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Ballet Review



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A Conversation with Robert Weiss

On the cover: Balanchine's *Orpheus* with Maria Tallchief and Nicholas Magallanes

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Cover photo by Roger Wood, NYPL: Balanchine's *Orpheus*
with Maria Tallchief and Nicholas Magallanes.



Lynne Taylor-Corbett's *Carmina Burana*: Melissa Podcasy and Timour Bourtasenkov.
(Photo by Russ Howe, Carolina Ballet)

A Conversation with Robert Weiss

Francis Mason

Robert Weiss: I danced my whole career at New York City Ballet, but I started my training at American Ballet Theatre's school. My first real teacher was Ludmila Schollar, who had danced for Diaghilev. She was married to Anatole Vilkzak. At age nine I went to the School of American Ballet because I wanted to be in *The Nutcracker*. I was in it right away because there were only three young boys at the school. I was little Fritz and then I did the first cast of the Prince for two years.

At SAB I had all of the teachers: André Eglevsky, Alexandra Danilova, Antonina Tumkovsky, Muriel Stuart, Pierre Vladimiroff, and, of course, Stanley Williams who was my biggest influence. Later on, as a young professional, David Howard was important in shaping my approach to dancing.

Just before my seventeenth birthday Balanchine asked me to join the company, and I was with New York City Ballet until I was thirty-three, almost seventeen years. When I retired I became the director of Pennsylvania Ballet, from 1982 to 1990.

BR: Was it clear to you early on that you wanted to direct a ballet company?

Weiss: Oh yes, at seventeen years old. I used to take students, contemporaries from SAB, into the little studio at the old location on Broadway. If nothing was going on in there I choreographed on them, just to see what I could do. I had some Sarasate piano pieces and some Bach inventions. I used to work with a few girls who would help me out.

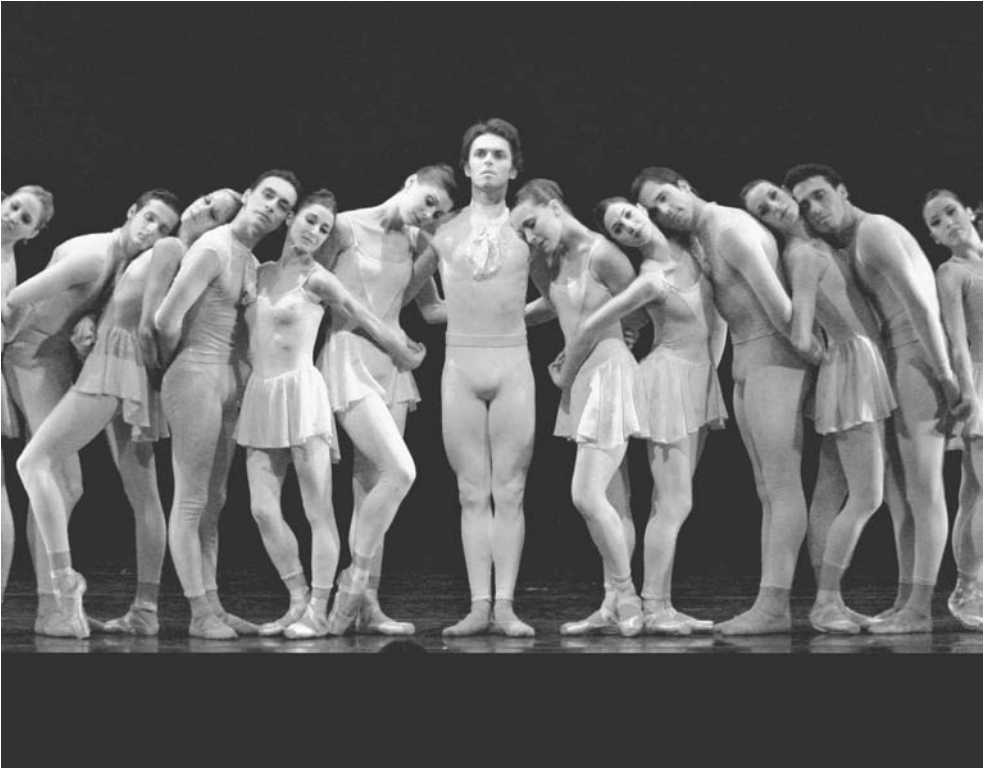
I always locked the door because I did not want anyone to know I was doing it. One time Balanchine came and tried the door and it would not open. He knocked saying, "What are you doing in here?" I replied, "I'm just trying a little bit of making some dances." He said, "Okay," and left.

But yes, I knew right from the very beginning. I grew up as a child at SAB, and Balanchine would have rehearsals there. I watched him choreograph and it was always very interesting to me and I thought, Well, I'd like to try that. I mean, at that time I didn't know why. Then little by little, of course, working with Robbins and Balanchine all the time and with other people, Todd Bolender – and even Ashton came. I was in the revival of *Illuminations* (1967) coached by Ashton and then by Tudor when he came to do *Dim Lustre*. So I was around choreographers all the time. It seemed like a natural thing that you danced and then you choreographed.

My first big professional break came in 1975 when Maurice Béjart asked me to go to Brussels and make a new piece for him. I had already done *Awakening*, a pas de deux at ABT for Gelsey and Misha. Then Fred Koch commissioned me to do a ballet for the Caramoor Festival up in Katonah, New York. I did Respighi's *The Birds* and used City Ballet dancers. This was in 1978 between the spring season at Lincoln Center and Saratoga. Peter Martins and Kay Mazzo did the bird and the tree in that. Then I did another little pas de deux for Gelsey and Ivan Nagy for an ABT gala.

After that I didn't choreograph for a while because nobody asked, and I was busy dancing. In 1979 Balanchine made *Ballo della Regina* for Merrill Ashley and me and, you know, I was really into performing. Then I tore an Achilles tendon. I came back the year after, in 1981, and I danced another year or so, but I was really thinking more and more about becoming a company director.

In 1982 I got the job at Pennsylvania Ballet. I did about fifteen ballets and took the company from a \$2 million budget to \$8.6 million. For two of those years we were The Pennsylvania/Milwaukee Ballet. With the combined cities we had the only fifty-two-week contract in the history of ballet in America. Unfortunately, all that unraveled because of misplaced civic pride. Milwaukee wanted more control, then Philadelphia wanted more. I couldn't get them to understand that they both had some-



Robert Weiss's *Messiah*: Gabor Kapin and Company. (Photo: Curtis Brown, CB)

thing really fantastic by working together. I was in Philadelphia for two more years, then in 1990 they fired me, over money basically.

BR: You hadn't raised enough?

Weiss: They thought I had spent too much even though they had approved my budget and then couldn't raise the money. They had no professional development staff at the time. Now they do. So that was the end of that. For six years I just freelanced – teaching, choreography – whatever I could do.

I did an opera for New York City Opera, *Kinkaku-ji* or *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, based on the famous Yukio Mishima novel. Toshiro Mayuzumi, who had done Mr. B's *Bugaku*, was the composer. Then I did a dance for a girl in a wheelchair, I did a couple of pieces for New Jersey Ballet, and Pennsylvania revived a few of my ballets, but it was tough getting a job. Then I was lucky enough to be asked to start a company in Raleigh, North Carolina.

BR: What led to that?

Weiss: Well, there was a man named Ward Purrington who just thought that Raleigh should have a ballet company. He put an ad in *Dance Magazine* and eighty people applied. It was about the fourteenth job as artistic director I had applied for since leaving Philadelphia, and I got it.

I had made the short list at about five other companies and even came in second for several major positions including those at Birmingham Royal Ballet and Het National Ballet in Amsterdam, but Raleigh was unique. I really wanted it because it was a chance to start from scratch. No one else's preconceived ideas.

BR: You came aboard as?

Weiss: Founding choreographer/artistic director.

BR: And began to make ballets right away?

Weiss: Yes. I started with a pas de deux called *Dancers in a Gypsy Style*. Then I choreographed part 1 of "Messiah" for Christmas. We didn't

have a *Nutcracker* until the fourth year. I finished the first season with Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. Then the next year I did *Carmen*, and I choreographed *The Kreutzer Sonata*. It wasn't a full-length ballet, but it was a seventy-five-minute piece based on the Tolstoy novella with actors and dancers.

That same year I hired Lynne Taylor-Corbett to be the company's principal guest choreographer. She has choreographed a new ballet on Carolina Ballet every year since – *Carmina Burana*, *Cabaret* with Andrea Marcovicci, *Carolina Jamboree* accompanied by the Red Clay Ramblers, *Lost and Found*, and *Code of Silence*, among others. Also during that second season I did parts 2 and 3 of "Messiah," which made it a full-length ballet.

BR: So, *Messiah* has become a tradition?

Weiss: We did it for five years in a row and then it started to drop off a little so we decid-

ed to rest it. However, Roy Kaiser asked me to do it for Pennsylvania Ballet in the spring of 2008, and it was very gratifying to see it so well received there. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* said, "Messiah rises in dance divine." We revived *Messiah* in Raleigh last Thanksgiving (2008).

We finally started to perform *Nutcracker* during the fourth season, once the North Carolina Symphony no longer had it tied up. They had been bringing in the North Carolina School of the Arts, but after three years that contract was up.

I did a *Nutcracker*, a *Swan Lake*, my version of *Coppélia*, *Firebird*, *The Symposium* using Bernstein's "Serenade," a ballet to music by Ravel based on Degas' paintings, and several years ago a full-evening work based on Monet paintings called *Monet Impressions*. Part one was Lynne's "Picnic on the Grass," and the second part was my "The Gardens of Giverny." I cho-



Agon: Lara O'Brien and Alain Molina. (Photo: Russ Howe, CB)

reographed a full-length *Cinderella*, to commissioned music because I have never thought that the Prokofiev works.

What else? Oh, yes, *Petrouchka*. We did a Stravinsky evening, *Petrouchka*, *Jeu de Cartes*, and *Pulcinella*. I commissioned a Hans Christian Andersen evening, three ballets by three choreographers. Damian Woetzel did the *Nightingale*, Lynne did *The Ugly Duckling*, and I did *The Shadow*.

Recently we did a new *Sleeping Beauty*. Other ballets include *Time Gallery* and *Tempest Fantasy* to the music of Paul Moravec, *A Classical Ballet* to selections of music by Prokofiev, *Petit Ballet Romantique* to Delibes, *Oblique Dreamscape* to Stravinsky, *Grosse Fuge* to Beethoven, and several pas de deux: *Adagio* to Albinoni, *Endymion's Sleep* to J. Mark Scarce, and *The Visitation* to Mozart.

It sounds as though we have done only new

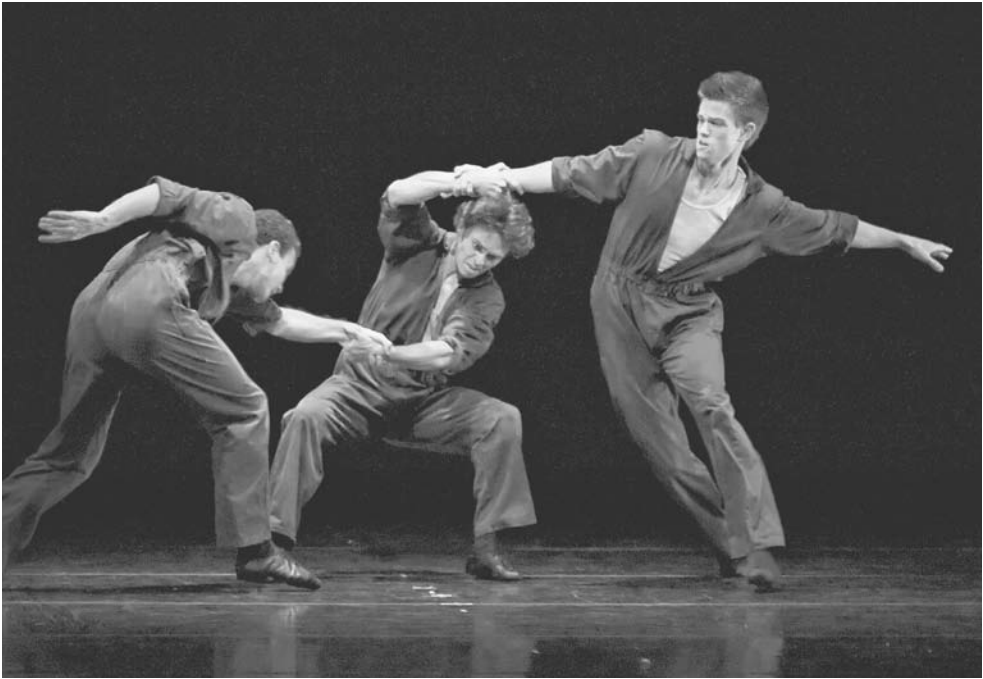
work, but I've introduced Raleigh to Limón's *The Moor's Pavane* and Tudor's *Lilac Garden*, as well as many works of Balanchine, *Concerto Barocco*, *Prodigal Son*, *Apollo*, *Rubies*, *Agon*, and *Raymonda Variations*, to name a few.

BR: Every time I've been to Raleigh there has never been any doubt that everyone in the audience is there because they like the idea and they respond very well to the new pieces. But you are not in a major metropolitan area. Is that a problem?

Weiss: Well, no. There is good enough support for a small company like ours, with limited scenery and costumes, and live music only for *Nutcracker*. But I want to tour more and have audiences outside the area see our dancers. We did a three-week, seven-city tour of China, which the local private producers paid for. We took *Messiah* to Hungary, where it was a huge success. We only went to one place, Budapest,



Robert Weiss's *Swan Lake*: Lilyan Vigo and Timour Bourtasenkov. (Photo: Russ Howe, CB)



Lynne Taylor-Corbett's *Code of Silence*: Attila Bongar, Gabor Kapin, Nicholas Hagelin.
(Photo: Nigel Armes, CB)

but the government paid for the whole thing.

We got great reviews in Europe. I hoped that would be something that would spur other presenters to ask us, but it hasn't really happened. When you try to tour in the United States the cost is prohibitive and to go other places in Europe, unless you have someone who is really willing to produce you or promote you, is equally difficult. We don't have the reputation yet, even though I think we should. Just now we are in negotiations with a producer in Spain who is interested in taking the company there next summer.

BR: You have a twelve-year record now.

Weiss: And only good reviews. We've had some criticism, but just a little, and in the criticism they always had something good to say, too. Most of the reviews have been raves from both the people who came down to see us, like you and Terry Teachout, as well as local people. We've been covered in Raleigh by seven or eight reviewers on the *News & Observer* staff. The music critic, Roy Dicks, is very knowledgeable. He never stops talking about

how great the company is and how great the new choreography is. Not just mine but Lynne's and Damian's, too.

Dicks has been reviewing the company since the beginning. But it is the paper's Linda Belans who wrote most of our reviews in the first several years. She's covered the American Dance Festival for years, was in a modern dance company herself, and hosted the critics conference in Durham, so we have knowledgeable critics here. John Rockwell was somewhat critical of the one production he saw, *Swan Lake*, but he said a lot of good things as well, both about the dancers and the choreography.

BR: You have done, what, seventy ballets in eleven years?

Weiss: Yes, seventy-two now. All new works, some only pas de deux, some are fifteen minutes or half an hour or sixty minutes or full length.

BR: The support you've gotten is mainly locally?

Weiss: Yes, the majority of the money is lo-



Robert Weiss's *Don Quixote*: Melissa Podcasy and Timour Bourtasenkov. (Photo: Nigel Armes, CB)

cal. We are raising about \$2 million a year, which in a community this size is pretty amazing.

BR: What size is that?

Weiss: There are about 800,000 people, with 400,000 people in Raleigh, and then in Wake County and other counties, Durham and Chapel Hill, what is called the Triangle area. Some of those communities are pretty far away. What's doable, what's within about twenty minutes driving time of us, is about 600,000 people. Which is not that large.

We are taking in about between \$800,000 and \$1 million a year with *Nutcracker*. That's about 25-30,000 people. We have five thousand subscribers who come to six, seven, or eight performances a year, plus single ticket sales. We have about 70,000 seats to sell every year. It's a very good number for such a small

city. So we're taking in a little more than \$2 million a year in ticket sales and another \$2 million in contributions. It's not enough for live music, or enough to pay the dancers the salaries I would like, not enough to have as many weeks of work for the company as I would like. It's not enough to tour.

Still we're very successful. Seventy-four percent the people who subscribed last year re-subscribed this year. During the past two seasons we have increased the number of programs on our subscription series. Because of the economy, however, we, like a lot of people, have had to trim our budget. We've taken the time to do more revivals than new work. For our tenth anniversary season and during this past season we performed a variety of ballets from our rep, some of our most successful and popular story ballets.

We are still presenting new work, for example, I created a new *Don Quixote*, *Time Gallery* to Paul Moravec's wonderful score, and a new *Beauty and the Beast* to a commissioned score by Karl Moraski.

BR: Let's talk about your dancers.

Weiss: Even though Raleigh is a small place, I've managed to entice a lot of really good people, some for many years. Melissa Podcasy, my wife, was a principal dancer with Pennsylvania Ballet and Basel Ballet. Timour Bourtasenkov is originally from the Bolshoi Ballet and was a principal with Pennsylvania Ballet. Marin Boieru, who has been ballet master from the very beginning, although he was at the end of his dancing career. He won the gold medal at Varna and was a principal with Pennsylvania Ballet and Miami City Ballet.

I was lucky to have these seasoned principal dancers but the rest of the company in the beginning were seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen year-olds. Now eleven years later they're all in their prime. They're twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and thirty years-old and they're really come into their own, in part, I think, because I've picked very talented people. You can't make people talented, only God can do that, but if you have a good eye, you can pick good people and work with them over a period of time. I think it takes about ten years to make an artist – turn a dancer into an artist from age eighteen to twenty-eight. Lilyan Vigo, Margaret Severin-Hansen, Pablo Perez, Margot Martin, and Alain Molina – all of these dancers came up with us.

I was lucky to get some other very talented young people over the years, Lara O'Brien, Hong Yang from China, Attila Bongar from Hungary, and I had another very talented Hungarian boy for a long time, Gabor Kapin, who left to go to Boston Ballet. I developed him over a seven-year period before he left. I was really disappointed by that, but he did great there. I went to Boston to see him do my part in *Ballo*

della Regina, and he did "Melancholic" in *The Four Temperaments* on the same program. Now, fortunately for us, he has returned to Carolina Ballet as a principal and is married to Margaret Severin-Hansen.

We now have a whole new crop of young people coming up as well. We've had people come and go. We had Mikhail Nikitine from Miami City Ballet, Isanusi Garcia from the National Ballet of Cuba, and Cyrille de la Barre from the Paris Opera Ballet. Most of the young dancers I have can compete both artistically and technically with anyone in a major company.

BR: Are both Melissa Podcasy and Timour Bourtasenkov still dancing with you?

Weiss: Yes, and it is incredible to have two such seasoned artists not only for the public but for the younger dancers to emulate. When I think about choreographing a ballet, I still get inspired by working with Timour and Melissa. Melissa even had a hip replacement four years ago and she has come back to dance in all the major productions. I can't imagine the company without them. I know she is my wife, but as you said to me when viewing her as Juliet, she is really one of the major ballerinas of her generation.

BR: What is in store for this year, as you move through your second decade?

Weiss: As I said the economy has put a crimp in most arts organizations' plans. We need to guarantee ticket sales so we are bringing back *Swan Lake*, *Cinderella*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Messiah*. But we are staging Bournonville's *La Sylphide* for the first time in the Triangle, and Lynne is doing a new work for that program as well. We will have an evening based on a Picasso show at Duke's Nasher Museum of Art. Creatively we are still on track, although I can't do everything I want to just now.

BR: I really can't wait to see your company again. You know I've always said that Carolina Ballet is one of my favorite companies.