

Summer 2016

# Ballet Review



From the Summer 2016 issue of *Ballet Review*

**A Conversation with Jamie Rae Walker  
by Michael Popkin**



**Ballet Review 44.2  
Summer 2016**

Editor and Designer:  
Marvin Hoshino

Managing Editor:  
Roberta Hellman

Senior Editor:  
Don Daniels

Associate Editors:  
Joel Lobenthal  
Larry Kaplan  
Alice Helpner

Webmaster:  
David S. Weiss

Copy Editor:  
Naomi Mindlin

Photographers:  
Tom Brazil  
Costas

Associates:  
Peter Anastos  
Robert Greskovic  
George Jackson  
Elizabeth Kendall  
Paul Parish  
Nancy Reynolds  
James Sutton  
David Vaughan  
Edward Willinger  
Sarah C. Woodcock



- 4 Violette Verdy – Clement Crisp
- 5 Toronto – Gary Smith
- 6 Tokyo – Eva Shan Chou
- 8 Jacob's Pillow – Christine Temin
- 10 London – Nina Alovert
- 12 Boston – Jeffrey Gantz
- 13 New York – Eva Shan Chou
- 15 Hong Kong – Joseph Houseal
- 16 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 19 Williamstown, MA – Joel Lobenthal
- 21 Bhutan – Karen Greenspan
- 22 Paris – Vincent Le Baron
- 24 Miami – Michael Langlois
- 25 New York – Harris Green
- 26 San Francisco – Rachel Howard
- 28 Washington, DC – Lisa Traiger

David Mead

- 30 Peter Wright on Staging the Classics

Susanna Sloat

- 40 Garth Fagan

Michael Langlois

- 44 A Conversation with Gillian Murphy

Susanna Sloat

- 57 José Limón Festival

**Michael Popkin**

- 62 A Conversation with Jamie Rae Walker**

Karen Greenspan

- 70 A Path to Extreme Dance

Carla DeFord

- 76 A Conversation with Ashley Ellis

Darrell Wilkins

- 81 Cross-Genre

Don Daniels

- 92 Fragment and Vessel:  
A Fractured *Sylphide*

Horst Koegler

- 106 A Conversation with Hans van Manen

- 121 London Reporter – Clement Crisp

- 126 Music on Disc – George Dorris

Cover photograph from Stuttgart Ballet: Hans van Manen's *Variations for Two Couples* with Anna Osadcenko and Jason Reilly.



Jamie Rae Walker in *Airs*. (Photo: Francisco Graciano, Paul Taylor Dance Company)

# A Conversation with Jamie Rae Walker

Michael Popkin

BR: I understand you started out at Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet and then went to Miami City Ballet before joining Taylor. Can you talk about your classical training and your transition to modern dance?

Jamie Rae Walker: It was so organic for me that I didn't even think about them as different. I did Graham as I was growing up and my first mentor was a Graham dancer who did ballet as well. Her name was Sharon Filone. She has passed away but danced for Martha and also for Pauline Koner before teaching. So I started out taking both ballet and Graham at once. I knew my path was to be a ballet dancer at that time, even though I loved working on the Graham technique.

BR: How old were you then?

Walker: I was probably around eight to ten when I started with Sharon and I took it very seriously. Without a doubt ballet had been calling me from the minute I was born. I just knew I was going to be a dancer. Sharon's best friend was Melinda Howe, who taught at Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, and that's where it got stronger. I was going to summer workshops and there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to do ballet professionally.

The day that I graduated from Carlyle High School I was on a flight to Miami to join the company there. But over the years I had had opportunities to work on Paul Taylor's dances at summer intensives, and then in Miami it started growing on me. We did *Company B*, *Esplanade*, *Arden Court*, *Funny Papers*, and *Aureole*, dancing them over and over again, so in my seven years I got to do many performances of Paul's ballets.

BR: How did your career develop in Miami?

Walker: I was doing soloist roles by the time I left. A couple of principal roles but those weren't as frequent. But I was definitely on a

path and that was my future, as far as I thought. Until there was a moment when I knew that something was changing. Edward Villella knew it as well.

I loved the jazzy, contemporary Balanchine ballets that I was doing – and those were the dances – jazzier ballets like *Who Cares?* – where I mostly had the soloist or principal roles. But we did a lot of Balanchine and even in his more classical work like *Concerto Barocco* and *Serenade*, I felt myself gravitating toward wanting to explore bigger, fuller movement. And that's not something you can really do when you're in a corps de ballet. Meanwhile, the more we did Taylor, the more I felt myself getting hooked. Still I didn't see it coming until literally there was just a complete light-bulb moment in my heart.

BR: Are you talking about an actual time and place?

Walker: Yes, it was really specific. Sandy Stone, who was a dancer at Taylor, was staging *Arden Court* on us. After a performance one night I came off stage and as I ran past her something made me turn around, and I just wanted to tell her how much it meant to me to do his work – to be there and do this dance. It was this perfect marriage of music and movement that I had never felt quite that much before. So I went up to her and started to speak, but my tears came out. I couldn't even talk and she just hugged me and said, "I know, I understand." She said, "there's nothing" – just basically "follow your heart." She knew what was happening.

BR: What did you do?

Walker: At first I just thought of Paul and looked at the next year's Miami repertory. And I thought, "Well, maybe I'll get another Taylor to dance," but there wasn't anything on the list. I was looking forward so much to whatever that Taylor work might be, but there was not a single one when I looked through the following season. That's when I knew instantly that I had to come to New York. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I wanted to take class at the school and explore modern dance.



Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet's *Nutcracker*. (Photo: courtesy of Jamie Rae Walker)

Then by coincidence three weeks later, Paul Taylor came to Miami City Ballet to visit us. He was coming to Miami to get an award and he visited his old buddy Edward Villella at the studio and watched us dance *Arden Court*.

By then I had already given my notice and so Edward was very helpful and told him, "This is my girl; she's moving on. She's going to New York. Keep your eye on her for me." And Paul told me, "I certainly will. I don't have any openings in my company right now, but I'm going to keep my eye on you." And over the first years I was here he did that. I knew we had a special connection. He would watch me in class and pull me aside and make sure that I was staying around.

Finally there was a moment when a dancer left Taylor 2 and he called me to join that company. I was dancing for Twyla Tharp, who had started *Movin' Out*, her Broadway show. We were actually about a month out from going to Broadway with it when I got the phone call and there was no question in my mind. It was a dream come true and I feel that working with

Paul is the best possible place to be in the dance world.

BR: Besides gravitating toward bigger movement with Taylor, you also got to do a very wide range of material. Between *Company B* with its Andrews Sisters score and *Gossamer Gallants* where you play a whacky bug, and *Speaking in Tongues* or the very recent *Death and the Damsel*, there's a huge variety, from comedy to drama and everything in between. Almost all of it is also very different from what you'd been exposed to in ballet. Was the transition something you consciously worked on?

Walker: No, it's a funny thing. While I don't know if it's a good tie-in or not, all of the dancers here know me really well, and sometimes they compare me to Lucille Ball, because aside from being a comedienne she was also a great actress, and the things I do here – the physical interpretations – just come naturally to me. I'm very interested in body language and, watching movies and watching dance, I am observant about what makes people honest in an acting way and whether I believe it



or not. I observe that a lot. I also think that because I'm small, maybe I just found it challenging to do all this.

Still, another big thing is investing truth in what I'm doing. To let my reactions onstage be very real is probably the most important, because finding my truth onstage is what being a creative artist is all about for me. Releasing myself into those moments is the most satisfying way for me to live. I love Paul's

dances and I want to do them for real because in them I'm not only a dancer; I want to be an artist. It makes me feel creative to define different aspects of something, to grow into something, to experiment and change it. And I guess I have to channel my energy somewhere [laughing] and I think it's my best outlet.

BR: But how do you work? Do you have a specific way you repeat in preparing a role?

Walker: No, in the process of acting I gen-



*Arden Court* with Michael Novak. (Photo: Paul B. Goode, PTDC)

erally don't have a method. The challenge is to be honest and genuinely invested in my imagery of the character. Paul has given me so many different costumes and roles, and so many very strange parts over the years, that it forces me to be real and just to throw myself with abandon into the character completely – otherwise it wouldn't be believable. And that's just something that I find really fun to do anyway. I think that he knows that, plus that it's also really nice for me to not be put into any one particular mold, so that's part of the fun about it, too.

BR: Well this is a good place to ask you specifically about *Death and the Damsel*. It was the leading role in the premiere dance at Lincoln Center last winter. To begin with, how much time did you have to work on it?

Walker: Paul took his usual six-week creative process. He gives that amount of time for each dance and I think he took almost the entire amount here and finished it in the fifth week. He'll work a couple of days, maybe three days a week, for one or two hours a day in the studio. And during the last few years he works a little more efficiently and gets a lot done while he's feeling vibrant during the day. But it took five weeks to do it. Still, he also changed the ending right after he saw the first performance.

BR: What was the process like?

Walker: Well the process for this one was very close to my heart and special for my connection with Paul. Because we've had a long relationship and he's known me for quite a long time. On the first day we began making it he said, "I haven't really made anything special for you yet, have I?" And then he said, "It's about time I did," and that was a beautiful thing. So I feel really blessed that he [pauses, thinking again]... that he thought about what he was going to do and that this one was specifically for me. And it felt special that way from the very minute it started.

He was incredibly hands on and specific and created all of my dancing. He thought it through, and it was almost like we were reading each other's minds. So it felt amazing to

have this process with him that was really one-on-one. Because often times – usually – when a dance is made around more than one person or with a central group of dancers, there's usually more of that. It's very rare for it to be one person that a dance is about and from that point of view the process was the best I've ever had with him.

BR: Did he give you a scenario at the start of the work?

Walker: There was no scenario he explained for this one, but he works differently for every dance. This one in particular was special for how we didn't count the music. Paul was making material that felt like it was coming out of my own head and we were just making it musical. So that part of it was very unusual and different than almost any other process I've been involved with. Here it was just that he simply trusted me to make it work with the music.

BR: The critics were rather confused by it. The dance starts with you dreamy in bed and this crazy group of tough people is behind you, and then it looked like you got gang-raped. Some of the reviews thought it was about the sex trade.

Walker: Oh yes, I think that he loves to keep people guessing [laughing] and maybe even that if people are talking about it, he's done something right. This was something that was a big conversation piece, controversial. There were so many interesting things I heard about it afterward. What people thought it was about. It was fascinating to me. So they'd ask me and I'd say that "that was even better than what I thought it was" [laughing].

It was creative what people were coming up with. He did not give us a story per se and all the way up until the very last section definitely also kept us guessing about what the ending was going to be. He kept kind of winking around the subject but was very specific in saying it's death *and* the damsel. So it isn't handed to you but makes you wonder what's going to happen next. I also think that the ambiguity was set up by the theatrical sets and the beginning, with me in front not knowing



*Death and the Damsel* with Michael Trusnovec. (Photo: Paul B. Goode, PTDC)

what's going on behind me. As a result, it's almost as if it's happening in my mind. And then the action proceeds to my being manipulated by death, but I face it in the end. I nearly get the chills thinking about it.

BR: Well does death then appear in different guises? You struggle with a character played by Michael Trusnovec and then another played by Laura Halzack. Do they both represent death?

Walker: Death is all of them really and I'm fighting with them as if life is always a struggle with death. Just sustaining one's self and being alive every day is a balancing act. But

that's also the unknown part of this dance. That whole opening scene is a big question mark, and I left it as a question mark for myself so that I knew how to navigate through the simplicity of being in the front of the stage and not seeing what was going on behind me.

I wasn't the person you were necessarily focusing on at that moment and I needed to have some depth – some part of me lost in that moment. And maybe even how I felt about my character changed over time, but definitely I left it as unknown whether it was happening in my mind or I'm dreaming. I think I'm awake





*Beloved Renegade* with Jamie Rae Walker, Aileen Roehl, and Michelle Fleet. (Photo: Paul B. Goode, PTDC)

but not for sure and it's not very certain that I'm awake until the very end, and even then I leave it open.

BR: You said Paul changed the end after the first performance. Can you tell me about that?

Walker: We had just finished a full dress rehearsal of several other dances at the theater when our stage manager called us to meet Paul onstage in rehearsal clothes. That evening's performance would be the second time the piece was being danced, but he was determined to make a change. And the new ending was much darker than before.

When we performed it the first night, death retreated from me at the conclusion, as if I had conquered it. And those were all the other dancers, so that it basically looked like I'd fought and conquered them by kicking, punching, and shoving. It was very physical – a question of physically triumphing over death. Or life, depression, or mental illness –

anything that could be going on. There were so many possibilities that I heard afterward as to what I could represent. People identified with it so passionately, as to what they thought it was, that I definitely don't want to take that away.

The new ending Paul changed it to, however, made it look like *they* could be consuming me in the end. He kept everything the same up until the last few seconds, including my triumphantly defeating them. But then, right at the end, as they seem to have been conquered, he decided to have them turn right back and slowly start coming back toward me until the blackout, indicating to the audience that death might very likely consume me. It was subtle in movement but also musically far more dramatic than the original ending. Ultimately that changed the entire dance for me and my reaction onstage was real. So I could be going back to sleep and this was all a dream,

or I never wake up, depending on how you interpret it. *Terrifying*.

BR: What did he say about it?

Walker: He didn't say anything. He just changed it.

BR: You teach modern dance at Ballet Academy East. What is it like to teach to ballet students? How do you do it?

Walker: My goal is to help them combine their ballet technique with a structured modern dance style. So I like them to use a base of ballet because that way they can still use their ballet training to find the right muscles from the inside out and not feel like they're trying to copy me. I want them to understand that they don't need to let go of their ballet technique and their muscles in order to make this style happen in their bodies.

I tie it all together and make the connection for them right away that their technique is important and that they can use combinations that include their base, allowing them freedom from the waist up, more so than from the waist down. So that's the starting point – that they can actually dance stronger based in the center, because they are so used to starting at the bottom. Then when they come to the center they feel like they can just let it all go, especially in a modern dance class anyway. And I think it's important to make that connection for them that it's coming from the floor up. Actually that's also something I remember hearing from Edward Villella and that I'm sure he heard from Stanley [Williams].

BR: Funny you should mention Stanley Williams in connection to this, because pushing to the floor and developing a strong and deep plié is certainly a hallmark of Danish training.

Walker: Well it's a trend in fact – maybe not consciously – but I'm finding that one of the things I feel is important for me and other modern dance teachers to emphasize right

now is using the floor to dance with weight. And I think what people are slowly becoming aware of is that modern dance classes are essential for a ballet dancer.

BR: But it's not anti-ballet is it? I mean it's not ballet goes up and modern dance goes down, or anything like that.

Walker: Not at all; I think it's a marriage really. It's really important to have an understanding of both, and I found the more I was doing modern, the stronger my feet became and the more control I had in pointe shoes. Had I known how to use the floor back then to the extent that I do now, it would have changed my dancing that much sooner.

Having this experience of over twenty years of dancing professionally, I feel like I can influence young dancers to see that I'm still dancing, and that they can use this information now that I had to learn over time. I love sharing that so much. Little things like going through their feet more, using their plié, and knowing how to release into things with a bit more ease and efficiency even with their ballet movement.

BR: Finally, has the change over to Paul Taylor's American Modern Dance from the good old Paul Taylor Dance Company made things any different for you at the dancer level?

Walker: It's still the Paul Taylor Dance Company within that. We are sixteen very tight family members – the company, the work, touring, and all that – so we are still the Paul Taylor Dance Company within Paul Taylor's American Modern Dance. For right now it's still an experimental time as to how we're working with Paul but also with other choreographers. We're still figuring it out.

BR: But it will be a big difference when other choreographers make work on the company.

Walker: Yes. That has started now with Larry Keigwin, and it's already been fun.