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# Ballet Review



**A Conversation with Peter Martins  
Ballet Review Winter 2015-2016**

On the cover: Gillian Murphy in *The Sleeping Beauty*.  
(Photo: Gene Schiavone, ABT)

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Cover photograph by Gene Schiavone,  
ABT: Gillian Murphy as Aurora.



Lauren Lovette and Anthony Huxley in *La Sylphide*. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, New York City Ballet)

# A Conversation with Peter Martins

Jay Rogoff

BR: What led you to want to stage *La Sylphide* for New York City Ballet? It's rather unlike a lot of things that the company has done.

Peter Martins: Well, it is my heritage. I grew up in the Royal Danish Ballet. Bournonville was the Petipa of Denmark, if you will. What Petipa was to Russia – *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker* – Bournonville was to Denmark, and he did all these wonderful ballets. I grew up with Bournonville – well, I didn't grow up with *him*, he was gone! But the material is phenomenal.

I always bring Balanchine into this conversation to legitimize him, because many don't know about Bournonville. Balanchine and I talked about him all the time, and I'm not exaggerating. Balanchine adored Bournonville, and he always used to say he was one of the best choreographers – he and Petipa. But even if he hadn't endorsed him, I would have still wanted to bring him here, because I think the current generation of dancers deserves to be exposed to his work.

BR: Bournonville style, which is what you grew up with: Is it very different from Balanchine technique? When we're watching *La Sylphide*, or *Bournonville Divertissements*, which is on a bill with it, what kinds of things should we be looking for?

Martins: It's very similar to Balanchine. It's fast footwork, it's very musical – *extremely* musical – and it's structured in such a way that it's just first-rate choreography. When I presented this to the dancers four or five months ago, I was a little nervous because I didn't know how they would take to it, because it's a whole new generation. And I was very taken aback by how much they loved it. Dancers know when Peter Martins spoke at a preperformance forum at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center during New York City Ballet's summer 2015 season.

they're dealing with good material. They just know. There is good choreography and not good choreography, and this is good.

BR: So if you have grown up with Balanchine technique, if you're somebody coming out of SAB or the company, what will you find readily adaptable to Bournonville technique, and what will you have to study; what will challenge and stretch you a little bit?

Martins: Balletically, physically, it's really surprisingly similar to Balanchine. The whole approach is very similar. Fast little footwork, et cetera.

BR: Could you talk a bit about the upper body in Bournonville, and how his approach to it differentiates him from other choreographers?

Martins: Bournonville did not like arms to ever go above your shoulders. He has the arms under the shoulders, and that is the biggest challenge physically of doing this work. You don't fly.

BR: Does that apply to the legs also? For example, we've read a lot about Ratmansky's new *Sleeping Beauty* and the low arabesques in that production.

Martins: No, not at all. The dancing – if you've seen *Donizetti Variations* – Mr. B used to say to me, "Pure Bournonville. It's my tribute to Bournonville." The real big difference is mime. Balanchine didn't use mime much in his ballets because he didn't do those big, full-length ballets much. But mime – that was the area where I felt I had to spend time with the dancers and show them how to do that.

How do you say, "I love you" right on stage so it doesn't look silly? It's actually very different. I was taught when I was little how to do it. You say, "I," one hand [gestures with right hand to mid-chest], "you" [gestures outward with right hand], "love" [gestures with both hands to heart]. You see, "I" is one hand. Don't put it to your heart; you put it there. And then you say, "you," and then you say, "love" – two hands. On the left side, because that's where the heart is.

And so little things like that – very important. Otherwise it looks like sign language, you

know? The audience has to understand what it means.

BR: When you did your *Sleeping Beauty* and your *Swan Lake*, you decided to forgo most of the mime. And it's one of the things that makes those ballets swifter and more efficient.

Martins: There's a lot of mime in those, too: lots of "I love you" there, too!

BR: Okay. But for example, you cut out the whole story of how the mother's tears created *Swan Lake*.

Martins: Yes, because we have to end before midnight! That won't work in this day and age.

BR: That's always seemed to me close to Balanchine's idea that there are no mothers-in-law in ballet. So why is mime so important here? That expression of "I love you" – what is that accomplishing that an intimate pas de deux does not accomplish?

Martins: Well, with a story ballet you have to tell the story. And you don't speak, obviously, so you have to be able to express yourself in mime. But people are not trained here in that craft. I thought that was probably my most useful contribution in this whole endeavor.

BR: When your dancers are learning the roles, when Sterling Hyltin is learning the Sylph, when Joaquin De Luz is learning James, do you ask them to focus on mime in the way that other dancers would focus on steps, or do you ask them to focus on a character? What kinds of cues do you give them to get them into the world of this ballet that's now 180 years old?

Martins: Surprisingly, you have to tell them very, very little, because they're so smart and so adaptable, and they basically know what to do. I only open my mouth when they go astray. I basically let them do it their way, because I'm not looking for clones. Up here we have two casts of the Sylph; in New York we had four casts – and they're all different. But they have to speak the language, so I definitely taught them how to mime, and that includes all the characters. But they can do their own interpretation. I tell them very little, surprisingly,

and I think that's the best way, so they develop their own character.

BR: Is there a lot of latitude for acting in the ballet? Or would you not go so far as to call it "acting"?

Martins: Well, there are parameters, and within those parameters there has to be a freedom for them, too, in how they express themselves.

BR: Did you set the ballet exactly as you remembered it from when you danced it in Denmark, or did you make changes that were suitable for NYCB?

Martins: The only suitable change was to eliminate the intermission! I looked at this ballet – I know it inside out – and I thought to myself that there's absolutely no need to change one thing. That's how sublime it is. I liken it to *Serenade* – imagine changing *Serenade*! Criminal! And I feel the same way about this. That is not to say I just dusted it off! Because pace has a lot to do with it – musicality, how fast things go – so you have to stage it and arrange it without tampering with the text, as they say.

BR: Let's talk a little bit about what we're seeing tonight. We have some great Balanchine lined up.

Martins: You have *Square Dance*, which is fantastic, to the music of Vivaldi and Corelli. You have *La Valse*, which is one of the greatest scores ever for ballet. And then *Tarantella*, which is another tribute to Bournonville. And *Symphony in Three Movements*. It doesn't get better than that.

BR: How would you describe *La Valse*? If somebody hasn't seen it before, how do you prepare somebody for watching that?

Martins: Well, it's one of his most dramatic ballets. Romantic? It's Romantic plus, because there's a little darkness in there, too. It's tremendously wonderful. I made this program tonight to show the breadth of Balanchine's oeuvre.

BR: Balanchine always worked with the assumption that if his ballets survived at all – and maybe he was speaking with false modesty when he said that – that they would change



Sterling Hyltin and Joaquin De Luz in *La Sylphide*. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

a great deal over the years as new dancers took up the choreography, and of course some of those changes he made himself. How do you balance the trust placed in NYCB for maintaining and preserving the Balanchine repertory, and the Robbins repertory, against the certainty that new dancers, and new musicians, and new audiences are going to come along, and that changes are going to happen? In thirty-plus years, have you seen these ballets change, and are you happy with the ways they are changing?

Martins: You know, it's going to sound a little bit like a cliché, perhaps, but I do think

these ballets are danced better now than in my generation. Because the dancers are essentially better than we were. I mean, it's really that simple.

BR: Their technical skills . . .

Martins: Yes, and their understanding. It's just – it's like the Olympics. I hate to compare it to sports, but my favorite subject is tennis. I was a big Björn Borg fan, but he would have no chance against Federer today. And so it may be a slightly odd explanation, but dancers are like that. The people you will see tonight on that stage – I know them all because I know what I have – and there's no way we [in the

past] could have done that. That's how good they are. But the texts of the ballets, the choreography, remains the same.

BR: So let's take somebody like Sara Mearns, who's dancing *La Valse* tonight. She has a real

dramatic flair. What kinds of things does she bring to that ballet that make it look a little different from when, say, Patty McBride was doing it, or even more recently when Janie Taylor was doing it?



Sara Mearns in *La Valse*. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

Martins: Well, she brings her own personality to it. She's an artist. She doesn't change the choreography, but she imbues it with her personality, and her feeling and verve, and her take on the role, which is warranted. It's what keeps these ballets alive, when new people come in and have a different take, although not changing it.

BR: Do you think the kinds of things she does with *La Valse* – [to audience] *La Valse* is a romantic drama in which a young woman at her first ball abandons her beloved and waltzes with a mysterious stranger, and you can guess who that stranger turns out to be – Justin Peck! But since Mearns has such a dramatic flair, do you think that Balanchine, watching her, would have said, "Too much! Don't act so much!" or do you think he would have let her have her head with it because her technique is so great?

Martins: You know, it's a good question, and obviously I can't answer it. But I will tell you one thing. I spent almost twenty years with him, and I rarely ever heard him say anything to anybody. He let us do what we did. And he freed us up. And as I said earlier, on rare occasions he would say, "What are you doing!" But I'm telling you, he let us be. That was perhaps one of his greatest gifts to us. He was not, as some perceptions had it, a dictator. Not at all. And as I said, only on rare occasions – and I usually was one of those who got it –

BR: Because he knew you could handle it?

Martins: No, it was, "Dear, where did you get that idea?" He would do this once in a while. Very rare. So there was room for interpretation.

BR: What about, let's say, *Tarantella*? When you look, say, at Joaquin De Luz and Tiler Peck, what are they bringing to this ballet that may be different from what, say, Eddie Villella and Patty McBride did? Or is it more or less the same?

Martins: I don't want to say "better," but they're very different. They're different. It's very hard to compare people with legends. Villella was the greatest thing then, but it's different times.

BR: One of the things we're also going to see this summer is the Saratoga premiere of one of your ballets, *Symphonic Dances*, to Rachmaninoff. Could you tell us a little bit about that ballet – where that's coming from, what it's like?

Martins: I did some dances some twenty years ago to music by Rachmaninoff. I love the music. It's a big score, it's a big ballet, it's a lot of people. I liked it when I looked at it on tape, and I thought maybe we should bring it back. And when you bring it back, you bring new people in there, and it has new life, new vitality; maybe it has new life and maybe not – we'll see.

BR: We already have the good news that next year Justin Peck will be choreographing a new work for us here. Any other surprises, or do we know nothing yet?

Martins: Well, the one thing I can reveal is that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was done here fifty years ago. It opened SPAC, so we're going to open with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I have asked my ballet mistress who's in charge of the children to take as many local kids as possible. I said, "If you have to spend a month, spend a month. We've got to get local kids."

BR: Could you just reflect a bit on your time here over the years? What has changed about Saratoga?

Martins: When I first came as an arrogant twenty-one-year-old from Denmark, I did not want to be in Saratoga. I wanted to be in the city – New York – and I thought, "Why are we here?" And now, of course, fast-forward. You can't get me out of here. I think it is the most beautiful place to have a summer home for our company. We are very, very lucky.

No other ballet company has a summer home – not ABT, not San Francisco, not The Royal Ballet, not the Paris Opera, not the Kirov, not the Bolshoi. But we have a summer home. Mr. B loved it, of course. I remember, toward the end of his life he lived ten minutes out of town, and he didn't want to come in to SPAC because he was a vain man and didn't want anyone to see him, so he made me go out and show him the casting. I kept him involved.





Tiler Peck in *Tarantella*. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, NYCB)

He said, "No, you run it. Just put anyone on-stage you want to look at." I said, "Mr. B, you should know who's dancing." He said, "Look, I'm trying to let go. I like to stay here and eat ice cream." He sat in his little house, ate ice cream, and watched television. So I did all the casting, and I did everything, and I showed him who dances, and whatever. But he loved it, and I love it, and more importantly, the dancers and the orchestra. I just walked into the backstage, and there were three young girls, nineteen years old, and I said to the three of them, "Do you love it here?" "What's not to love?" That's the feeling of everybody. We love it.

BR: A few questions from the audience?

Question: You said earlier that ballet dancers

of today are better technically and have more insight. How would you rate the choreographers since Mr. Balanchine, from then until now – including yourself, sir? [Laughter from audience.]

Martins: Well! That is such a tough question. I don't want to give you a glib answer. Anybody who compares themselves to Balanchine is a fool. It's like Mozart, right? Mozart or Bach. However, it doesn't mean that what came after Mozart and Bach didn't have validity, didn't have merit. There's been great music written after Mozart and Bach. Would I compare it to Mozart? Maybe not. Same with Mr. B.

Is anybody ever again going to do ballets like George Balanchine? Probably not. It does

not mean that ballet isn't alive. It doesn't mean that it doesn't talk to us today. It's different, and you can't compare it. It has its own merit and its own value. I believe ballet is alive and well.

Question: I just wanted to say that since you came on the scene, the men are dancing a lot more, and that's wonderful. They used to just show off the women, but now they're really dancing.

Martins: Well, you *should* show off the women!

Question: But you see how wonderful the men are, and I swear it started with you.

Martins: That's kind, thank you. Mr. B said to me once – you may have heard this story, but I doubt it – we had lunch, and this is one of my favorite stories. He said to me, "One day, dear, we don't want to have people like you any more."

I said, "Do you care to explain that?" He said, "You see, you're an import. I like you, you're very nice, you can do things, you can dance very nice, you can partner, and you're tall and not so bad looking. Everything is right, but we want Americans. So one day, when I'm long gone, you're going to have to produce American dancers."

And I went, "Okay." And then, of course, he passed away, and fifteen years ago I started a boys class at the School of American Ballet. It was tuition-free – exactly fifteen years ago – and it was packed. Lots of minorities. It was fantastic, it was really groundbreaking, and guess who was one of the first ones in that class, as a twelve-year-old? Amar Ramasar. Yes, and many others. I guess I recognized that men – we need equal time in here, equal time. So I've done my share to uphold our sex. But we're still supporting the ladies – that's our primary function!

BR: And of course Justin Peck's new ballet [*Rödē,ō: Four Dance Episodes*] uses fifteen men and one woman.

Martins: You know, he came to me a year

ago and said to me, "What would you think if I did a ballet with fifteen boys and one girl?" And I said, "Uh . . . it sounds like a gimmick. Can you explain to me why?" And he explained it to me, and I said to him, "If you want to do that with all the boys, and with one girl, good luck." You have to experiment – people have to experiment, so it's great.

Question: We love NYCB's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but we saw Ashton's with *The Royal*, and in terms of the comment you made a few minutes ago about trying to find local kids, they had the Brooklyn Children's Choir singing in the orchestra, and I wonder if that was something you would ever consider for NYCB's production?

Martins: We do have a live women's chorus for the production, but not children. On that, I would have to call Balanchine collect.

Question: What advice would you give someone looking to enter the dance world today, as far as choreography, dancing, or dance therapy?

Martins: You enter the dance world when you're seven years old. In order for you to have a career as a dancer, you have to be seven years old. Six! We just lowered the age for the School of American Ballet to six from eight. How do you advise a six-year-old? You don't. What you try to do is make it enticing for them, to introduce them to a world that has the beauty of music and movement.

The world of ballet is so beautiful, it can be so enticing, but it's also so competitive, and short, and it can be brutal physically, and even mentally it can be tough. You have to be ready as a professional as a seventeen-year-old. That's really tough.

I think the best advice is you'd better love it, because if you don't, then you're not going to make it. You have to have your heart in it, and many other things. But I think you can apply that to anything in life, not just dancing. If you don't have your heart in it, how are you going to succeed?