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SPRING AHEAD, FALL BACK

New York City Ballet's Tradition of the New

Photo: Ava Sautter and Aarón Sanz in Jerome Robbins' *Glass Pieces.* Photo credit: Erin Baiano. With permission of The New York City Ballet.

THE FALL 2023 season of New York City Ballet's seventy-fifth anniversary year was themed Foundations, the Winter 2024 season Evolutions, and the Spring 2024 season the Future. This spring futurity was represented by a plethora of new and/or recent choreographies and the increased presence on stage of the younger dancers of the company.[1] Some of the works premiered or reprised featured garish lighting, pop song music with lyrics that literally serve to translate the choreography's meaning, and haute couture costumes by leading fashion designers showing off signatures more than effective costuming. I don't see a choreographic future in any of this as it distracts from ambitious dance making even though it cannot be denied that ballet is inherently spectacular given its origins in baroque political culture. In the modern United States ballet's spectacularism translated into an overlap with forms of popular culture. In the 1930s Lincoln Kirstein thought the core of ballet's potential popularity was in its resemblance to comic

strips. By this he meant that despite its European pedigree ballet had the potential to be widely popular to a general audience in the United States. Upon arriving in the US Balanchine choreographed for Broadway and Hollywood and Robbins got his start in musical comedy. Yet, despite their versatility, both choreographers were able to tell art and entertainment apart in their work rather than confuse them.

The idea for the spring season as futuristic is part of a new business plan aiming to attract a younger audience.[2] It is endorsing a public that comes to the theater with little or no history of spectatorship and a knowledge of dance mostly based on what can be seen on television. Apart from the designer costumes, many new works make me think of college dance concerts albeit at a higher technical level. Let us hope the company can find a way to plant the seeds for a love and understanding of what makes ballet an art rather than an occasion to drop in for a trendy event. For his Ballet Society in the 1940s, which set the groundwork for the New York City Ballet, Lincoln Kirstein used many ploys not just to seduce but also to educate a new audience and assure their interest would be more than a passing fancy. But today sending subscribers copies of an informative journal like Kirstein's *Dance Index* and long-playing records of ballet music would probably not be viable. As it stands, on stage, the benchmark is always Balanchine and Robbins, two of the most brilliant and prolific choreographers of the twentieth century. The problem is their ballets almost always act as foils casting new work in a bad light. This begs the question of how valuable new choreography can be found and nurtured given that it must immediately stand the test of comparison with the established masterpieces of the repertory.

The dual mandate of the company to maintain and display the repertory along with newly commissioned work comes with some serious liabilities for New York City Ballet. For example, if one compares it to the Paris Opéra Ballet, the openness to producing older ballets in Paris, ones that have no institutional connection to the Opéra, is far greater than it has been in New York. And, the Opéra has largely let go of its own institutional history in rarely programming the work of Serge Lifar. I think NYCB needs a less exclusive vision of the "classic" modern ballet—limited to Balanchine and Robbins alone—and less addiction to crowd pleasing pop culture ballet offshoots. Instead, it might do well to explore the rich and fertile space of twentieth-century ballet, which would mean celebrating the excellence of the founders while underplay-

ing the trademark Balanchine neoclassicism as the choreographic gold standard to make it part of a larger picture that includes other Balanchine contemporaries. Obviously, the performance of Balanchine's works would not be abandoned but the problem is in the lack of relation and sharp cut off between his tradition and new works.

I think that with the seventy-fifth anniversary we see two business models in conflict: tradition and the new are going their separate ways yet each remains institutionally entrenched. What I sense is that most new choreographers are not working from a deep knowledge of the tradition (Tiler Peck is an exception as discussed further on). The future looks increasingly like a struggle for the soul of New York City Ballet. This is because much of the new work lacks authentic choreographic interest and thus constantly begs the question: Does ballet choreography itself have a future? When you combine this question about the future development of an art with a business plan designed to fill up more seats the result is messy. The inexperienced audience can look like they are answering the question. It is important not to confuse their newly found enthusiasm with an answer to the vital yet nagging question of the New York City Ballet.

The most successful of the premieres to my mind was Tiler Peck's *Concerto for Two Pianos* to the astounding *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra* by Francis Poulenc. Kudos to Peck for choosing to work with such a great and challenging piece of music. The choreographic art of choosing music not familiar to ballet repertory but able to generate a sophisticated complexity of moods suitable to this art succeeds in generating an interest that is contemporary while also evoking something magical of ballet's past. In fact, *Concerto for Two Pianos* has the feel of a 1940s ballet (Poulenc composed the score in 1932) whereas visually it suggests *The Red Shoes*. The world of ballet itself as a kind of fairy tale seems to stand behind it and thus it acquires a very interesting form of reflexivity. Also, the sensibility of Tiler Peck as a dancer seems to play a role here. As choreographer she was not afraid of the driving pace of its rhythm, of the outlandish explosiveness of its crescendos, nor of its exquisitely lyrical passages. Tiler Peck had the right combination of daring, humor, and poetry to carry this off with wit, unabashed theatricality, and poetic character. She is working closely with the music, which is not there merely as background, but which has its own content, complexity, and fascination. Working with this musical content in a thoughtful way lends substance to the ballet itself. The choice of

unusual scores that work for dance falls within the Balanchine and Robbins tradition and to my mind also fits within the need to generate new choreographic ideas rather than just choreograph more steps in flashy settings. Ballet as an art derives not only from the all-important dance technique but also from the choreographer's ability to weave ideas out of a complex structure of sound in relation to technique. When they all come together, we have more than a spectacular display of technique, costume and set: we are made to feel and think. *Concerto for Two Pianos* is a fairy tale without protagonists that takes the music as its subject. As such, it leaves some space for our imagination to play a role. I look forward to seeing how this work develops as it is scheduled to return next season.

I wondered about the intent of Alexei Ratmansky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (2014) set to the famous Modest Mussorgsky score of the same name. Mussorgsky criticism relates the music quite loosely to specific paintings with the idea that the composition is a musical interpretation of a visit to the gallery. The choreographer maintains the titles of the original paintings thereby making a direct reference to the idea of the score. Transferring the musical account of walking through an exhibition to the sphere of ballet seemed promising. After all, ballet is an old-world art form, and it can tolerate a certain amount of quaintness. Would the dancers behold the paintings? Or would the paintings be the dancers themselves? Or, perhaps, both? The only painting visible on stage was in backdrop projections of Kandinsky's *Color Study Squares with Concentric Circles*, which suggested both frames and eyes so that a self-conscious approach was hinted at. But as these images came and went, appearing in fragmented and duplicated forms, they began to evoke linear doodles rather than Kandinsky's dynamic explosions of color and form that once inspired Martha Graham. (Ratmansky inserted some of Graham's vocabulary, but I was not sure why). I concluded the intent of *Pictures at an Exhibition* was satiric, suggesting the lighthearted cartoons of James Thurber with the nebbish-like gestures of the dancer's poking fun at the whole idea. The duet, "The Old Castle," with Unity Phelan and Tyler Angle was the most evocative and mysterious section. The final section, "The Gates of Kiev," was carefully crafted to be visually stunning but its connection to the whole was unclear. The ballet left me perplexed mostly because I could not feel the choreographer's connection to the music and his intent in using it.

Pam Tanowitz's *Law of Mosaics* (2022), to an arresting commissioned

score by Ted Hearne, was an analysis of ballet technique and its dead ends. While the score focused on thematic mashups in classical music, the choreography was more about classical ballet technique itself as a language with inherent limitations. There were many little academic steps with stops and starts showing angles of the body ballet does not usually display. Tanowitz's point of view on ballet is that of historical modern dance and one senses throughout the choreographer's constant questioning: Why does ballet do this? The dancer's body is seen fragmenting its formal qualities in the very process of its movement, a choreographic concept from which one might derive the idea of the mosaic in the sense Walter Benjamin used it to discuss the contemplation of a work of art. In the mosaic, the image is ultimately decomposed and calls upon us to recompose it from a myriad of fragments. "The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea."[3] Benjamin, however, was thinking of the fragment itself as a work of art that should be considered on its own terms whereas Tanowitz relates each fragment to one underlying idea: the rejection of ballet itself. The constantly recurring idea is that of critique and a bemused wondering about ballet's arbitrariness. Hence, a balletic action will frequently devolve into a pedestrian action (historical modern dance includes pedestrian movement in this case). As a result, dancers are seen to "hang out" in their own movement. Quite often the mosaic idea functions choreographically as a division between the upper and lower body that exposes the way ballet constructs its ruse. While the upper body is held in an arch, for example, the lower body shifts its position to a more earthbound stance to undercut the beauty of the upper body's arch and make it appear awkward. One can see an influence of Trisha Brown's *Accumulations* where movements are added to and repeated. A similar sense of formalism seems involved. The cast achieved a palpable feeling of self-estrangement since they were always presented as high-functioning ballet dancers with full leg extensions and mandates to articulate flow whenever possible. In this sense, the ballet dancer is presented by Tanowitz as the prisoner of their own idiom. They use the uniqueness of their ballet style even when asked to apply an orientation to it which is critical or questioning of ballet. I think the onus on the choreographer should rather be to see something new in the dancers themselves as artists rather than to exploit their skills in order to critique their movement language. The approach to commissioning new work can be a trap for the choreographer because of insuf-

ficient time with the dancers. I can imagine that it would be hard under these circumstances to bring out new and different qualities in each performer. Nevertheless, it seems to me as though the choreographer sees this project as avant-garde. But William Forsythe worked through these matters beginning with *Artifact* in 1984 and the *Herman Schmerman Pas de Deux* (1992) performed this season is a good example of his deconstructive wit applied to ballet. The difference is that in his quest he succeeds in coming up with alternatives to ballet conventions. Thus, rather than pointing up the shortcomings of ballet Forsythe shows how it can be generative of new shapes, new centers of energy in the body, and a look that is entirely unusual.

During the Spring season the "next generation" of dancers have also had the opportunity to perform some of the more demanding roles in the repertory. While it is important to provide younger dancers with a chance to perform these roles, this has not been practiced by New York City Ballet on such a massive scale until now. New roles are traditionally tried out on tour or at summer residencies. Consequently, more than half the principal dancers have been missing in action this spring. It is often the case that a seasoned cast can lift a younger artist up to their level when dancing together. For example, in a February 7th performance of *The Four Temperaments* (1946) the first three "Themes" and the solo "Melancholic" danced by new comers fell flat until Adrian Danchig-Waring entered for the "Phlegmatic" solo and single-handedly put the piece back on track. His very presence on stage influenced everyone else, indeed, fairly galvanized them. But artistic level can decline when the less experienced outnumber the more experienced. This happened with the reprise of Jerome Robbins's *Dances at a Gathering* (1969) where four principals—Indiana Woodward, Anthony Huxley, Emilie Gerrity, and Chun Wai Chan—worked with five relative newcomers (May 12th). None of them set the tone needed for this ensemble work. Woodward and Huxley crafted exquisite phrasing for themselves but added little to the group dynamics; Chun Wai Chan, himself likely new to the ballet, had an approach at times closer to melodramatic gesture of the late eighteenth-century pantomime ballet than Robbins's naturalism. In the section for three women, they failed to create a sense of community and the fleeting touch of sadness. Robbins's work seemed to suffer most from this problem with *Interplay* (1952), which was very cheerful and crisp but devoid of wit and poignancy. A period piece, the title suggests interactions between sexuality and forms of play—"free, horse, by, and

team"—whereby the couple and the group, intimacy and sociability, are constantly contrasted. One didn't feel the character of these different kinds of inter-playing: the point was always and only the technique.

To be sure, there were performative high points this spring: Unity Phelan partnered by Alec Knight in the Second Movement "Adagio" of Balanchine's *Symphony in C* (1948) was breathtaking. Phelan lived in the choreography by pulling out of it a very distinctive timing, which contrasted with the rush of the ensemble (I shall return to this further on), while Knight developed a very personal relationship to her suggesting a hidden story. And Ava Sautter partnered by Aarón Sanz in Robbins's *Glass Pieces* (1983) was the discovery of the season. Sautter brought a unique vulnerability and precision to the role that gave new life to this minimalist ballet. Tiler Peck and Roman Mejia performed Jerome Robbins's extended duet *Other Dances* with consummate skill and personal communication that was a pleasure to watch, but theirs seemed like a cameo appearance. Mira Nadon in *Errante* (the new and unfortunate title for *Tzigane*) reconnected with her extravagant freedom of movement, which we have seen less of since she has been promoted to principal dancer. Nadon handed in particularly strong performances in Balanchine's *The Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet* (1966) and Pam Tanowitz's *Law of Mosaics* (2022). Ashley Laracey and Taylor Stanley performed brilliantly in Balanchine's *Symphony in Three Movements* (1972). Stanley's lean into one hip or Laracey's flexed foot in *attitude derrière* accented a latent orientalism of *Symphony in Three Movements* as though it were making references to Balanchine's *Bugaku* (1963). Given what Balanchine achieved across his career with Stravinsky, to close the all-Stravinsky program with *Symphony in Three Movements* made the other two works on the program—Justin Peck's *Pulcinella Variations* (2017) and Christopher Wheeldon's *Scènes de Ballet* (1999)—look sophomoric by comparison. The closing ballet—the "classic"—saves the show. This creates an all too frequent split-screen effect whereby the future falls back and the past leaps forward, constantly reminding us of well-developed choreographic ideas in contrast to tired formulas masquerading as new whereas they are more often retrogressive.

The tendency toward acceleration of tempi in *Symphony in C* and in *Concerto Barocco* (Bach 1941), seen last fall, however, undercuts the innovation that the past still possesses. In the case of *Concerto Barocco* I have noticed this over several years. The dancers can handle the acceleration, but it robs the audience of the choreography's effect by confusing

pulse with tempo. Pulse is the groove of the danceable whereas tempo can always be manipulated arbitrarily. The signature move of *Concerto Barocco* is dancers falling repeatedly off *pointe* to the side, which shows a contrast between a lifted lightness and a return to the earth. This suggests a stylistic trait of Italian Renaissance courtly dance that continued into the French baroque era. Dance master Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro used the terms *ondeggiare* and *campeggiare*, sometimes translated as undulation and shading or settling down, in his fifteenth-century dance treatise.[4] With Balanchine, falling off an elevated center balance places emphasis on *petit temps* or the downbeat rather than on *grand temps* or the upbeat. A repeated falling off center allows us to feel the body's weight in the downbeat, which is particularly striking when synchronized across the entire *corps de ballet* and thus multiplied at high speed in the ballet's final section. *Concerto Barocco* does require remarkable speed, precision, and musicality as well as sophisticated coordination in the corps de ballet. The problem is that the dancers appear to have been coached to achieve this by anticipating the downbeat and effectively staying ahead of the music. But we the audience are then deprived of the sensation of the body's fall and its succumbing to gravity. In short, it deprives the audience of the drama of movement and the very character of the ballet. I am not sure if the music should be played slightly more slowly, or if the dancers need to stop problem solving in this way and feel the music's pulse. But if the orchestra conductor insists on a faster tempo this is literally impossible. With increasing tempi, we see the deterioration of the tradition from within, the loss of a human pulse.

Both the public and choreographers need more models for creating and evaluating new work. I suggest that these might come from a more extended sense of repertoire, one that does not impose the Balanchine trademark on everything deemed "classical" since the nineteenth century. Looking back on the twentieth century it seems that the great choreographers and even many who were not labelled "great" established distinctive styles and vocabularies that audiences were aware of. As the choreographers stretched these styles their new work was either recognized as a necessary outgrowth of earlier work or rejected when the work taken in the wrong direction. But in either case, their choreographic creations offered convincing instances of what ballet could do and how it could grow; they were like distinct languages within ballet itself. In such cases, the stretching of these achievements into new domains was an interesting proposition as one was already familiar with

choreographic visions and how these might be augmented or expanded or otherwise developed.

When choreographic ambition itself falls by the wayside the loss of a connection to tradition signifies the loss of an ability to innovate. William Forsythe is at this time the last in a line of choreographers whose creations have redefined and reconceptualized ballet: he has just received the Kyoto Prize in the category of arts and philosophy.[5] Dance and philosophy indeed go together in this award: dance is an inherently philosophical form despite philosophy's attempt to sideline it or to confine it to metaphysics. The full potential of ballet as an art combines the dancer's expressive potentials with theatrical, visual, and musical elements that challenge our perception of what we see and hence our perception of the world itself. Ballet has been overlooked in discussions of philosophical aesthetics precisely because of its complexity. But at New York City Ballet new works are floundering in a world of trademarks, status, and commercialism. I want to suggest that choreographers should take more cognizance of the philosophical tradition of dance to develop new choreographic ideas and reconceptualize what dance is able to do starting from a deeper engagement with the heritage of ballet and music. Does ballet have a choreographic future at the New York City Ballet? The question is: what kind of work is being added to this prestigious repertory and why? What does it mean to build on this tradition and on the larger tradition of innovation? Precious few new works are providing answers because they don't even seem to be aware of these questions.

MARK FRANKO's *Text as Dance: Walter Benjamin, Louis Marin and Choreographies of the Baroque* will be published later this year by Bloomsbury Academic.

NOTES

1See my "Of Foundations and Evolutions: Apollo and Impersonality," in The Massachusetts Review (January 18, 2024): https://www.massreview.org/node/11737

2Jocelyn Noveck, "At 75, NYC Ballet is getting older. Its audience is skewing younger, and that's the plan," in Associated Press (May 24, 2024):https://apnews.com/article/new-york-city-ballet-anniversary-young-audience-449fc6e48f355c0fb4e05b95697e942e?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2HXPxU8gHMf1pkG-n

3Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), p. 29.

4Trattato del Arte de Ballo (Bologna, Presso Gaetano Romagnoli, 1873). For further discussion, see Mark Franko, The Dancing Body in Renaissance Choreography. Kinetic Theatricality and Social Interaction. Revised edition (London: Anthem, 2022), p. 77.

5https://www.kyotoprize.org/en/240614?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR1y_F5PbdZ0coQG-1ovr1V1v2ghrMgF9o4a2HtKQCq3OmtTPnfEuLkxZo_aem_wTXwaPU9LyXCzOHWhGS4gA