

**Kirkland's book makes the reader wince**

# Tale of the dancing whiner

**Dancing on My Grave**  
Gelsey Kirkland with  
Greg Lawrence  
Doubleday

review by Elaine Ostry

It's a bad sign when you read an autobiography and end up disliking the author intensely. Especially when you not only feel scorn for him but embarrassment as well. There are a lot of autobiographies on the rack: everyone from Christiane F. to Vanna White wants to share their life stories. These autobiographies are either good or bad literature (*Christiane F.* is a great book; I suspect Vanna White's will not be), but one thing they all try to do is endear the reader to the writer.

Gelsey Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave* makes the reader wince. Kirkland is a ballerina who starred in the ABT and NBT companies, as well as the Royal Ballet of London. She has excelled in her craft and gained the respect of her colleagues: so why is her autobiography so self-pitying?

The book begins with an account of Kirkland's volatile childhood, which included sibling rivalry and an alcoholic father. Kirkland relates how she worked out her childhood angers in her dance. Indeed, Kirkland seems to be angry at the world altogether, and she doesn't even describe ballet as something fun; not once does she mention the joy of dancing. A strange sort of vengeance seems to be her only motivation.

Granted, some of the most interesting (and the only challenging) passages of the book explain various theories of dance, including her own. However, some of these explanations are highly technical, and confusing to anyone unfamiliar with the finer points of dance.

However, Gelsey concentrates on how dance and her relationships with other dancers have affected her. People are generally irritating when they try to analyze themselves, and Kirkland is no exception. She discusses how ballet encouraged her masochistic tendencies as she avenged herself against the world through her dance; how ballet became a self-destructive obsession. Kirkland relates how she worked herself to exhaustion and starved herself in the process, becoming an anorexic. (While I was reading this, I devoured countless Christmas cookies and felt good about it.)

It is not the content of the book so much as its tone that irritates the reader. Kirkland is a dull writer because she focuses so much on herself, to the near exclusion of

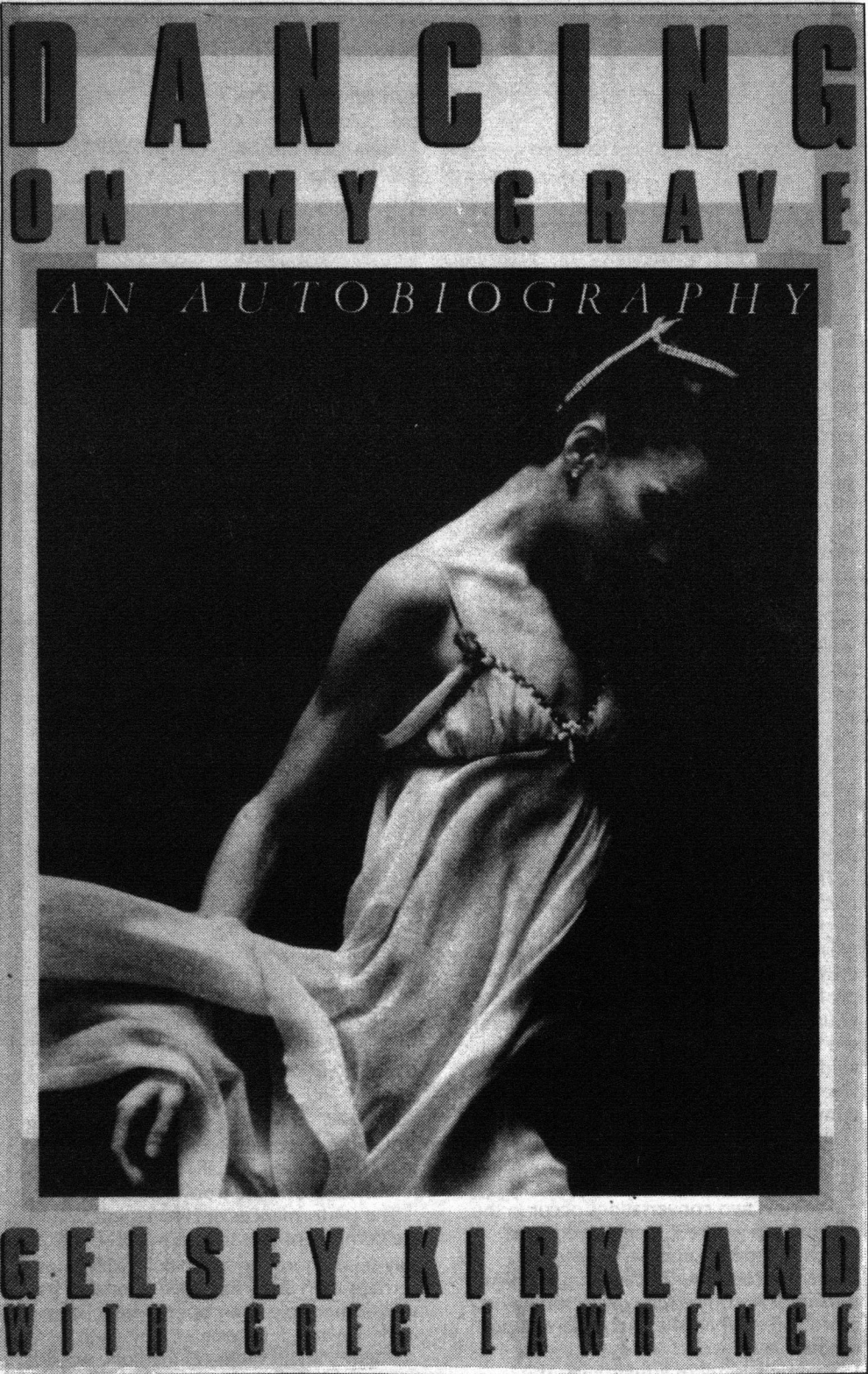
other people. Her writing is overly precise; the mass of details overwhelms the reader. She doesn't seem to exclude a single incident, a single word, that bothered her overly sensitive nature. Every fight is recreated, even ones about headdresses on costumes. The result is that the reader perceives Kirkland as a spoiled, petty child who pouts and throws temper tantrums by turn.

Indeed, Kirkland seems to have used her book as a form of revenge against anyone she believes to have crossed her. Besides dance, she seems to do nothing but complain. It is this lack of variety, this narrow-minded pettiness, this bitter lack of generosity that makes the book dull and irritable.

The most interesting parts of the book tell about Mikhail Baryshnikov; or rather, Gelsey and Mikhail. Baryshnikov chose Kirkland as his partner when he defected to America, and their partnership lasted for several years. At first, Kirkland is amazed by Baryshnikov's genius; but this attitude wears off soon enough and suddenly she is trying to teach *him* how to dance. Equally embarrassing are her attempts to win his love, as she drags him into bed with her at their first meeting. Again, Kirkland's penchant for detail does not serve her well, as she is "hit by a whiplash of insecurity" during this encounter. Kirkland's style is pretentious, flowery, and is not above the obvious clichés ("This would be our first performance. We were both suffering from stage fright.") Oh, Gelsey, have you no pride?!

The reader actually feels sorry for Baryshnikov, as well as anyone else who has had to work with her. Granted, Kirkland does admit her immaturity, her masochism, her vanity; but with an air of angry pride and righteous self-pity that alienates the reader. Even when she slides into a drug-induced decline, she fails to capture the reader's sympathies. One reason for this is that this part of the book is liberally sprinkled with glowing reviews; therefore, it's hard to be convinced of her physical and emotional deterioration. She comes closest to appealing to the reader's emotions when she describes her stay in a mental hospital; perhaps because (at last) she has legitimate reason to complain.

Later, Kirkland meets a poet and fellow cocaine addict, Greg Lawrence. They help each other overcome their addictions. Amazingly, they shift the blame for their habits onto the drug industry itself, ignoring the principle of supply meeting the demand. Even stranger, she recovers from her various addictions within the space of a page. Again, the reader is not convinced; surely rehabilitation takes



longer than a month or two. Amazing what the powers of love and poetry can do! Lawrence and Kirkland marry; he helps her write this book, which ends in nauseating sentimentality. One can see Kirkland and

her husband on the back cover: fellow suffering artists looking soulfully at the camera, wearing the mandatory scarves. They look the perfect couple, but their book reveals their true selves.

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