

DANCEVIEW

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF DANCE

VOL. 30, No. 4 AUTUMN 2013



T
H
E

D
I
A
G
H
I
L
E
V

E
X
H
I
B
I
T

DANCEVIEW

VOLUME 30, NUMBER 4 AUTUMN 2013

Editor Etcetera:

Alexandra Tomalonis

Editorial Advisors:

Robert Greskovic

George Jackson

New York Correspondents:

Mary Cargill

Marina Harss

Gay Morris

Carol Pardo

Michael Popkin

Tom Phillips

Leigh Witchel

San Francisco Correspondent:

Rita Felciano

London Correspondent:

Jane Simpson

European Correspondents:

Marc Haegeman

Alexander Meinertz

Photographers:

Costas

Marc Haegeman

DanceView is published quarterly by Alexandra Tomalonis. Writers and photographers retain copyright of their original material.

Address all correspondence to:

P.O. Box 34435,

Martin Luther King Station, Washington, D.C. 20043.

Annual subscription rates (4 issues) are: USA: \$30 (individual), \$50 (libraries); Canada: \$35.00 (ind.), \$55 (lib); Europe, Africa and the Middle East: (sent air mail): \$45 (ind.), \$65 (lib); Asia and Australia: \$50 (ind); \$70 (lib)

Front cover:

Boris M. Frödman-Cluzel; Adolph Bolm as the Polovtsian Chief from Prince Igor, 1909; bronze; V&A, London

Back cover:

Auguste Bert; Vaslav Nijinsky as the Golden Slave from Scheherazade, 1910; gelatin silver print; V&A, London, Gift of Jean Hugo. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Gay Morris

ABT's New Hit:

Alexei Ratmansky's *Shostakovich Trilogy*

3

George Jackson

Putting Sets, Costumes and Concepts on Display

The National Gallery of Art's Diaghilev Exhibit

10

Mary Cargill

An Interview with American Ballet Theatre's

Paloma Herrera

20

Helene Kaplan

Pacific Northwest Ballet Turns 40!

A review of its 40th Anniversary Season

25

Marina Harss

Letter from New York

Dance Heginbotham, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre,

A Dancer's Dream, Drive East, Erasing Borders, and

Rama Vaidyanathan

31

Jane Simpson

Royal Ballet's *Don Quixote*, Boston Ballet, and

the Ashton Symposium

36

Rita Felciano

Paris Opera Ballet, Festival del Sole, Bandaloop, San

Francisco Dance Film Festival, dawsondancesf, Bodytraffic

41

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

DANCE HEGINBOTHAM, ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE, A DANCER'S DREAM, DRIVE EAST, ERASING BORDERS, AND RAMA VAIDYANATHAN

BY MARINA HARSS

The sultry summer of 2013 will not go down in the annals of dance history as a vintage season for dance in New York. In fact, there was very little dancing to be seen once American Ballet Theatre packed up its new, generic production of *Le Corsaire* and went on the road. (For the record the older one, the one with the silly cartoon costumes and storybook shipwreck, was much more fun. At least it knew it was silly.) No dance was included in the main programming of the Lincoln Center Festival, nor was there any at the Mostly Mozart Festival. What few dance performances there were consisted of free outdoor shows at SummerStage (in Central Park) and at the Damrosch bandshell (at Lincoln Center). I caught only one of the latter, by **Dance Heginbotham** (Aug. 8), part of the Lincoln Center Out of Doors series. The program was very similar to the one performed last year at Jacob's Pillow. My impressions were largely the same: Heginbotham, recently of the Mark Morris Dance Group, is an ingenious, charming, and wry dancemaker with lots of ideas. He borrows, cleverly, from vaudeville, Broadway, jazz, and ballet and his dances are lively, super-tight, and full of humor. But he has a penchant for cutesiness – big eyes, o-shaped mouths – that is augmented by his musical choices, which, so far, range from Raymond Scott's upbeat cartoon jazz to bubbly nineties electronica by Aphex Twin. The dances were clever and enjoyable the first time around, less so a year later. Luckily, Heginbotham will be taking on a meatier challenge this fall at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (in late October), where the ensemble will present the première of a dance inspired by Picabia's

Dadaist ballet of 1924 for the Ballets Suédois, *Relâche*.

A high point of the spring/summer season was a short run by **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre** at the Koch Theatre, the company's first appearance at Lincoln Center in thirteen years (June 12-16). The run began shortly after New York City Ballet closed for the summer. (Since New York City Opera left the Koch two years ago, it has become an increasingly important venue for dance.) It was heartening to see such a large, enthusiastic audience. If, as one assumes, the company was testing the viability of a regular Lincoln Center season, the results were surely favorable. This despite the fact that the two programs were not terribly adventurous: most of the pieces were recycled from the month-long City Center run. There was Robert Battle's clever, articulate male solo *Takademe* (1999) a cheeky riff on the intricate rhythms of *kathak*. And Garth Fagan's somewhat dated *From Before* (1978), an ensemble work performed in colored unitards, which combines low-to-the ground crouches reminiscent of certain forms of West African dance with the fluid upper bodies and coolness of modern dance. The dancers tore their way through the pseudo-sexy gyrations of Jiri Kylian's *Petite Mort* (1991) – a work as silly as it is pretentious – set to bits of Mozart piano concerti. The men played around with rapiers while the women glided in and out of sculptural gowns. When they eventually paired off in heavy-handed duets, there were lots of splayed limbs suggesting acrobatic, and utterly joyless, sexual encounters. (*Petite Mort* is part of Robert Battle's campaign to add range to the repertory.) What a relief, then, to see Ailey's *Revelations*.



Dance Heginbotham's Twin; Photo Liza Voll; Courtesy of Jacob's Pillow Dance.

The one new work, *Four Corners*, was a commission from Ronald K. Brown, a choreographer with a long history with the company. His fluid, multi-dimensional, full-bodied style – now *this* is sexy! – suits the dancers beautifully. There is something intensely seductive, also, about the way Brown moves groups of dancers across the stage, and how these groups constantly and effortlessly reconfigure in myriad ways. Patterns ebb and flow with the same organic quality of a breeze playing with a field of wheat. The designs seem to overflow beyond the stage and into the wings, and beyond the theatre to the world at large. And what a sense of pacing; his formations never stagnate or become stale. The dancers have multiple identities, as members of a group and as free agents; one can never predict what they will do next, whether they will peel off from a group and go their own way, or join a new cluster that crosses their path. In his hands, dancing is like breathing.

Brown's movement vocabulary, which draws on West African and American urban dance styles, is equally infectious. The whole body dances: feet, pelvis, knees, shoulders and especially the back. I'm always struck, too, by the elasticity and sweep of the movements for the dancers' arms, which open outward like wings as the torso undulates. (This comes from African dance.) The rhythm breathes. The dancers are as three-dimensional and pulsing with life when

they turn away from us (or from the side) as when they face forward. Their knees are bent and their feet glide, almost as if they moved on a cushion of air. The movements are simultaneously grounded and light. His dances awaken the dancer in all of us.

I'm less moved by the underlying themes of his work. *Four Corners*, like many of his dances, has a spiritual dimension. According to the company materials, it depicts "spiritual seekers amid four angels standing on the corners of the earth." The music is a collage, opening with a pulsating song by the hip-hop/soul/jazz singer songwriter Carl Hancock Rux, then moving on to a blues section, and culminating in a rhythmic lullaby (*Da Na Ma*) by the north-African Afropop singer Yakoub. The costumes are vaguely African-inspired, with wild prints and loose fabrics. But as I watch *Four Corners*, the spiritual message escapes me entirely; Brown's dances are more compelling as pure movement than as mystical offerings. On the other hand, it is arguable that the quasi-religious nature of the work is part of the reason why the dancers seem so natural, so uninhibited and unencumbered, freed from the need to project their own personalities or show off. In Brown's work, the Ailey dancers become part of a human collective. So if the religious message is the price, I'll take it along with the rest.

**

Later in the month (June 27-29), the **New York Philharmonic** presented *A Dancer's Dream*, a collaboration between the orchestra, the production firm Giants are Small, and the choreographer Karole Armitage. The mixed media event featured three dancers: Sara Mearns and Amar Ramasar of New York City Ballet and Abbey Roesner, of Armitage Dance! The countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and bass-baritone Eric Owens played smaller mime roles. A small army of puppeteers and cameramen – filming the live video feed – completed the cast. Essentially, the evening consisted of the layering of various elements – film, dance, puppetry – over two Stravinsky ballets, *Le Baiser de la Fée* and *Petrouchka*. To tie the two pieces together, the team came up with a story: a girl is bewitched by the world of the stage and is magically transformed into a ballerina. As the orchestra began to play *Baiser de la Fée*, Mearns, seated in the audience, slowly stood and began to walk toward the stage, as if drawn by an ineluctable force. Once there, she delighted in the magic world that surrounded her: the music, the puppets and fantasy toyland – chalets! toboggans! – created by Giants Are Small.

Then, during a short *entr'acte*, two pianists played the impressionist four-hand piece *Neige*, by Louis Durey. Mearns changed into a frilly pink tutu, and became the ballerina doll from *Petrouchka*. Then the orchestra played *Petrouchka*.

From a theatrical point of view, the evening was a bit of a mess. It was almost impossible to focus on the music of *Baiser* with all the business going on onstage. It's a delicate, subtle piece, a real musical fairy-tale interwoven with references to *Sleeping Beauty*. (Stravinsky composed *Baiser* shortly after orchestrating *Sleeping Beauty* for Diaghilev.) The production company Giants are Small is known for its work with puppets, and there were puppets of every kind: paper puppets, tiny wooden puppets, life-size puppets, as well as miniature mountains, trains, clouds, farm animals. Cameras zoomed in and out, projecting images onto a large screen above the stage. It was difficult to keep track of what was real and what was illusion. All this activity took place in a shallow strip in front of the orchestra, leaving very little space for Sara Mearns to move around. Back and forth she went, spinning and leaping and launching herself into powerful, yearning



Sara Mearns, with Alan Gilbert behind her, in *A Dancer's Dream*. Photo: Chris Lee.

arabesques. (The lack of space is even more noticeable with a powerhouse dancer like Mearns.) Armitage's choreography was completely uninspired, but it must be said that there was little she could have done under the circumstances. This was followed by a tormented passage of partnering, in which Mearns's character was tempted by the promise of love, in the form of Amar Ramasar, who performed valiantly in a thankless role. Eventually she chose art over love (or perhaps the choice was made for her). Narrative inconsistencies aside, the dance and the concept merely eclipsed the intricacies of the music.

Then, after the transformation, came *Petrouchka*. Here, the visual complement worked in tandem with the music. Boots stomped, tiny onion domes danced, a violinist juggled colored scarves. And it must be said that *Petrouchka*, with its wild energy, can survive just about anything. The orchestra-members danced in place, stood, changed seats, and acted out little vignettes (all captured by the cameras and projected overhead). Alan Gilbert, the conductor, left the podium and commanded his baton from afar, with the help of a system of pulleys. Costanzo and Owens appeared in pre-recorded video as the Moor and the lovelorn Petrouchka, miming their roles. (When Owens played

with his coconut, a sign was held up with the word "Orientalism!" just to show we were all in on the joke.) Mearns skittered about on pointe as the ballerina doll. Ramasar, who seemed to be having twice as much fun as everyone else, handled puppets, wrestled a man in a bear suit, and played air-balalaika. It was all great fun. But truth be told, Mearns' talents were wasted. She should be dancing, not running around like Alice in Wonderland. And frankly, the underlying idea of *A Dancer's Dream* – that choosing to dance is equivalent to being turned into a puppet – is almost offensive. The New York Philharmonic proved its point that classical music does not have to be enjoyed in reverent silence. But as a concept, *A Dancer's Dream* was a dud.

August brought two festivals of Indian dance, **Drive East!** (at La MaMa, August 19-25) and **Erasing Borders**, the latter of which was part of Battery Dance's outdoor Downtown Dance Festival (August 15). Both featured an extraordinary young *bharatanatyam* dancer, **Rama Vaidyanathan**. At the *en plein air* performance, in the dappled sunlight under the trees of Battery Park, she performed two short solos, revealing a light, sharp, surprisingly staccato style. The first was an evocation of the strutting of a peacock, full of



A Dancer's Dream: A puppet of Petrouchka by Giants are Small. Photo: Chris Lee.



Rama Vaidyanathan in Mad and Divine. Photo: Andy Chang.

The first half of the evening was dedicated to the story of the milk-maid Janabhai, who served her Lord Vishnu with a devotion born of simplicity. Here, Vaidyanathan dazzled with her mime. She performed with an almost folk-art quality, direct and un-exalted. She invited the audience into her world. In one memorable scene, she mimed an episode in which Janabhai's mother-in-law served the girl a plateful of rice, under which was hidden a large stone. Vaidyanathan's face molded itself into the old woman's crocodile smile; then she embodied the daughter-in-law's humility. Then, she showed the girl's surprise at discovering the ruse. Her eyes flashed with anger. It was like watching a movie, with all the characters. Later, Vaidyanathan depicted Janabhai's vision in the forest; her eyes quivered as she slowly opened her delicate, lotus-like fingers.

In the second half, devoted to the story of the Kashmiri saint Lal Ded (sung in Kashmiri by the bright-voiced Ramya Sundaresan Kapadia), Vaidyanathan's style changed. Her movements and presentation became pared-down and unembellished. She shed the brightly-colored silks of *bharatanatyam* for a plain white belted tunic

and details for the fingers and face. In the second, *Raas Lila*, Vaidyanathan embodied Krishna with a group of *gopis*, or milkmaids. Here, Vaidyanathan's striking dramatic gifts came to the fore. She is less goddess-like than dancers like Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy of Nrityagram, more direct and down-to-earth. Her eyes, especially, seem to sparkle with laughter. (She is a very beautiful woman, compact, with a perfect round face and huge eyes.) A few days later, at La MaMa, she applied her talent for mimicry and characterization to an evening-length work, *Mad and Divine*, that explored the lives of two female mystics. The two figures, Janabhai and Lal Ded, come from different traditions and regions, Maharashtra and Kashmir. The act of combining them in a single program is in itself radical and new in the context of Indian classical dance, which tends to be very pure. Vaidyanathan is considered an important innovator among the new generation of classical Indian dancers.

and trousers. Her thick, long hair was loose around her shoulders, and she wore almost no makeup. She became a different artist. Here, Vaidyanathan created her own vocabulary, less sensual and more severe, with elements of yoga and martial arts. With her delicate fingers, she spun filaments in the air. There were also passages of beaten footwork. These, however, exposed one weakness, a slight rhythmic imprecision. Of the two sections, this was the more innovative, and perhaps for that very reason, the most flawed. Vaidyanathan had less tradition to rely on. And, in light of the spartan qualities of Lal Ded – who gave up material life and wandered naked, covered only by her hair – Vaidyanathan denied herself the use of her greatest gift, the liveliness of her characterizations. But still, these are only slight quibbles. She is clearly an important artist with a hunger to explore new ground. It was an extraordinary evening of dance. I'm eager to see what she comes up with next.

