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# Ballet Review



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**Tiler Peck and  
Sara Mearns at  
New York City Ballet**

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Cover photo by Paul Kolnik, New York City Ballet: Tiler Peck  
in Peter Martins' production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.



Sara Mearns as Odette. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

# No Apologies: Peck and Mearns at NYCB

Don Daniels

When a ballet company produces fine artists among its dancers, it can honor such signs of health by rearranging existing repertory around them. Despite the fact that we often see undercast new productions of old ballets at major houses around the world – revivals by companies that do *not* possess the necessary personnel – dance lovers have every right to expect a match between first-rate material, however old, and first-rate executants, however new. Anything less may allow a dancer to coast on his or her popularity with the fans, but it adds nothing to the serious process of defining stage artistry.

We need to find fresh facets in a discovered favorite, and the best way to release aspects of dance genius is through work that creates a context for discovery. Ballet fans often complain about the paucity of new, young choreographic talent. Perhaps more disturbing is the failure to introduce young dancers to revived tradition.

If companies can be foolhardy in imagining ballets-without-dancers, they also often appear to doubt the old ballets themselves as vehicles. We get productions that apologize for the venerable warhorses, tricked out in wilted “concepts,” attempts to salvage something from the glue factory, almost anything to rescue a modern audience from a lengthy ride. It is enough to make one wonder whether there is any need for future retrospection. (At the current rate, there may be little to remember.) Actually, those of us who recall the Grigorovich thrift-shop revisions of the classics at the Bolshoi have been here before; now that he’s once again working for his old company, even Grigorovich has been here before.

At New York City Ballet the best young dancers themselves do not apologize. My examples are the performances of Tiler Peck in

*The Sleeping Beauty* and Sara Mearns in *Swan Lake* last winter.

Peck provided a true diapason of movement qualities in her accounting of Aurora. She has her controlled version of a strong attack, and she has her utterly distinctive idea of dance filigree. There is a startling softness in areas of this young woman’s dance. Not only does she dare to discriminate among a wide range of dance energies; suddenly we are able to find a logic in dance passages that other Auroras leave untouched. An obvious example is to be found in the way she takes full advantage of transitional movements. A Peck glissade can become a major statement; I have seen recent Auroras who cannot essay a plausible glissade. The poetic force of a Tiler Peck performance derives from such acts of discovery.

Peck’s sense of stage timing and dance rhythm allows her fresh, unexpected agreements with Tchaikovsky’s great score. Peck can indicate a dance gesture with the lightest of touches, and she can clinch a phrase with the most definitive of accents. In the midst of her most decorative flights, there is a clear destination. Peck does not condescend to the Petipa conception of the role of Aurora. She has studied her place in the ballet from the ground up. Watching this young ballerina pull the spectacle around her is one of the great excitements of the art today. She is the most vivid, the most unpredictable of Auroras, performance by performance.

Sara Mearns’s *Odette-Odile* hit the City Ballet audience like a lightning bolt. In her characterizations, she works against the fatalism of the full-evening NYCB production, with its suggestion that the lakeside couple’s double suicide and apotheosis are not sufficient for an unhappy ending. Only a retributive separation and mortal solitude will do: no spells broken here. But Mearns weaves her own spell. She differentiates between the two swans. Her *Odette* endures an exquisite martyrdom. Her *Odile* takes a wide range of joy in her villainy.

Over at American Ballet Theatre, Veronika Part gets more neurosis into her *Odette*, and

she does so with a scar of masochism through her cut-glass Maryinsky style. Mearns has a ready speed denied to Part, but Part's suffering is dark and deep. Diana Vishneva turns Odette into a creature fearful for Siegfried because her beauty and plight may lure him unfairly; she fears her own possible predation upon the Prince, one equivalent to her enslavement by von Rothbart. Vishneva thereby connects her Odette to her rapacious, force-of-nature Odile.

Mearns contrasts her portraits with two distinct fantasies: one infinitely painful, one effortlessly calculating. Thanks to her, we are permitted a variety of privileged glimpses of what is really going on in the netherworld of this ballet, the sorts of things you usually only catch out of the corner of your eye at a busy party—livid, frozen images that classical dance can vouchsafely with no morning after. Jared Angle was brilliant both in his partnering of Mearns and in his suave suggestion that this Prince is finding his own guilt-riven way to grow up.

Both Mearns and Peck are mistresses of dramatic contrasts in their dance movement. (At City Ballet they have a sister genius in this skill—Janie Taylor.) Perhaps at times the two could use more stretch amid the high speeds of the NYCB productions. Peck's line can become briefly attenuated, and Mearns's can lookropy.

Mearns's "Diamonds" in *Jewels* (where she is sympathetically partnered by Jonathan Stafford) appeared to use what she had learned from her recent Odette. In the great Balanchine pas de deux, Mearns employed a more compressed phrasing than I remember in her first "Diamonds." A more expansive idea of phrasal relationships would achieve a greater effect. When her dance tightens, Mearns can look old-fashioned in her accents and periods. (There is always a part of a ballet audience that wants an old-fashioned ballerina busy around the house.) At such moments Mearns refers back to that first fast entrance in *Swan Lake*, an entrée that only she has conquered among the City Ballet ballerinas. But an artist cannot master the pas de deux of "Diamonds" by rid-

ing the choreography or creating movement dramas, however swift. She must find ways of bracketing not only the dance's small, but also its large, gestures. Only then do we see the pas de deux's reciprocal motifs, variable scale, and vast formal range. Balanchine and Farrell, who originated the role, threw down this challenge for the future.

I seem to remember a wider command from Mearns in her earlier performance of "Diamonds" (she was again allowed only one last winter). This ballerina is a true creature of the stage, and she alters her approach from night to night, so I may speak too soon or place too much emphasis on what I took to be missing this time in "Diamonds." Mearns has already mastered the Mimi Paul role in "Emeralds."

One wants to see Mearns in other great Balanchine roles. If the City Ballet seasons are to be expanded backward and forward around current schedules, perhaps there will be time to sneak some contraband works into the mix. And if we are to have more full-evening ballets, perhaps the way could be cleared for the return of Balanchine's *Don Quixote*, especially now that there are candidates—Mearns, Taylor—for Dulcinea. If NYCB does not currently boast a choreographic staff, resident or guest, that can supply its best ballerinas with rich new material—roles with poetic range and fitted technical challenge—the search must turn to the company's own past. Every major Balanchine ballerina role becomes precious for the development of NYCB's dance genius.

Before he died, Balanchine expressed the wish to condense his three-act *Don Quixote* into a two-act work so that the ballet could be performed in repertory. We know that its composer, Nicolas Nabokov, had earlier mentioned to his wife that he had found a way to "fix" the ballet. Both Balanchine and Nabokov were thus considering a substantive revision until the ends of their lives. Balanchine's *Don Quixote* is as personal a work as his *La Sonnambula*. In many ways the 1965 ballet has the dark, self-punishing quality of a film by Ingmar Bergman. The role of Dulcinea is central to NYCB's history. Perhaps a way could now



Tiler Peck and Joaquin de Luz in *Theme and Variations*. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

be found to compress acts 1 and 2, retaining the large integrity of Nabokov's score and the iconic stage vignettes (Marcela's dance, the best pas of the divertissement in the original act 2), so as to construct a new act 1. City Ballet has a new generation of skilled ballerinas for the large cast of *Don Quixote*: Sterling Hyltin, Teresa Reichlen, Rebecca Krohn, Kathryn Morgan, and Kaitlyn Gilliland.

Many members of the new seat-filling audience at the Koch Theater would undoubtedly not know that there is a difference between the three-act Petipa *Don Quixote* and the two-

act Balanchine. But the title alone is regarded as box-office. And newcomers would confront a fascinating reclamation, streamlined along Balanchine's late plan. The result could offer something like a perfect marriage of new commercialism and old art, between young artists and unapologetic tradition: a consummation devoutly to be wished.

The recent NYCB tendency has been to try young artists in the most demanding active rep right away. (Peck has already done *Theme and Variations*.) A balletomane with a memory inevitably laments the absence of the challeng-

ing 1950s works (*Sylvia Pas de Deux*, *Minkus Pas de Trois*, *Bourrée Fantasque*, and *Pas de Dix*) from present use, especially when bringing a younger artist up through the Balanchine classics. What can eventually be done about this repertory omission, given the pressure to keep the later rep alive and a new dependence on full-evening works in the NYCB schedule?

Perhaps this is the time for City Ballet to form a junior company like American Ballet Theatre's ABT II. Too many full-evening productions can discourage management from quick, improvisatory decisions, like reviving a training ballet for a young dancer suddenly on the rise. (*Valse Fantaisie* is one example.) A junior company could take over the part of the Balanchine repertory (including the 1950s works) that the main ensemble cannot easily honor. The Balanchine and Robbins repertoires are already enormous, and the company copes heroically with trying to maintain them and introduce new ballets at the same time.

A NYCB 2 would be able to absorb some of this effort. A smaller stage would allow certain works (*Orpheus*, for example) a legibility that is impossible in a large venue. Promising graduates of SAB could use NYCB 2 for performance experience and – should they graduate from 2 to 1 – for preparation for the more “modern” challenges of the NYCB 1 rep. Works like the Stravinsky *Symphony in Three Movements* might even gain in underlying strength after dancers at NYCB 2 have traversed the “classical” style of the earlier Bal-

anchine staples. This approach would also mitigate the charge from new balletomanes that City Ballet is not a “classical company.”

There would be other, specific advantages from the creation of a NYCB 2. Young male dancers could be nurtured in the John Prinz repertory before confronting the Villella roles. (At the current accelerated rate, corps member Chase Finlay – excellent in the Gold variation in Peter Martins' *Beauty* – will soon be doing “Rubies” rather than the pas de trois in “Emeralds.”) Not only could a second company revive Balanchine works like *Cotillon*, *Mozart Violin Concerto*, and *Glinkiana*, not to be seen on today's main stage; revivals at the junior company could be considered candidates for transfer to the senior and, if successful, ultimately claimed by NYCB 1 stars like Peck and Mearns. The best graduates of the City Ballet's Choreographic Institute would be able to display their experiments in performances of NYCB 2, rather than suffering in comparison with the Balanchine-Robbins monolith at the David Koch Theater. American-born and New York City-based choreographers might even find their way to showing their work to local audiences via commissions from a NYCB 2.

From the beginning George Balanchine trained his dancers in a wide range of clarified rhythmic articulation toward an eventual artistry both classical and modern. His surviving oeuvre is our repository of that achievement. A junior company would be one way to claim it for the present and the future.