

Spring 2014

# Ballet Review



From the Spring 2014 issue of *Ballet Review*

**Ballet West**

On the cover: Mark Morris Dance Group in *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*.

**Ballet Review 42.1  
Spring 2014**

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**Cover Photograph by Costas: Mark Morris Dance Group  
at Lincoln Center in *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*.**



Christiana Bennett and Beau Pearson in the pas de deux from *Diamonds*. (Photo: Luke Isley, Ballet West)

# Ballet West

## Joseph Houseal

Adam Sklute is succeeding in ways other companies can only imagine but also in ways other companies can't even imagine. Sklute is a protégé of the Joffrey Ballet, a dancer then assistant director, who worked closely with Gerald Arpino in his twilight years. Arpino entrusted to Sklute the artistic mission, attitude, versatility, and quality of the Joffrey Ballet, which was started by two American guys with a broken-down car.

Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino were great men. The Joffrey Ballet was like no other in the world. The current Joffrey company is doing everything it can to become like every other classical company in the world. At present it can't even muster a respectable performance of Arpino's or Joffrey's choreography. The technique and stamina required defeats them, and they have no interest in the purpose, style, and artistic place of the ballets. It is an embarrassment that they bungle a great artistic legacy. They will succeed in their own new way. But, jeesh.

The true legacy of the Joffrey is alive and robust at Ballet West under Sklute, its artistic director. Ballet West is the first classical company with its own reality-TV program, as awful as that at first sounds. Many of the Joffrey's firsts (first ballet company on the cover of *Time*, first to have sold-out runs on Broadway, first to incorporate film with classical dance, first to revive Nijinsky's *Sacre*) were greeted with shouts of "Awful!" and then the game changed because the Joffrey of old spoke to people in ways ballet hadn't before.

On the CW network, which is aimed at teenagers, the name of the television series is *Breaking Pointe*. I cannot sit through even five minutes of an episode, it is just so stupid. But the joke's on me. It's not a program for the over-twenty crowd. It's aimed at teens and they love

it. Apparently hundreds of thousands of them across the United States and Europe (the show is produced by the BBC) think *Breaking Pointe* is cool. Ballet West is cool. Adam Sklute is cool. Classical ballet is cool.

Sklute says astounding things like, "Alison needs to work on her concentration." OMG. Did you hear that? She is spending too much time with her boyfriend. She could lose her dream. She better get it together or she won't get a role in *The Sleeping Beauty*. Yes, that is right. The real, full-evening, Petipa masterpiece that preserves better than anything the courtly origins of ballet.

Sklute is relentless about quality. I have watched him rehearse his dancers. He understands the art of ballet in a full way that has few peers. *The Sleeping Beauty* is a work that has produced a long list of sad victims. It has taken down many of the greats. Dance performances that are high quality through all three acts, in every aspect, are rare. In this production Ballet West hit the mark, a stylistic triumph start to finish. Even the vitality between the solo dancers and the orchestra was always being tempered theatrically, to everyone's best effect. Artists making art. The choreography is not just difficult, it is entirely exposed. The whole thing is slowish and dignified. Make the slightest mistake and everyone knows.

The choreography has any number of "Mona Lisa" moments, so iconic as to become souvenir ashtrays. Most of these moments involve a series of increasingly difficult balances. Christiana Bennett, who danced Aurora, has some way to go before truly seizing that ballerina tiara, but she is well on her way. Here's the thing: although she tired during her first long danced sequences, and did some of the Mona Lisas with more determination than art, she never made any technical mistakes, not a one. She never fell off pointe. She never missed a turn. She made every aspect of the grand pas de deux read like a dictionary.

Similarly picture perfect were the historical groupings of dancers. In fact, this Ballet West production of *Beauty* may be the most



*The Sleeping Beauty*: Haley Henderson Smith and Easton Smith as the Lilac Fairy and her cavalier. (Photo: Luke Isley, BW)

beautiful of this masterpiece I have seen. Sure, I have seen superstars and famous companies do it. With Ballet West, it is alive with style and the interest of budding dancers and connoisseurs. I have never seen this ballet staged traditionally, and yet so full of the excitement of our times. It is a marvel.

There was such energy in the theater, Chicago's richly beautiful Auditorium Theater, one of Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan's greatest masterpieces and now part of Roosevelt College. Then enlightenment struck. Virtually all of the many teens in the audience knew who Christiana was, knew her vicissitudes, her rivals, her weight, her ex-boyfriend (the bastard), her favorite salad, and most of all how

hard she has been working in Utah under Adam's watchful eye to become an American ballerina. How much she wanted it.

Sklute is cultivating real ballerinas in a whole new way. These teens in the audience of both the TV show and the live performance have seen Christiana on the small screen try – and not always succeed. When she completed *Beauty* without an error, half the audience thought they had completed it without error too. It was a pure triumph, a shared victory in the great art of Classical Ballet.

Not only was this new *Sleeping Beauty* a glorious, beautifully danced production, but two days later I saw the best performance of *Rubies* I have seen in years, followed

shortly by the sterling pas de deux from *Diamonds*. Both were fantastic examples of Balanchine, who would have loved these deliberate, exuberant performances. *Rubies* was nonstop excitement. It is still as odd as can be.

Concentration is what characterizes excellent performances of Balanchine. It seizes the attention of the audience and, well done, holds it, to the point where it is borne by it. Balanchine can generate excitement onstage like no other. In these weird ballets, like *Rubies*, how he builds it all with the strangest combination of classical structures and technical innovations is extraordinary.

Because of *Breaking Pointe* the teens in the



*The Sleeping Beauty*: Garland Dance and Christiana Bennett as Aurora. (Photos: Luke Isley, BW)



*Rubies*: Elizabeth McGrath and ensemble. (Photo: Beau Pearson, BW)

audience know the name of everyone in the company, their blogs, tweets, and Facebook profiles. It is their company, their generation. *Sleeping Beauty* is alive and well. In fact, it is kicking ass.

Who else anywhere is doing a new, full-length, fully costumed and staged production of *The Sleeping Beauty*? One with live music, thanks to the Chicago Sinfonietta, and a novice audience who sits appreciatively and energetically through the whole thing? These are very different tastes from a very different time meeting a wholly receptive young audience. Here, TV created the initial interest, then the real thing was better than they could have dreamed.

They were, with one acceptable exception, very well behaved and attentive, entirely interested in the dancing. There was one small boy who came to the show with a wand, and, thinking his dreams were manifesting, he waved his wand to make magic everywhere.

His mother worried that he was bothering me. I assured her that if ever there was a place for a sorcerer's wand, it was here. He was digging it – for three hours – because this production is captivating.

With this enormous audience of interested teens, what would you do? If you are Adam Sklute, you show *The Sleeping Beauty* and honor them with the real thing; you show Balanchine at his best, vital and engaging, and show them a freedom in ballet unique to his work.

Sklute does not dilute the artistic transmission he inherited, as others have. He is charging the ballet world forward with the *joie de vivre* that once sang the song of the Joffrey Ballet. Hats off. He understands Petipa and Balanchine and Nijinsky; he is a trustworthy steward of the true greatness of the Joffrey company. He also understands that girls have boyfriends and iPhones. If you ask him, he will tell you to your face, "Alison needs to work on her concentration."