

Corpse de Ballet

Lucy Cores

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American Ballet Drama dancer Vova Izlomin is the bad boy of the barre in this wry mystery novel, originally released in 1944. Following a bout of mental illness (he went mad during a performance, “succumbing to the catatonic schizophrenia which had been developing over a number of years, and to the delusion that he was indeed the Sun God he had danced in *Phoebus*”), the surly twirler resumes his daily regimen of furious outbursts and flawless pirouettes.

The irascible Izlomin disappears during a bravura performance, and soon his lifeless, sequin-clad body is found hanging by a rope backstage. Manhattan homicide detective Andrew Torrent enlists newspaper columnist Toni Ney, a former ballerina, to help expose the secrets and lies leading to the despised dancer’s demise. Having solved her first case in *Painted for the Kill* (1943), Ney finds herself back on the trail of trouble. The vibrant protagonist is literary proof that strong, independent female sleuths were alive and well in American crime fiction long before the 1970s.

Detective Torrent’s interrogations introduce readers to an eccentric cast of characters: Izlomin’s wife, Natalia, a frosty ballerina who has written a tell-all book about her notorious spouse; Mikhail Gordon, a Brooklyn-born dancer of Irish descent (and Toni’s former partner), who changed his name from “Mike” to add a Russian cachet; blubbery ballet director Baron de Speranski, who has a secret—and lucrative—agreement with many of his dancers; and playboy publisher and divorcé Charles Graham, who flashes his blue eyes at Toni, to her soldier boyfriend’s chagrin.

Corpse de Ballet is being re-released following Cores’s death in 2003 at the age of ninety-one. Raised in a family that embraced the arts (her father, Michael, played the viola in the NBC Philharmonic under Arturo Toscanini), Cores was a versatile writer, rendering numerous romance novels, including *Women in Love* (1951), based on one of her own early love affairs. A short story she wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post* was turned into a television series that ran for two years.

Readers will delight in the author’s razor-sharp renderings of ballerinas behind the scenes: “They paddle around in the semitransparent darkness with their feet turned out à la Chaplin, or lounge in the wings gossiping at the top of their voices...Then suddenly in the middle of a sentence, one of the gossipers takes the piece of gum out of her mouth, rises to her *pointes* and floats gracefully onstage. Her stint done she comes back, her breath barely quickened, picks up the wad of chewing gum where she has parked it and in a moment is again immersed in the favorite backstage pastime of blackening the character of a fellow dancer.”

While Cores’s prose is occasionally overwrought, her novel remains sassy and suspenseful more than fifty years after its debut. The opera may be over when the fat lady sings, but *Corpse de Ballet* isn’t finished until every bony truth is revealed.

ALLISON BLOCK (November / December 2004)

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