tudor would walk quickly then, almost running. Eventually he would slow to a snail's pace.

Otherwise, Hotz told me the same anecdotes I had heard from my ballet teachers at North Carolina School of the Arts. They all amounted to the same three themes: Tudor fought passionately and frequently with Hugh Laing (they often could be heard throughout the entire four-story building); Tudor humiliated dancers and students in hopes of helping them find emotional truth in his choreography, and Tudor was unquestionably a genius, though the genius part bothered me. I wasn't sure why he was a genius or why bad behavior was, and is, considered a hallmark of intelligence.

The most interesting detail I learned from Hotz about Tudor

was his devotion to Zen. The Zeckendorfs had offered Tudor a fancy, furnished apartment downtown. But Tudor had refused it, preferring his modest living quarters at the Institute.

Peter Lamp, a longtime resident and former student of the master, caught me in the hall on my way out. Lamp is long and lanky and I was surprised when he swooped down in front of me and twirled balletically. He told me that he and Tudor often greeted each other that way when they met near the corner of 30th street or on the stoop in front of the building. I imagined Tudor smiling, and wickedly. The story he conveyed next was less charming and more in line with the man I'd come to know.

During a weekend sitting, the students gathered at lunchtime around the library table for soup. Lamp's was the only setting with a teaspoon instead of a soup spoon. Lamp asked the person who was serving him to bring a soup spoon which he did. But Tudor intervened, took the soup spoon, returned the small spoon to Lamp and said he was to use it. Lamp, still seated, took the spoon and flung it across the table splitting an empty tea cup in two with the spoon nestled between the fallen halves. Several people broke out in giggles. The students rebelled against Tudor that weekend and went out for pizza. Lamp concluded the story by saying Tudor often attempted to treat his housemates as though they were his "ballerinas," but with little success and finally gave up in the late 70's. Mary Farkas who more or less ran the Institute as Secretary and who they called their dragon mama, had cultivated a nest of young, zen tiger cubs who were not so easily intimidated by fame, fortune, masters or even her. But it took Tudor about 15 years to recognize their fiercely independent natures, Original or otherwise.

I once heard Amanda McKerrow, a former principal dancer and longtime lead Tudor ballerina for American Ballet Theatre, relate a brief anecdote about working with the mastermind. She was having trouble with a role. And Tudor with a loud, commanding voice stopped rehearsal and asked her partner if he thought she was a virgin. Her partner didn't answer. And the room was silent for some time. McKerrow was horrified. And Tudor broke the silence: "The character, I mean. Do you think she was a virgin?"

I felt cheated when I left the Institute. I had no great insight on Tudor's life or choreography as I had hoped. And I felt depressed. All that remains of any choreographer's life are scraps of documentation, not the actual work.

At home, I went straight to YouTube and looked up Tudor's ballets. I started with *Jardin aux Lilas*. (It has since been removed.

Now only *The Leaves Are Fading* exists online.) And I thought about Balanchine's work and my teachers who had quoted him frequently, "Just do the steps, dear." Here the dancers were thinking. And it registered on their faces, not only their bodies. The music served as a score underlying the dramatic intent. It was as if the dancers could have sung the Ernest Chausson *Poeme*, not only moved in time with it. And the action was centered in the stage space, not giving the impression of being larger than or moving beyond the wings. It was classical ballet with some difficult, awkward steps and dramatic gestures. And the dancers seemed to enjoy it.

And then, in the last moments of the ballet, I was thrilled. The dancers stopped moving. And in their total stillness something happened: a shift of consciousness on stage and in the audience. There was something Zen about it.

And it made me think of the stillness, the quiet, in the opening of *Serenade* and in the dramatic diagonal in *Symphony in Three Movements*, two of my favorite Balanchine ballets. I felt enlightened. Tudor's composition had been brilliant, if not emotionally honest and insightful. And I felt like I had been sitting, asleep, for many years.

Tudor, like Balanchine, made ballets that spoke to all kinds of people. He made ballet democratic. But where Balanchine focused on time and space and energy—ideas that can be understood by all people regardless of class, race, and education—Tudor often focused on types of people that had not generally been included in ballet libretti—the working class, prostitutes, murderers. He made ballets about the common man.

This fall American Ballet Theatre honored Tudor, one of the company's founding choreographers, in what would have been his 100th year, throughout their New York City Center season with several revivals including *Jardin aux Lilas*. I saw as many performances as I could. I wanted to find that stillness, that single-mindedness that permeates much of Tudor's work—and the work of my other favorite genius.

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