



Serge Lifar rehearsing with Paris Opéra Ballet ballerina Lyette Darsonval. Photo by Walter Sanders/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

On the dance stage, writes Valerie Lawson, we'll always have Paris.

The summer of '43. How sweet it was for Serge Lifar. The Director of Dance at the Paris Opéra Ballet shrugged off the stress of directing a French company in a city under German occupation. Visiting Zurich in June, Lifar gazed at the enchanting shop windows, the bright lights of the Swiss city, and the stores laden with luxuries. Most of all, he loved the freedom of neutral Switzerland where he was able to talk about anything and everything without fear of being overheard by the wrong person. In Paris, during the four years of German occupation, this was impossible, especially for Lifar who had a way of becoming entangled with too many political factions; German, French and Russian.

In Zurich, Lifar ate strawberries at a soirée where he chatted about the outcome of the war with the Aga Khan, and, in the eggshell white, neo-baroque Opera House on the shores of Lake Zurich, he danced in his own ballet, *Suite en blanc*, the most successful work he ever choreographed. It was, Lifar maintained, his most "sincere" ballet, as well as a chic and sleek showcase for the stars of the Paris Opéra Ballet.

Perhaps the privations and tensions of the Second World War energised Lifar with a kind of frantic creativity, for in the grim years between 1940 and 1944, the repertoire of the Paris Opéra Ballet blossomed with 13 new works, eleven of them choreographed by Lifar. Almost all of them honoured and acknowledged the artistic traditions of the city in which they were created.

As the historian Lynn Garafola has written, when Lifar became Artistic Director, "for the first time since the Romantic era, a century before, ballet at the Opéra was chic". *Suite en blanc*, above all his ballets, was the epitome of the French style. Described by Lifar as "a real parade of stars", the ballet was designed to show the virtuosity and elegance of the French company. With its classroom perfection of line, its acknowledgement of ballet's stylistic past, and its display of technical expertise, it represents a "dictionary of academic dance", in the phrase of the French critic Patricia Boccadoro.

Although Lifar was Russian, he understood completely the importance of France and particularly Paris in the development of ballet. But in the 1930s, when Lifar took up his directorship of the Paris Opéra Ballet, he found that dance was regarded only as "an agreeable amusement", as he wrote in his autobiography. There was, he maintained, "no living tradition ..."

In all his years as director in Paris, Lifar created more than 60 ballets and re-staged many classics. But his legacy resides not so much in repertoire – many of his works were later dropped by the Paris Opéra Ballet – as in his success in restoring the status of ballet in France. Lifar maintained that France was his second country, and that he must always uphold the traditions of the company whose origins stretched back to the reign of Louis XIV, founder of L'Académie Royale de Musique et de Danse in Paris in 1661.

Although ballet had its origins in Italy, Paris is regarded as the cradle of ballet and "France as the mother of us all, as far as ballet is concerned", in the eyes of dance writer Anna Kisselgoff. "The strong Italian contribution to French ballet's own development over three centuries is not denied," she wrote, "but the danse d'école, the academic foundation of ballet, is seen as a firmly French tradition".

The French school stresses charm and elegance, "cleanness" in line, placement, turns and jumps, complex beats and suspended carriage in the upper body. The Russian school, in contrast, is noted for its vigour, diamond-sharp virtuosity, and its heavier, higher jumps. In the 20th century, the great pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova placed great emphasis on the plasticity of the arms, and the strengthening of the lower back.

Lifar brought elements of the Vaganova technique to the Paris Opéra Ballet where his long directorship was an important milestone in the two-way traffic connecting Russian and French ballet. The links went back to the 19th century, when French choreographers such as Jules Perrot, Marius Petipa and Arthur St Léon established much of the classical ballet repertoire in Russia. Meanwhile, in the 20th century, Diaghilev, Lifar and Balanchine moved in the opposite direction, to France.

One can trace the importance of Paris in the ballet repertoire through the succeeding eras of the art form, from the Romantic 19th century

THE FRENCH CONNECTION



Artists of The Australian Ballet in *Divergence*
Photography—Jeff Busby

ballets – *La Sylphide*, *Giselle*, *Coppélia* – to the early 20th century revolutionary – *Petrouchka*, *Schéhérazaade*, *Rite of Spring*, *Firebird*, and *Afternoon of a Faun* – to the 1940s purity of *Suite en blanc* and Balanchine's *Palais de Cristal* (1947), later called *Symphony in C*, and finally to William Forsythe's explosive *In the Middle*, *Somewhat Elevated* of the late 20th century.

Just as *In the Middle* contorted the purely classical line, Lifar's *Suite en blanc* deviated from the traditional upright lines of classical ballet. Lifar favoured a spiralling of the torso, off-centre arabesques and the use of feet and legs placed in parallel positions.

Although one of his teachers was the Italian Enrico Cecchetti, Lifar had not been indoctrinated in any particular school of ballet. He learned by example, particularly that of Balanchine, but also by experimentation. Australian choreographer Stanton Welch has described *Suite en blanc* as a ballet "based on French technique, with typical Lifaresque off-balance virtuosity, all done with humour behind it".

This could be the recipe for Welch's own ballet *Divergence*. Creating the ballet in 1994, Welch was also playing with line and form. While honouring centuries-old French technique, he employed new ways of shifting balance and shrugged a shoulder at the pomposity of some

classical ballets. As Welch explained: "For years I had heard that classical ballet was dying; staggering along like some prehistoric creature, tiredly dragging its old and limited repertoire around. I have never believed this. I was raised on the beauty of classical ballet and have never seen its limitations – it was my breast milk. I wanted to take classical ballet, and diverge from it. The first image in the work is what one would consider very traditional classical ballet. From then on, I kept branching off into different paths. I wanted to show the women working as hard as the men. I wanted to show the inside of ballet, to make it look difficult ..."

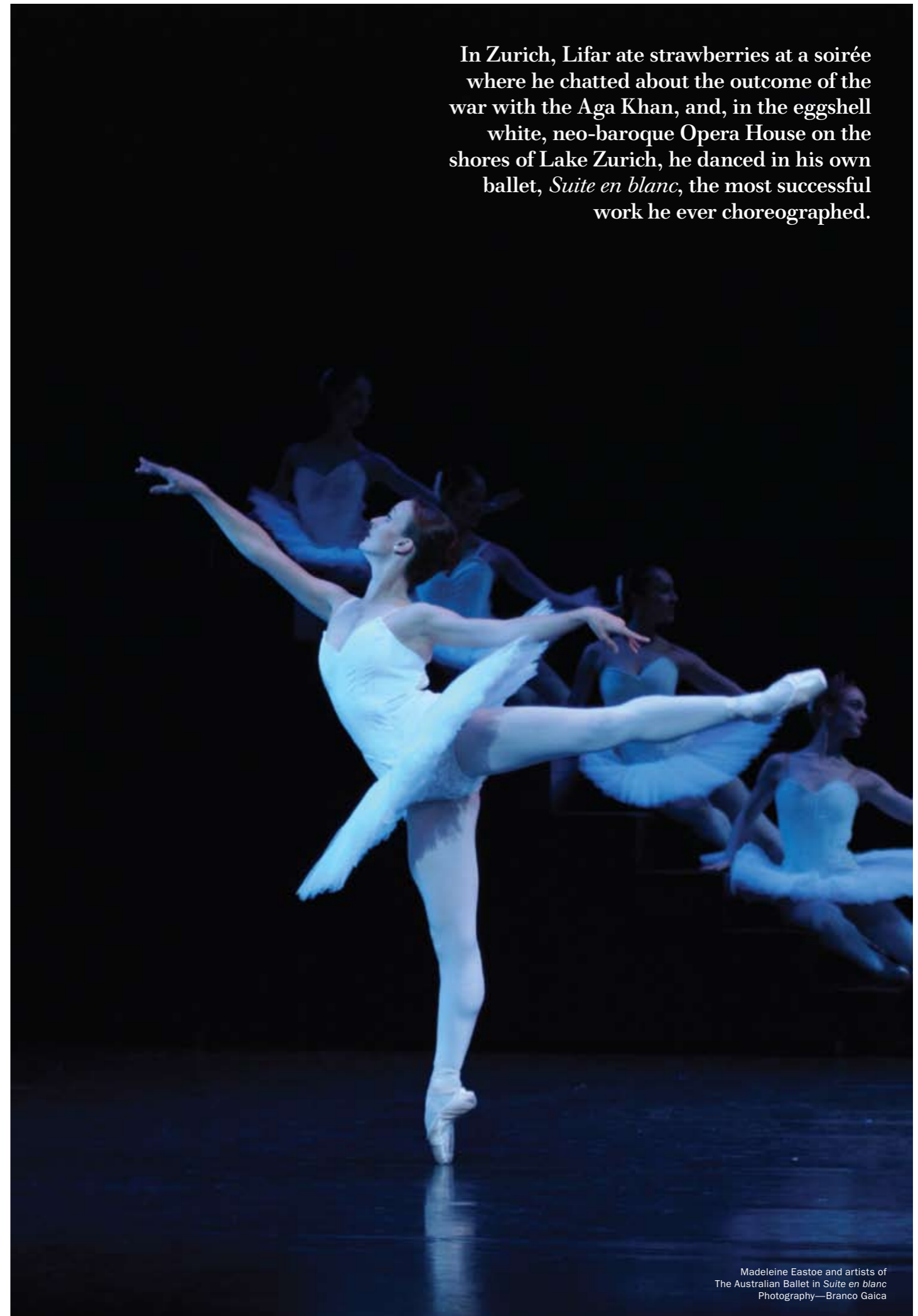
In *Suite en blanc*, the dancers wear pure white costumes. In *Divergence*, they wear edgy black. In both cases, they seem to express the essence of Parisian chic, both in dress and in manner. For the dancers, both ballets represent a technical challenge, impossible to master if they did not have the underpinnings of technique based on the French school of ballet. Although Peggy van Praagh, the founding Artistic Director of The Australian Ballet, was an Englishwoman, the company's focus and repertoire has acquired a French accent over the decades.

Van Praagh's production of *Giselle* for The Australian Ballet was awarded the Grand Prix of the City of Paris in 1965 and four decades

later, the company returned to that city last year to receive high praise from both critics and audiences for its season at the Théâtre du Châtelet. The French connection can also be seen in The Australian Ballet's repertoire with its six works of French choreographer Maurice Béjart, most of them introduced during the artistic directorship of Maina Gielgud; the ballet *Carmen*, choreographed by the Frenchman Roland Petit; important works that had their premiere in Paris including *Symphony in C* and *In the Middle*; the many ballets introduced to Parisian audiences in the first seasons of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and of course *Suite en blanc*, created by the honorary Frenchman Lifar.

Since *Suite en blanc* entered The Australian Ballet's repertoire in 1981, the ballet has flourished as a popular and timeless example of the French school. The company has performed *Suite en blanc* more than 200 times, including performances in London, Russia and Greece in 1988, Taiwan in 1989 and the USA in 1990. In the 21st century, it remains one of the company's most compelling showpieces, a white jewel to remind us that, on the dance stage, we'll always have Paris.

Valerie Lawson is an author and dance historian



In Zurich, Lifar ate strawberries at a soirée where he chatted about the outcome of the war with the Aga Khan, and, in the eggshell white, neo-baroque Opera House on the shores of Lake Zurich, he danced in his own ballet, *Suite en blanc*, the most successful work he ever choreographed.

Madeleine Eastoe and artists of
The Australian Ballet in *Suite en blanc*
Photography—Branco Gaica