[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** Now, I don't know if you've ever done this, but sitting and watching dancers, leading a modern ballet performance, it's exhilarating, it's magical goal. One person after another redefining the possible. Beauty, grace, strength, made to look effortless, like a wholly different species of person is on that stage, unconstrained by gravity or age or knee pain. It's sorcery, art in its purest aspect, which is why it's so infuriating that the story you're about to hear is not about art at all, really. Instead, this story is about power. Power on one of the most elite stages in the land, the insular walled garden of ballet.

Today and Snap, we're going to feature a podcast called The Turning: Room of Mirrors. It follows a man heralded as a genius but this show deals what boundary is crossed with the blurring between being a mentor and being a predator. As such, I want to advise listener discretion, because we're going to explore what it's like for a young woman to enter the rarefied arena of dance that creates those flawless performances. Snap Judgment.

**Wilhelmina:** We are not part of the outside world. It's separate from us. There is no need for the outside world because we are removed from it and apart from it and in our own unique sphere. We had our own universe.

[inspiring music]

**Erika:** That's where you would rehearse every day, most of the time?

**Wilhelmina:** All the time. There are no windows. We don't need windows because the outside world doesn't matter. And it was exciting. I thought everybody was the most beautiful creatures on the earth that I'd ever seen, and they were so talented.

[violin playing]

**Wilhelmina:** People were trained to hone his particular sensibilities, even his ethics, so that there would be a readiness in all of us to embody his vision. We were christened. We were graced. We may not be alive tomorrow. And what could you possibly lose?

You literally have to know. You have to commit and know. And so, you give up everything else. It is a 24/7 path, and you don't feel like you can do anything else.

He used to say, "What are you looking at? What are you looking at, dear? You can't see you. Only I can see you."

[violin music stops]

**Erika:** In 1982, a stream of people visited Roosevelt Hospital in Manhattan. They went to the room at the end of the hall on the left, a room with an old man. The nurses hadn't seen anything like it. It was like a pilgrimage. Many of the visitors were in their 20s. They were thin and graceful and carried large bags that smelled like sweat. They were young ballerinas who danced for this man, women who saw him as their father, their mother, their knight and shining armor, their genius, their lover, their husband, the most important person in their lives. His name was George Balanchine, but they called him Mr. B.

**Wilhelmina:** I think he'd been in the hospital for so long and was losing his mind and losing his words.

**Erika:** This is Wilhelmina Frankfurt. She was one of the pilgrims. She was 26 years old, and she was a ballerina at New York City Ballet, one of the most prestigious ballet companies in the world. Mr. B was the one who put her there.

At 78, George Balanchine was the most famous choreographer alive. He had created an entirely new style of ballet and popularized the art form in America. For 14 years, Wilhelmina had danced for him. For 14 years, he'd been the person who determined her fate. He was also one of the people she loved most in the world. But now, his health was failing. Where he once modeled arabesque for professional dancers, he now had trouble balancing. He leaned on walls when he walked. He led rehearsals seated. He couldn't hear music the same way anymore, and he couldn't see the color blue correctly. And then, he fell. He'd been at the hospital for more than a month now, with no sign of returning to his ballet company. It was not a happy time for Wilhelmina.

**Wilhelmina:** I mean, we all knew that once he was gone, things were going to change.

**Erika:** She went to the hospital when she could with groups of dancers.

**Wilhelmina:** Sometimes they just sit and say hi and just in between rehearsals.

**Erika:** But this time was different. This time, she went alone.

**Wilhelmina:** I went with a mission.

**Erika:** Wilhelmina wanted his advice on a role she'd be dancing soon.

**Wilhelmina:** I wanted to ask Balanchine about it. I wanted to hear what he had to say. It was a little bit of an excuse to go see him. Somehow, I think it's probably my denial that he was dying.

**Erika:** Balanchine was in a hospital bed in blue and white striped pajamas and a robe.

**Wilhelmina:** I sat down with him, and I said, "I'm going to do the mother in *Nutcracker*, and can you help me with the part?" He kind of sat up and started coaching.

**Erika:** Balanchine she knew came to life, dancing from the waist up in a way only Balanchine could.

**Wilhelmina:** He said, "Give me your hand." And I gave him my hand. He said, "No, don't give me your hand like that." He had a big thing about how you hold hands. He said, "The men must take your hand underneath, and this is how they kiss it."

**Erika:** He kissed her hand and looked at her almost flirtatious, then let her hand drop to the bedsheet.

**Wilhelmina:** I didn't need much. I just wanted him to talk about it a little bit. And then things went from there.

**Erika:** Balanchine told her to open a drawer nearby.

**Wilhelmina:** In his hospital cabinet, he had these bottles of Slivovitz. It's really strong. Have you ever had Slivovitz? Oh, man, it's like gasoline.

**Erika:** Wilhelmina didn't have a show that night. She thought, "What the hell?" Balanchine patted the bed beside him, and like she'd done so many times before with her choreographer, she followed his direction. She hopped on.

**Wilhelmina:** He said, "Dear, come under the covers."

[intense music]

**Erika:** From iHeartPodcasts and Rococo Punch, this is The Turning: Room of Mirrors. I'm Erika Lantz. Part One: Only I can see you.

In the US, there is ballet before George Balanchine and ballet after George Balanchine. He's so in the water of American ballet that even now it's hard to divorce him from what it is today. The beautiful parts and the hard parts. He grew up dancing for the Tsar in Russia and survived a revolution. Eventually, he landed in New York and created a ballet company. The New York City Ballet. He drew a blueprint for how to run a ballet school and a company under the rule of an artistic director. He emphasized devotion to the art form above all else, he choreographed pieces that were abstract, that colored outside the lines of traditional ballet. He integrated fast footwork and big movements into his technique, pushed dancers beyond their limits.

These innovations bolted him to a position of power few artists ever reach. Chances are, if you've danced ballet in America, Balanchine has affected you. I know he affected me.

Last season, we talked about Mother Teresa, the most famous woman in the Catholic Church. She and Balanchine are very different. But if there's a Mother Teresa of American ballet, someone larger than life, I'd say it's George Balanchine. Like with Mother Teresa, there are myths and legends surrounding Balanchine. He was put on a pedestal. He created an insular world where dancers felt chosen, like they were part of something bigger, and it was intoxicating. Dancers described him as channeling his artistic vision from God, and dancers were the vessel for his art. Like with Mother Teresa, that can get very complicated.

What was Balanchine's role in his dancers lives or in your life?

**Wilhelmina:** He used to say, "I am your mother in class, I am a mother." Well, he was everything.

**Erika:** Wilhelmina entered Balanchine's world for the first time in 1969. She was 13 years old. She had just left her family to move to New York on her own to attend Balanchine's school, the pipeline for his ballet company.

**Wilhelmina:** They had these old studios on the Upper West Side on 84th and Broadway.

**Erika:** There were stairs that led down into the studio where the class was held. And she remembers one day she looked up-

**Wilhelmina:** -and what I thought was an old man who was standing at the top of the stairs, and he came down and he sat with the teacher, and suddenly he came over and he had his hands all over my body. I was doing arabesque.

**Erika:** She froze, suspended in arabesque. One leg lifted behind her and arm outstretched in front of her face.

**Wilhelmina:** He took my arabesque, and he turned it so that it was a more open position and that my hand was lengthy and extended and looking over my eyes. That was my introduction to George Balanchine. I didn't really understand what he was doing. I understand now that he was looking to see if I was capable of what his vision for technique for his ballets was.

**Erika:** It was her introduction to Balanchine's style of ballet unlike anything she'd experienced before. Balanchine had this fantastical way of describing movement. He would tell dancers to present a foot as if it were a diamond placed on a red velvet pillow. Wilhelmina sensed that trusting him would lead to greatness.

**Wilhelmina:** You are blessed with having been in the presence of that kind of genius. I was scared, I guess, that I might not measure up or I wasn't as good as the other kids. I was nervous about unlearning what I had been taught and relearning this new, complex, very demanding technique.

[dramatic ballet music]

**Erika:** It was big, animated, acrobatic in ways that seemed physically impossible to pull off.

**Wilhelmina:** That technique, Balanchine used to describe it as more, used to say, "More, more pork sausages, mom. More." It was more, higher, faster, sleeker, extended. This technique was just take what you know and push it.

[dramatic ballet music]

**Erika:** After that day in the classroom with Balanchine, Wilhelmina often noticed his eyes on her.

**Wilhelmina:** He was watching me.

**Erika:** How did it feel when Balanchine noticed you, when you can tell he was watching you?

**Wilhelmina:** Well, I loved it. [laughs] How could you not love it? At one point, he kept pulling me front, and it became embarrassing because I had friends that it wasn't happening to. People would assume that you were flirting or doing and there was jealousy around it and that you were getting close to him because you wanted to dance better parts.

**Erika:** Balanchine had a track record of blurring the professional and the personal, falling in love with his favorite dancers and marrying some of them. At 16, Wilhelmina became an apprentice with New York City Ballet. The transition from student to potential professional dancer in Balanchine's company.

**Wilhelmina:** We got dressed up for class because you wanted him to pay attention to you. Everybody wore flowers in their hair, and [mimics Balanchine's voice] he spoke like that. He spoke so quietly, like in a rehearsal, only dancers could hear him.

**Erika:** You had to be totally tuned into him.

**Wilhelmina:** Totally tuned in. Well, he completely wanted all of our attention and all of our devotion. Not unlike the convent. We were not supposed to be interested in men. Balanchine felt like if were distracted by a man, it would pull us away from what he wanted us to do. He really wanted us to be completely and totally, just deeply involved in our dancing. He didn't really want you to have children. He didn't really want you to get married. Nobody got married, or if they did, it was in secret. And you hid your boyfriend.

**Erika:** Wilhelmina learned this the hard way.

**Wilhelmina:** I was at a cafe across from Lincoln Center called Fiorello's. I was with a date.

**Erika:** And who should walk by but Balanchine. He stopped in front of them.

**Wilhelmina:** And he looked at the guy and he said, "Wilhelmina has the ability to make a man relax." I think it was an insult to the guy. [laughs]

**Erika:** And then, he turned to Wilhelmina, and he said-

**Wilhelmina:** "Dear, you think you're in Paris, but you're not." And I went, "Okay, got it."

**Erika:** What was he saying? Because I feel like often, I hear quotes from Balanchine and they're indirect, and I don't know exactly what they mean.

**Wilhelmina:** They're indirect, and he was sarcastic, very sarcastic. I think what he meant by that is in New York, you're sitting outdoors, the buses go by, and it's loud and dirty, but you're not here in the romance of Paris with this gentleman, I just took that as I'm not that happy about this, especially because it's like I was on his turf in a way, right across the street. I laughed. I just laughed at it. He was just out to just destroy my time with the guy, I think, whatever. [laughs] I think he was just throwing his weight around, Mr. B. Letting the guy know, "She's mine. I had her first."

**Erika:** At the same time, he's having relationships with some of his dancers.

**Wilhelmina:** Yeah, he did. I don't know that I thought about it that much at the time. It was just the way it was.

**Erika:** Balanchine asked his dancers to keep their mind in the studio. In the studio, he asked for their complete trust.

**Wilhelmina:** He used to say, "What are you looking at?" In terms of as a dancer, we look in the mirror. He'd say, "What are you looking at, dear? You can't see you. Only I can see you."

**Erika:** To Wilhelmina, it meant the mirror could lie.

**Wilhelmina:** "You're just seeing an image of yourself fleeting, as you're going by. The audience is seeing something different. Don't listen to the mirror. Listen to my voice. You can't see you. Only I can see you."

[sorrowful music]

**Glynn:** When we return, can mirrors lie?

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** When Step Judgment continues, stay tuned.

[sorrowful music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to The Turning's Room of Mirrors. Listener discretion is advised because we've crossed over into a world of dance where if you wish to enter, every step is subject to the whims of one man.

Snap Judgment.

**Erika:** Balanchine controlled the company, controlled who got parts, controlled your life. He could recast your role at any time. He could decide you're out of the company. Your artistry and career were in his hands, and he was seen as a living genius. Many dancers have praised him for his gentlemanly manner. Others have said he could be cold at times, cruel even. If he didn't like your dancing, he might be sarcastic or blunt, but Balanchine seemed to like Wilhelmina. She wonders if it's because she resembled one of his ex-wives, another dancer. She was built like her, had a long nose like hers. And while some dancers feared Mr. B, Wilhelmina didn't for some reason. She felt he was lonely.

**Wilhelmina:** It was very easy for me to talk to him, I think, because he was ultimately very shy himself. He wasn't that comfortable with that many people.

**Erika:** Balanchine and Wilhelmina often walked in the same direction at the end of the day. Not surprising, since all of the dancers lived in the area, including Mr. B. One night when they were walking home, Wilhelmina had an idea.

**Wilhelmina:** I just turned to him an idea, said, "You want to have dinner at my house sometime?"

**Erika:** He said yes.

**Wilhelmina:** I said to him-- this is so kid stupid, I'm going to cook coq au vin, which I knew nothing about. Nothing about it or how to cook it.

**Erika:** Wilhelmina was 19, Balanchine was 71, and Balanchine was big on food. He was known for his refined palate and cooking. Wilhelmina was out of her depth.

**Wilhelmina:** I got a coq au vin recipe, and I ran to what was called the Nevada Meat Market. I said, "Help. How do I cook coq au vin? What would Mr. B buy?" Because that was where he shopped. They said, "Oh, he would buy this, he would buy that." So, I got all this stuff. And then, I went to 67 Wine & Spirits, which was the liquor store I knew he went to. I said, "I'd need some wine that Mr. Balanchine would like to drink," and they laughed at me because he's such a wine mystery. He's like a wine collector. They were like, "How much do you want to spend?" I was like, "$10." I'm 19, I blew my whole paycheck on it.

He came over and he showed up with two bottles of 1957 Lafite Rothschild Pauillac. I think it was a Pauillac. Those are now like $5,000 bottles of wine. Even then, they were hundreds of dollars. I was like, "Do you want my wine?" "No, dear, I think we'll drink this."

At that dinner, that was like a turning point in my relationship with him because, first of all, he said he was really impressed with my cooking. He stayed a long time, and we had amazing conversation. Amazing conversation. It wasn't sexual. Honestly, I think he appreciated that I asked him over for dinner, because for the most part, he just went to dinner with his principal dancers at the time, or he went home alone. I don't know why people assumed that you were having sex with him or whatever with him. Balanchine was flirty, but he was such an old world, gallant gentleman about all of it. He did that thing where if he liked you, he would buy you perfume.

**Erika:** It was something he didn't do for everyone, just special dancers. Wilhelmina knew this when she was about 21 years old, on tour with the company in Paris. Balanchine was in his early 70s.

**Wilhelmina:** We were in theater. It was just a moment in between rehearsals.

**Erika:** Balanchine came over. He handed her a bag.

**Wilhelmina:** Pretty little shopping bag, "Dear, this is for you."

**Erika:** Inside was a bottle of perfume.

**Wilhelmina:** It was a huge bottle of Infini. He picked the scent, and I was such a brat that it took her to my hotel room, and I decided I didn't like it, I poured half of it down the drain, probably poured hundreds of dollars perfume down the drain. Later, when I got older, I was like, "You are an idiot, Willie. You are just an idiot."

**Erika:** Well, it's understandable. I mean, he's picking how you smell, and it is your body.

**Wilhelmina:** I wore it.

**Erika:** Did that feel like a big deal to you at the time, where you're like, "Oh, he's kind of chosen me"?

**Wilhelmina:** I was a little embarrassed because by then I had been around long enough to know that people gossiped that if he was going to do that for you, that he was sleeping with you, but he wasn't.

**Erika:** These insinuations felt manageable to Wilhelmina. She still saw Balanchine as a non-threatening old man, an old man who gave her the opportunity to make meaningful art. She loved to watch him spin dances out of thin air. She remembers when he choreographed the opening moments of *Symphony in Three Movements*. The composer, Igor Stravinsky, had written the music and personally told Balanchine, it should be a ballet.

**Wilhelmina:** And I remember Mr. B just doing the first step, which the music goes, [humming symphony] and we were all in a line, and he just pulled his leg in tight, like a squat position, rolled his right arm, stuck it up at the air, and did press and push into a low arabesque position. And he said, "Okay, everybody do that." So, we all did it. But the effect from that opening moment, you just knew that you were involved in what was going to be a masterpiece.

[*Symphony in Three Movements* playing]

**Erika:** The line of dancers and white leotards look like a line of cannons firing in a row. They windmill their arms, jab them straight. They weave in and out of each other. They look like they're about to collide.

[Symphony in Three Movements playing]

**Wilhelmina:** He worked furiously. Furiously. He had more energy than everyone. And that was just one rehearsal. Then, he'd go to the next rehearsal.

[Symphony in Three Movements playing]

**Erika:** The next rehearsal, he'd weave a whole different piece that would also go down in the dance history books. But being the object of Balanchine's artistic expression could be relentless.

**Wilhelmina:** When you're working in that kind of intensity all the time, you're doing eight shows a week, you're rehearsing all day, you're doing three ballets a night, you're doing some core parts, some principal parts, some soloist parts. You don't have any relief or any life at all. There was no counseling or no thinking about what's the mental health of these young artists, that didn't exist. You just had tough it out.

**Erika:** You might get cast in a difficult role last minute. Have to learn it immediately. When you go on stage to dance it, you know that how you perform will determine your future. It's something Wilhelmina did a lot. She remembers one time when she was thrown into a complex piece right before a show.

**Wilhelmina:** And I learned it on the spot. It's really hard. There's no music. It's just beeps and bops and things. So, they talked me through that.

**Erika:** Mr. B was in the elevator with her when she went down to the stage to perform.

**Wilhelmina:** And I was like, "Ugh," and he said, "Just take it one movement at a time."

**Erika:** And she did.

**Wilhelmina:** I never got injured. I was on my way to everything.

**Erika:** A year after she got that perfume bottle, she was running ragged. She'd been cast in Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She was dancing the role of Hippolyta. In Greek mythology, Hippolyta is the former queen of the Amazons.

**Wilhelmina:** I didn't feel like I was suited to the role because although I was long and tall and strong and could do those kind of tall girl parts, this was just not me.

**Erika:** She even talked to Balanchine about it.

**Wilhelmina:** I said, "I don't think this is a good part for me." But it was like a test, he just wanted me to get through it.

**Erika:** One day was particularly bad.

**Wilhelmina:** I just thought I was dancing so badly. I wasn't a great turner, I was good at other things, but I was falling off my turns so badly. There's a set of fouettes that you do there with a bow and arrow in your hands, and it's in the fog. I was struggling with them anyway, and I didn't get through it. I failed in this role so badly that I left the stage in a stage rehearsal with an orchestra, which is a very expensive rehearsal. I think I had a little nervous breakdown. I think I was popping. I was just popping, and I just couldn't handle it. I just walked out of theater in tears.

**Erika:** Wilhelmina decided to talk to Balanchine.

**Wilhelmina:** I went to him, and I said, "I'd like to take a leave of absence. I just can't do this."

**Erika:** But Balanchine didn't want her to go.

**Wilhelmina:** He told me this story of there were 12 nuns waiting for Christ to come down from heaven, and 6 of them brought enough oil. I don't even know if this is a real Bible story. I'd have to look at how--

**Erika:** But this is how he told it to you?

**Wilhelmina:** Yeah. He said, "Six of them brought enough oil to last the night. Six only brought enough for a little while. The six that didn't bring enough had to leave and go get oil. When they came back, Christ had already come, and the other six nuns had gone to heaven." That one I got. "You can go, but I might not be here when you come back." I guess that was his way of trying to talk me out of it.

**Erika:** He's like the Christ figure in that analogy?

**Wilhelmina:** Oh, yeah.

**Erika:** That story he told about nuns missing their chance at heaven, it wasn't just a story. It was real to dancers in the company. It was how the place worked. There were always younger dancers waiting in the wings to take your place, and Balanchine had no problem moving on without you.

**Wilhelmina:** I said to him, "I understand that I'm taking a risk. I had to leave."

**Erika:** She took some time, worked at a clothing store, dated, got married, but her decision to leave didn't stick.

**Wilhelmina:** Not long after, I was modeling a Tavern on the Green in the clothing store, and I walked by, and there he was.

**Erika:** He was with another ballerina, one of his top dancers and closest friends.

**Wilhelmina:** I walked by their table, I went, "Oh." And he said, "Oh, dear, it's you." I realized that I missed dancing, and I missed him. I missed my life. So, I called him. I had his phone number. I still have it in an old date book. And I said, "Hello, Mr. B. It's the prodigal daughter."

[symphony playing]

**Glynn:** Will Wilhelmina be accepted back into the company? Right after the break. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

[symphony playing]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to The Turning Room of Mirrors. My name is Glynn Washington. And listener discretion is advised because when last we left, Wilhelmina had just had the realization that she missed dancing. She missed Balanchine, she went back in, and she decided to pick up the phone. Snap Judgment.

**Erika:** Wilhelmina called Balanchine, but it was a long shot for her to get accepted back into the company. Generally, once you left, you were out. Just rare exceptions.

**Wilhelmina:** I called him, and I said, "Hello, Mr. B, it's the prodigal daughter." And he said, "Oh, Wilhelmina." I said, "I want to come back." He said, "Meet me in my office tomorrow."

**Erika:** She showed up to his office. Her fate was in his hands. They talked. He told her to come to theater the next day. She could start dancing again.

**Wilhelmina:** So, he didn't punish me. He forgave me. He forgave me for it.

**Erika:** He'd forgiven her for leaving the company, for leaving him.

**Wilhelmina:** I've come to find out that it was unheard of. He really was so good to me. However, in that meeting was the first time he tried to kiss me, and you're the first person I've told that to.

**Erika:** What happened?

**Wilhelmina:** It was kind of like to seal the deal. He went in, and I pushed him away. I said, "Mr. B, I'm married." It was awkward because I knew that I was treating him like a man much older than myself-

**Erika:** Which he was.

**Wilhelmina:** -which he was. Also, it's awkward to refuse anybody in life, and awkward for me to stop somebody who'd been so good to me and who I cared about so much. So that was really complicated.

**Erika:** When Wilhelmina said she was married, Balanchine pulled back.

**Wilhelmina:** He stopped. He just went, "Okay." I got up and left. It was not that big, but I guess it was big.

**Erika:** Sometimes, those things are kind of both at once.

**Wilhelmina:** Yeah.

**Erika:** That's an intense moment for him to try to kiss you, because it was the moment which he almost had the most power over you, because he wanted to come back and he was going to decide whether you did or not. In that meeting, he leans in to kiss you.

**Wilhelmina:** Which is like, "Are you going to get your job back or not?" I had been, in a way, refusing him always, in retrospect.

**Erika:** There had been that energy in the air throughout.

**Wilhelmina:** Yes, absolutely. There was that energy.

**Erika:** When you feel that energy, sometimes you can't always put your finger on it, but it's there.

**Wilhelmina:** That's exactly right. It was a complicated moment. Very complicated moment emotionally. It never came up again until the hospital.

**Erika:** Roosevelt Hospital, December 1982 when Balanchine was 78 years old, Wilhelmina was 26. She visited him to ask about a role in Balanchine's *Nutcracker*. She had requested to play the role of the mother of the main character. It wasn't a fancy part, but she'd been thinking about motherhood lately. Of course, Balanchine didn't like his dancers to have kids. Like a lot of dancers in the company, she'd had several abortions.

**Wilhelmina:** And I wanted to have children. I was getting older.

**Erika:** There was this one moment in particular she couldn't wait to perform. It's a simple moment. It doesn't exist in other versions of the ballet. Just in Balanchine's.

**Wilhelmina:** There's this incredible piece of music. It's a violin solo. And all it is the mother with a candle walking across in the front of the stage, looking for Marie.

**Erika:** Looking for her daughter.

**Wilhelmina:** She's looking for her because she's not in her bed. She's fallen asleep by the Christmas tree with her nutcracker, which her mother wouldn't let her take to bed. The scrim is down, and this violin solo happens. You walk across, you're looking, looking, and the scrim goes up.

**Erika:** And Marie is there, she's fallen asleep.

**Wilhelmina:** All you do is cover her up and it's just a really beautiful moment that Balanchine added to the story.

**Erika:** Balanchine told her that as the mother in this ballet, she was the grande dame of the house. She had to be elegant. He showed her how the men should kiss her hand. He directed her to get the bottle of Slivovitz and join him on the bed. Wilhelmina began her dance with Balanchine. The strangest ballet she'd ever danced.

**Wilhelmina:** And we drank. We drank it out of hospital glasses. They were real glasses at the time. We talked about all kinds of things while we were drinking. We talked about theater. We were laughing. He had this calendar with Christie Brinkley on it, a pin-up calendar of hers. He said, "Dear, come under the covers." So, I got under the covers.

**Erika:** He put one arm around her.

**Wilhelmina:** Women were his whole life. Women were his inspiration. To have one of your women come in and be with you, in a way, it's like that was always the conquest for him to always enjoy women, including physically. It's funny, in the hospital it didn't bother me because I felt almost like how when you really sick, you're like a mother almost, like you get into bed to hold the person and comfort them. I felt like that. I didn't feel grossed out by it. I felt sad for him. And also, I was very drunk. It must have been a really hilarious-looking vision of the two of us in that hospital bed, like sitting under the covers together, drinking, but also how normal, you know what I mean? What you would do with someone that you love that's at the end of their life, you do whatever it takes to just have a good time with them. As long as that person was alive and functioning, then my life was kind of okay too.

**Erika:** Half the bottle of Slivovitz was gone now.

**Wilhelmina:** And he tried to open my shirt. He said, "Just let me investigate a little."

**Erika:** Wilhelmina pretended to be in control, to know what to do. Part of her thought, "After all of these years resisting, maybe just let him."

**Wilhelmina:** I said, "No, Mr. B, come on." He said, "No, just a little, dear." I did let him open my shirt, and he didn't get very far.

**Erika:** Then, he tried to kiss her. She held her lips shut. Wilhelmina would write about this moment later, with some distance. She wrote about how Balanchine was like a father to her. He was to many. She wrote, "His hands are there, but fathers don't do this, because I love this father so much, and because I hate him for not loving me enough to not do this." I push him away and step off the bed."

**Wilhelmina:** I stumbled out of hospital with the rest of the bottle in my hand [laughs] into a cab like [unintelligible [00:41:31].

Three, four, five six. And one, two, three, four, five, six. And one, two-- you have to stay. Just stay.

**Erika:** 40 years later, she doesn't perform ballet anymore. Instead, she teaches.

**Wilhelmina:** Yeah, guys, try to make this one have that emotional piece to it. I think the way that Ellen put it, you feel the music through your body. Feel the music through your body and your face.

**Erika:** She's the Artistic Director of a ballet school in California, the Stapleton School of the Performing Arts.

**Wilhelmina:** And again, [unintelligible [00:42:17], look at that flow. Aw. Beautiful. Aw.

**Erika:** This week, she's teaching a special workshop for her teenage students. It's all about Balanchine. She doesn't tell them this hospital story. Instead, she tells them about how to open their arabesque by pulling one shoulder back, the way Mr. B taught her to. She tells them what it was like to dance for Mr. B.

**Wilhelmina:** Mr. Balanchine was very involved in our individuality. He took a lot of time to understand who you are.

**Erika:** She teaches them the choreography.

**Wilhelmina:** You guys are almost ready to perform.

**Erika:** And how to move their feet.

**Wilhelmina:** Little feet, [unintelligible [00:43:04]. Keep it little.

**Erika:** She shows these students why she loves Balanchine.

**Wilhelmina:** We have this same growth in the music again. The music says swell here, and you have to swell within yourself.

**Erika:** Most of all, she talks about his artistry, what made Balanchine great.

[symphony recording playing in the background]

**Wilhelmina:** All the way to the end. Just the quiet.

**Erika:** She's one of many dancers who do this. Former ballerinas who pass down his repertoire all around the world, like priestesses with sacred knowledge they need to pass on, afraid that the nuances of his art will be lost.

**Wilhelmina:** There are not very many of us left around that actually grew up with Balanchine. We are a dying breed, and we know it. I realized that it was like I grew up with Mozart.

[symphony recording playing in the background]

**Erika:** I came across this one quote I can't stop thinking about. It's from Vera Zorina, one of Balanchine's wives. Like all of his wives, she was a ballerina who danced for him. She wrote, "He would speak of the suffering faces of dancers, comparing them to saints. He meant spiritual suffering. To George, dancers were saints because they worked harder and longer, were obedient, never talked back, were always paid the least, and then went on stage and danced like angels." To me, this sums up how Balanchine wanted the women in his company to be. Balanchine's dancers would change their bodies for him, some through extreme dieting, drugs, or surgery. Some would have abortions or avoid romantic relationships to focus on the job. Some would fall in love with Balanchine. Decades after Balanchine died, ballerinas are still dancing for him, still seeking his approval.

[riveting music]

**Erika:** The Turning is a production of Rococo Punch and iHeartPodcasts. It's written and produced by Alin Lantz Lesser and me. Our story editor is Emily Forman. Mixing and sound designed by James Trout. Jessica Kariisa is our assistant producer. Andrea Asuaje is our digital producer. Fact checking by Andrea López-Cruzado. Special thanks to Kate Osborne and Natalie Jones. Our executive producers are John Perotti and Jessica Alpert at Rococo Punch. And Katrina Norvell and Nikki Ettore at iHeartPodcasts.

For photos and more details on the series, follow us on Instagram *@rococopunch*. And you can reach out via email *theturning@rococopunch.com*. I'm. Erika Lantz. Thanks for listening.

**Glynn:** We're so thrilled to feature this story. It came to us from the podcast The Turning, from creators Rococo Punch and iHeartPodcasst. It was produced by Erika “Once a Snappa always a Snappa” Lantz and Alin Lantz Lesser. There are more episodes of The Turning exploring the world of ballet, you can find wherever you get your podcast. All of this will be linked on our website, *snapjudgment.org*.

[upbeat music]

I get it, I do. If you need more stories and I know you need more stories, I've got some good news. Be the most interesting person you know because hours of adventure await on the Snap Judgment podcast, get it wherever you get your podcast. If you want to join the Snaptastic conversation, know that Snap is on Twitter, on the Facebook, on the Instagram.

Snap is brought to you by the team that appropriately applauds at the end of the symphony. Except, of course, of Mark Ristich. He just stands up and claps at random times.

You may have heard that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, late to the fancy dinner, you could stop by your local vintner, pull the manager aside, and ask for the finest bottle of ten-dollar wine with all good speed, and you would still, even then, not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*