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Ballet Review



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***The Sleeping Beauty* at NYCB**

On the Cover: National Ballet of Cuba's Viengsay Valdés in Peter Quanz's *Double Bounce*



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Cover Photograph by Linda Reyes, National Ballet of Cuba:
Viensay Valdés in Peter Quanz's *Double Bounce*.



Tiler Peck as Aurora. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

City Ballet's *Beauty*

Harris Green

Had New York City Ballet waited three more years to revive Peter Martins' 1991 production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the occasion could have been hailed as "a silver anniversary." Coming as it did during the last thirteen performances of the 2013 winter season, the latest revival must be described merely as a "twenty-second birthday." Even so, it was a welcome opportunity to encounter a production of a work long considered the ultimate test of a classical company at every level, performed by a company at its peak.

Balanchine had welcomed the Sadler's Wells Ballet when it opened its first visit to New York in 1949 with Nicholas Sergeyev's recreation of this ballet. (It should be noted that the city's appetite for dance had been whetted by the months-long art-house run of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressberger's beloved cult classic *The Red Shoes*.) Far from considering the Brits as competition, Balanchine said the more dance there is, the better, although he scoffed at those who considered this *Sleeping Beauty* a spectacle on the level of his beloved Maryinsky's.

He rejected any inclusion of the ballet in NYCB's repertory, but for box-office reasons he would soon add an adaptation of the second act of *Swan Lake*. Despite the willful inclusion of a flock of stately papier-mâché birds – one can imagine him saying, "They want swans; I give them swans" – this 1951 fragment achieves the impact of the complete work by bringing the choreography to a boil with the stormy music of the act 4 finale. The closest Balanchine came to a similar compression of *Beauty* was *Princess Aurora*, a short-lived adaptation of Petipa's last act, done for a Ballet Theatre visit to Chicago in 1949.

Lincoln Kirstein had long wanted NYCB to produce its own complete version, possibly

because Diaghilev's lavish 1921 production for London had been the great impresario's most spectacular flop. The beloved classic had looked hopelessly *vieux jeu* to Western Europe after the Ballets Russes had spent over a decade accustoming it to its pioneering repertory. Martins' production sustained City Ballet's reputation for novelty and creativity by compressing all action before *The Awakening* into one fluid act of three scenes and speeding the action along by relying on designer David Mitchell's projections for all the scenic transitions.

For those who insist that a classic be encased in ponderous settings or be saddled with an anachronistic updated production constantly at war with the genius of Tchaikovsky, the middle way chosen by Martins and Mitchell was either lightweight or reactionary – or both. For me it provided considerable satisfaction for the only reason that matters: it worked. Resistance to it dwindled markedly after American Ballet Theatre's fatally miscalculated 2007 attempt to combine novelty and tradition.

One example must do for the consistently odd decisions made by the troika of Kevin McKenzie, Gelsey Kirkland, and Michael Chernov: a heroine who has been asleep for a hundred years is acceptable in a fairy tale, but if she's also been sacked out on the veranda exposed to the elements all that time, as Ballet Theatre's indestructible *Aurora* apparently was, suspending one's disbelief is as herculean a task as keeping a straight face at her awakening.

Mitchell's projections permit the illusion of having King Florestan's distant castle come toward us, each increasingly closer view fading into its predecessor until lights go up behind a scrim, the scrim itself rises, and we are in the throne room watching the courtiers assemble for *The Christening* under the fluttery authority of Catalabutte. (Welcome back, former soloist Arch Higgins.) Those who believe that a slideshow makes this *Beauty* less imposing can take heart from Patricia Zipprodt's insistently lavish costumes. The corps looks

so overdressed they seem to have stepped out of an ancient deck of cards.

Everyone probably misses some beloved sequence in City Ballet's editing. (I would have kept the scene where the fairies plead with Carabosse to lift her horrid curse and also allowed Désiré either a demanding solo or at least one dance with his fellow huntsmen.) Fortunately, Martins not only retains much of Petipa's original set pieces, but also adds some worthy inspirations of his own. For example, unlike ABT's nymphs in *The Vision*, City Ballet's are not winsome sprites that keep emerging three by three from the woods, then retreating, and his fairies don't return in *The Wedding* to upstage the fairytale guests. What gives City Ballet's *Beauty* a special distinction no other company can equal is its inclusion of Balanchine's Garland Dance in *The Spell*. Created for the 1981 Tchaikovsky Festival, this continuously evolving ensemble of fifty-seven dancers is a masterly weaving of choreographic texture.

Strongly cast, City Ballet's *Beauty* can remain substantial with no loss through its fleetness. The premiere had starred Darci Kistler (Aurora), Damian Woetzel (Désiré), Kyra Nichols (The Lilac Fairy), and Merrill Ashley (Carabosse). For this revival, the present company, which now displays unprecedented strength at every level, fielded five different casts of principal leads and filled many lesser roles with corps members and soloists of stellar promise. There were ample reasons for observing the production's twenty-second birthday and anticipating its silver anniversary.

Every performance would have been a consistently celebratory occasion had each quartet of leads been uniformly outstanding. Unfortunately, that possibility had faded by the first evening. Megan Fairchild and Joaquin De Luz, monotonously chided for being technically immaculate but amplitude challenged, were predictably a small-scaled Aurora and Désiré; their grand pas de deux looked best when viewed through opera glasses. The performances that easily reached up to the Fifth

Ring were provided by Sara Mearns, a Lilac Fairy of flawlessly sustained grandeur, and Maria Kowroski, a Carabosse whose laughter after bestowing her curse upon the babe Aurora was mimed with such racking glee it could almost be heard.

Both ballerinas were mistresses of the simple but telling gesture worthy of Tchaikovsky. Lilac's music, a soothing balm to heal Carabosse's curse, was embodied by Mearns's seeming to brush aside some gossamer impediment before her when she confronted Carabosse in *The Christening*. Kowroski, her fingers splayed like the hands of a Bob Fosse dancer and her lovely face lit up by the evil smoldering within, achieved her vivid characterization with a dancer's precision. Too bad the four apprentices who danced her insectile "creatures" were the least repulsive monsters I can recall. The courtiers dutifully cringed in horror, but the two SAB students who were the stalwart little pages of the royal couple never left their posts by the throne.

Mearns and Kowroski were generally cast opposite Fairchild and De Luz instead of being bestowed upon every principal couple. Sterling Hyltin and Robert Fairchild, fast becoming one of the company's historic partnerships, were denied co-stars of their magnitude. Rebecca Krohn's Lilac Fairy excelled at chaperoning by gently intervening between Aurora and Désiré during *The Vision*, not an undemanding assignment given the comic potential in her repeated interference. (Imagine the foot-stomping hissy fit *Les Ballets Trocadero de Monte Carlo's* Désiré would have at such recurring frustration.) The Carabosse of Marika Anderson lacked menace, neither looking nor acting fierce enough to compensate for makeup that left her face so seamlessly blank it looked freshly, fiercely scrubbed.

Luckily, Hyltin embodied the essentials of Aurora to a greater extent than any other ballerina. Her entrance brought a vernal freshness onto the stage and her innocent delight built to the exhilarating triumph of the last sustained balance of the *Rose Adagio*. I regret



Maria Kowroski as Carabosse. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

to report that City Ballet, like every company you can find by trawling through the Internet, is now diluting the suspense as well as the fun of this *scena* by playing extra-safe about keeping Aurora balanced on pointe. Her royal suitors are lined up two deep to extend a helping hand the instant she finishes a pirouette.

Hyltin's demeanor was correctly noncorporeal throughout *The Vision*, free of any attempt at wooing the already smitten Fairchild. Eye contact had been at such a minimum that he, discouraged by Krohn's hall-monitor interventions, had been reduced to staring out into the house in despair. Then Hyltin glided up behind him and laid her hands upon his shoulders. His reaction was like a great sigh of delight coursing up through his body, rais-

ing his arms along with his hopes. He didn't hesitate to follow her offstage. New York City Ballet was once thought not interested in, possibly incapable of, such Romantic demeanor, yet here it was, alive and well upon the stage Balanchine and Kirstein had built primarily for displaying twentieth-century dance.

During *The Wedding*, our twenty-first-century Aurora and Désiré met the Romantic demands of the pas de deux with joyous assurance. Petipa, who hadn't hesitated to dictate the tempo and meter Tchaikovsky must follow in every measure of the score, was at his most imperious here. He grandly included three fish dives in quick succession in the opening section instead of saving such fireworks for the grand finale. He assigned the ballerina a solo of exceptional kit-

tenish delicacy. Partnering during the finale was so animated Aurora and Désiré playfully moved across the stage as it progressed. Fairchild remained unfailingly noble at all times, even during an accelerating manège. Hyltin, while never less than a ballerina, retained the innocence and delight of an enchanted teenager under a veneer of technique and artistry.

The finer subtleties of characterization were all that Tiler Peck lacked as Aurora, a chipper workaholic of a heroine. Peck's stamina, precision and stainless steel technique repeatedly make her awesome in abstract repertory, but such virtues, while far from incidental, are also far from all a great *Beauty* requires. Tyler Angle, her ardent Désiré, excelled as a dancer, partner, and an actor; his grand

gesture of amazement when he glimpsed Florestan's castle through the thicket of briars was another welcome recall of the Romantic tradition. Teresa Reichlen's Lilac Fairy had all the line, presence, and height needed to preside over the proceedings with benevolent authority. In such fast company, Georgina Pazcoguin's Carabosse looked more like a promising work-in-progress, surprisingly bland for a dancer who had shone as Anita in Robbins' *West Side Story Suite* and The Nurse in Martins' *Romeo + Juliet*.

The two remaining casts held considerable satisfaction and an occasional surprise. Predictably, Ashley Boudier, the embodiment of Authority, was a rather knowing teenager, but as Désiré, Andrew Veyette, often a coarse virtuoso, displayed a rare aristocratic demeanor during the frustrations of *The Vision*. They went at the pas de deux like gourmets digging into a five-course spread. Janie Taylor's Lilac and Jenifer Ringer's Carabosse exuded experience and competence, not exactly cardinal virtues but certainly welcome ones. Ana Sophia Scheller and Gonzalo Garcia, while not the most joyful of lovers, were unfailingly professional. Savannah Lowery's Lilac was at its best serving as a formidable traffic cop during *The Vision*. Kowroski's return as Carabosse was a welcome reminder of how a great mime can silently speak volumes of characterization.



Teresa Reichlen as the Lilac Fairy. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

Mitchell's use of projections makes filmmaking metaphors irresistible. "A cast of thousands" is how our increasingly extinct movie studios would have described the courtiers, sylphs, peasants, and fairies who swarm through this ballet. Decades before Hollywood invented the term, Petipa's Bluebird pas de deux contained "cameo roles," short but far from negligible parts that demand performers of star quality. (The great Enrico Cecchetti had spurned the role of Désiré to create *The Male Bluebird* and *Carabosse*.)

NYCB had an occasional nova, a star whose

light would flash, then fade among its Bluebirds (Anthony Huxley with his bold legs and negligible upper body; Antonio Carmena with his flickerings of inadequacy). Only Lauren Lovette and Daniel Ulbricht met all of Petipa's demands with a precision, buoyancy, and consistency that could be measured in megawatts. (I was anticipating the performance of Lauren King and Harrison Ball, but they cancelled for reasons unspecified. I have the nagging suspicion I may have missed something special.)

Martins' cameos for *The Wedding* guests in this section represent his choreography at its most efficient and rewarding. Ulbricht as a side-straddle hopping Jester, Chase Finlay, Jared Angle, and Adrian Danchig-Waring as Gold, Lovette as Ruby and *The White Cat*, Taylor Stanley as *Puss in Boots* – these roles were sources of joy on either side of the footlights.

Hollywood's word for the fairies' cavaliers at *The Christening* would be "extras," and they do seem to be merely escorting and supporting their lovely partners. When they have exposed leaps to perform, however, fully professional technique is essential and inadequacies can be all too obvious. It was always reassuring to check one's *Playbill* and learn that Stanley, Devin Alberda, Christian Tworzynski, Andrew Scordato, Joshua Thew, Joseph Gordon, Zachary Catazaro, and Justin Peck would be on duty.

As sylphs in *The Vision*, Martins' most daring sequence because he resisted every opportunity to be merely busy, the women's corps consistently exhibited a uniformity no movie director would tolerate in extras. This exposed passage of sustained stasis was a joy to watch and to hear as conductors Andrews Sill, Clotilde Otranto, and Daniel Capps guided the orchestra through music that recalled Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony*.

"Bit part" would also be an inadequate term for the fairies. Only Lilac can be said to be dancing a lead and they spend a great deal of time together in *The Christening*; however, each has the maximum exposure of a solo embodying the gift she will give the royal babe. King, Ashley Laracey, Gwyneth Muller, Megan LeCrone, and Brittany Pollack did not disappoint. Pzocoguin and Muller shared two roles with promising distinction. Both charged out of the wings to dance a rousing *Fairy of Courage* – or is it *Rudeness*? (She is incessantly *pointing* at everything.) Both also stood out as *The Countess in The Vision* by expressing her impatience with the dreamy *Désiré* by flouncing offstage in a most promising display of temperament.

I would anticipate the future if there weren't an unsettling subtext lurking in the final scene, built around Mitchell's most stylized yet most meaningful scenic effect. Onstage, regal authority, along with their crowns and trains, has been passed, literally as well as symbolically, from Florestan and his queen to *Désiré* and *Aurora*. As wedding guests perform a final procession around the stage to kneel before their new monarchs, a pinpoint of light on the cyclorama expands into the schematic rays of a golden sun.

A day of new authority has dawned and it belongs to Peter Martins. As was noted when the production premiered, he had proclaimed as much by naming the ballerinas in his *Wedding pas de quatre* Emerald, Ruby, and Diamond, the same precious stones set by Balanchine in *Jewels*. Martins now has jewels of his own. He has a company of his own. Try though I might, I could not refrain from thinking, even during this moment of glowing exhilaration, that the next New York City Ballet production of *The Sleeping Beauty* could well be designed by that not so great Dane, Per Kirkeby.