

Spring 2015

# Ballet Review



## **A Conversation with Evan McKie from Ballet Review Spring 2015**

On the cover: Olga Smirnova and Evan McKie in  
*Oregon* at the 2014 Youth America Grand Prix Gala.  
Photograph by Hideaki Tanioka, YAGP



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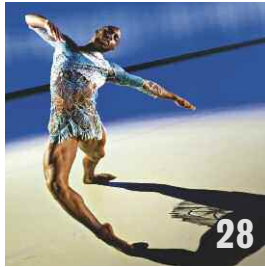
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Cover photograph by Hideaki Tanioka, Youth America Grand Prix: *Onegin* with Olga Smirnova and Evan McKie at the 2014 YAGP Gala.

- 4 New York – Susanna Sloat
- 5 Stuttgart – Gary Smith
- 6 Boston – Jeffrey Gantz
- 8 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 10 Berlin – Darrell Wilkins
- 13 Washington, D.C. – Christine Temin
- 15 Paris – David Mead
- 17 New York – Christopher Caines
- 20 Washington, D. C. – Lisa Traiger
- 23 New York – Nina Alovert
- 25 New York – Harris Green

**Michael Langlois**

- 28 A Conversation with Richard Alston

**Kevin Ng**

- 40 A Conversation with David Hallberg

**Karen Greenspan**

- 46 The Early Work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

**Marvin Hoshino**

- 52 Russian Avant-Garde

**Leigh Witchel**

- 56 Liam Scarlett

**Nina Alovert**

- 62 Divine Diana

**Vincent Giroud**

- 66 Nicolas Nabokov at the Ballet

**Marvin Hoshino**

- 73 Beauty and Nothing Else

**Gary Smith**

- 80 Evan McKie

**Joel Lobenthal**

- 86 “This Is Her Mother”

**Joel Lobenthal**

- 92 A Conversation with Irina Baronova

- 105 London Reporter – Clement Crisp

- 109 Jenifer Ringer – Jay Rogoff

- 110 Music on Disc – George Dorris

- 116 Check It Out



*The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude.* (Photo: Stuttgart Ballet)

# Evan McKie

Gary Smith

He's probably the last of the real danseurs nobles. The porcelain good looks – body like a Lladro figurine – coupled with the soul of an artist make him special.

Watch him in class. You see a man who battles at borders. Watch him onstage and you recognize total commitment. He has the line and elegance of a young Anthony Dowell, the visceral intensity of a passionate Nureyev, and the spirit of someone unique, like the exquisite Evelyn Hart.

Sitting across the table from me in one of his favorite Stuttgart restaurants, he talks about the man who lives inside the masculine, elegant frame. "I suppose if I'm honest I don't really know why I became a dancer. I just knew drama and dance went hand in hand. When I was a child I moved around the living room almost in a trance. The music unlocked something inside. It was about letting the joy out. It's all about release. Even then I knew I never wanted to be mechanical, to just dance steps. I always knew you were only stopped by the limits of your imagination."

Born in Toronto, Evan McKie went to Canada's National Ballet School, but left as a teenager to go to the Kirov Academy of Ballet of Washington, D.C., and finally the John Cranko School in Stuttgart. "I was always restless, searching for a better way to do things, trying to let inner feelings come out. I don't think I was narcissistic, nothing like that. I just never spent too much time looking in the mirror watching myself dance. I learned very early on I would never be satisfied with what I would see there.

"Although I came from a loving family, as a child I just wanted to be noticed. Maybe that's still true today. At eight years old I took tap and jazz and loved it madly. People kept saying I had a ballet dancer's body so I believed

them and I went to the National Ballet School."

McKie says he got into a lot of fights. "I just didn't fit in. I wanted to design my whole life – everything – to do things my own way. That wasn't popular back then. It probably still isn't today."

When he first watched *The Sleeping Beauty* as a boy, he thought ballet was all about girls in floral skirts. "I learned later it was about grown-up men, too. Men who can dream other lives, fly through space, land on a dime. I learned it was about men who aren't afraid of being powerful and vulnerable at the very same time."

In a sense, this is the essence of Evan McKie. Watch him onstage and you realize he's not frightened by emotion. He's not afraid to let feelings come out. Couple this with the physical, the overt perfection of his dancing, and you have an artist of rare gifts indeed. "I was drawn to the European style of dance, something so prevalent in Stuttgart. That style is more dramatic, more passionate, at least to me."

Certainly McKie's performances there, in a number of great works, from Béjart's *Songs of a Wayfarer* to Albrecht in *Giselle*, from the lead role in *Romeo and Juliet* to anything by William Forsythe, prove he has the Stuttgart style. The role most identified with him, however, is John Cranko's *Onegin*. McKie dances it like no one else. He finds *Onegin's* arrogance at the beginning, the dark Byronic spirit that fills Tatiana's young heart, then he surrenders in the final act to the desperate longing and regret that leaves the man drained of all hope.

Today McKie is its greatest interpreter for critics in Paris, Stuttgart, and Moscow, where he has startled audiences with his mercurial passion. His *Onegin* is simply a model of perfection. Reid Anderson, artistic director of The Stuttgart Ballet, and something of an *Onegin* specialist, says McKie's performance is now the best in the world. McKie has found darker, fomenting undercurrents in the man, coupled with a touching vulnerability.

"Dance is about bodies, that's true," McKie says, "but it's also about brains. And it's cer-

tainly about what we conceal inside. I feel very vulnerable when people look into my eyes. I'm secretive I suppose. I have private and personal ways. It's embarrassing to say that. There is a real difference, you know, between a stage life and one that's supposed to be real. I've said in the past I don't know who Evan McKie actually is. Maybe I'm more real onstage than I am sitting here talking."

Healing from a relationship that left him shattered and in pain, McKie has found

strength in his work. He's poured his passion and sadness into his stage performances, making stunning connections with the characters he plays. He's a tortured and powerful Hamlet in Kevin O'Day's dramatic ballet. He's an incredibly evil Iago in John Neumeier's *Othello*. And he's a beautiful but lonely Siegfried in James Kudelka's *Swan Lake*. In a sense these performances came from newfound strength in the face of adversity.

"I think I know myself better now," he said



*Swan Lake* with Svetlana Lunkina. (Photo: Aleksandar Antonijevic, National Ballet of Canada)



*Swan Lake* with Anna Osadcenko. (Photo: SB)

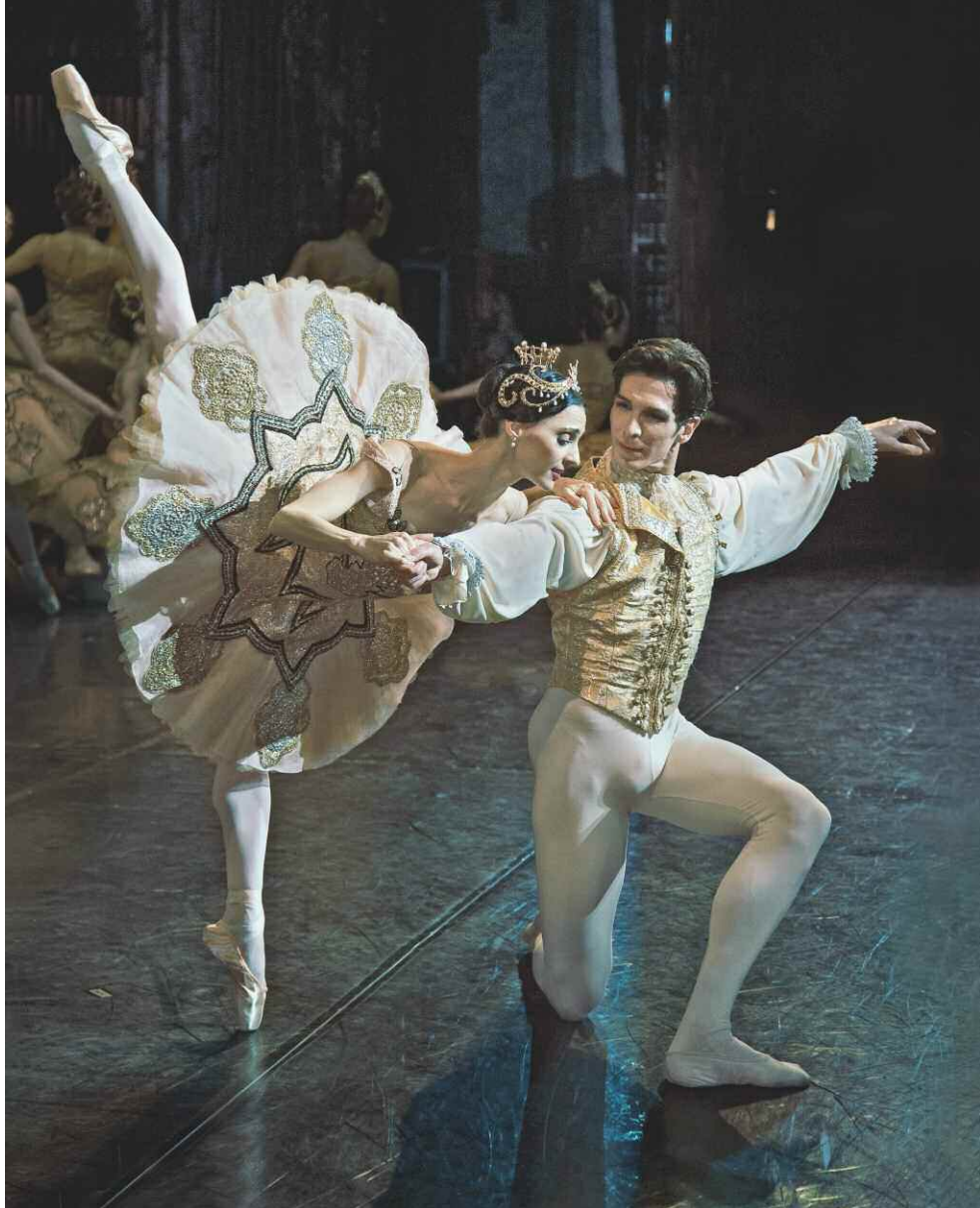
recently. “Now I think my favorite character is myself. That wasn’t the case before. I’ve become more intuitive. I know it’s okay to be upset, to feel regret. I’ve always felt like the ugly duckling of the ballet world, no matter how I look in tights.

“It’s now about getting to know myself and accepting who I am. It’s also about what I want to show an audience, what I want to share with them. I want my dancing to be a

conversation with the audience. Before, I didn’t know how to let go of certain things. They just got in the way.”

McKie thinks back to his training for dance. “I wanted this military Russian training. That means using your body from the tip of your head, to the tip of your toes. Everything must be pushed onstage.

“To do the roles I want to do, roles that are beyond classical ballet, I have to deconstruct



*The Sleeping Beauty* with Greta Hodgkinson. (Photo: Bruce Zinger, NBC)

and let it all go, then find a way to put it all back together. It's a process of breaking myself down to bring myself up again."

Self-analytical and aware, McKie examines every aspect of performance. "I use the tension that I have and the inner frustration I feel to create the pieces that I dance. I'm still the same person I was, I'm just more aware of what I want and how I can make my vision happen.

"I'm thirty-one. There's a huge difference from when I began dancing. Then too, I've al-

ways lived in extremes. There have been surprises, tough things I didn't see coming. So what? It's about using what happens to make yourself stronger and a better dancer."

Then some months ago McKie shocked the dance world by giving up his role as one of Stuttgart's principal dancers to join The National Ballet of Canada. Leaving a strong company with an international reputation, as well as all those wonderful Cranko ballets, couldn't have been easy.

"I always thought I'd have to forgo a home-ground career," McKie says. "It was a surprise then to be invited by Karen Kain to guest in Toronto." McKie's performances as Albrecht in *Giselle*, Florimund in *The Sleeping Beauty*, Lensky in *Onegin*, and Siegfried in *Swan Lake* had critics raving. He was a fresh and astounding addition to the Canadian company. He also had a purity of line and elegance not seen there since Robert Tewsley and Vladimir Malakhov danced with the Canadians.

McKie says his decision to leave Stuttgart for Toronto was initiated by his private life: He wants to be near his family. He also says he's become emotionally invested in The National Ballet after his guest appearances there. He believes the company is on the edge of a great international future. He sees it as the next logical step in his development.

"I learned so much in Stuttgart, about ballet and about myself. Reid taught me you've got to take risks if you're going to achieve anything. I'll miss my Stuttgart colleagues."

McKie says the Canadian company is similar to Stuttgart in some ways. "Both have a team atmosphere. Each has an identity. In Stuttgart, history is always in your face. In Canada it's different. In Stuttgart I walk for five minutes and I can go far back in time. That humbles me. Toronto is more contemporary, more now."

McKie reflects for a moment on his Stuttgart years. After a long pause, he smiles and speaks. His words help to explain some of the professional reasons he has left the company.

"I don't know if I've been disappointed in Stuttgart, but my expectations of other peo-

ple there have changed. There were roles I wanted to dance and they weren't offered. The disappointment is that I could have grown more, but I didn't have the opportunities. That was frustrating for me. I felt I wasn't moving on. It's important to keep searching and learning."

When I ask McKie what's important to him as a dancer he smiles again.

"I think generosity of spirit is more important than how many pirouettes I can do. You see, I never wanted to come into dance. Maybe that separates me. What I want to find is style. I don't mean something affected. I mean something absolutely my own. Something that identifies me."

McKie reflects once again. "I'm not a jealous person, but I can be envious of opportunities. I've never been jealous of anyone's dancing. I focus on what I'm doing and what I want. At the end of the day I want to be left with real friends."

When I ask McKie what makes him special he looks startled and unsure.

"Well, I hope onstage the audience sees how I approach the role I'm dancing from many different sides. I'm deeply passionate about the music and the literary side of things. Partnerships are important, too. They make the ballet work."

McKie has hopes for the future. "I'm not known in America. Not really. I hope to change that. I think there's a ballet renaissance just now. For me, it's all about stepping out; trying something different. I'm not trying to show people how difficult it is to dance - just how much love I have doing it."