



Hang time: NYCB's Woody Whelan and Niles Martins in Balanchine's *Naisff Divertimento*

Gardening

By Deborah Jowitz
New York City Ballet
The Balanchine Celebration
At New York State Theater
May 4 through June 27

American Ballet Theatre
At Metropolitan Opera House
May 3 through June 12

One of the joys of the New York City Ballet's Balanchine Celebration is, of course, the staggering array of performances shined up by coaching, devotion, and what must be a nonstop adrenaline high on the part of the gallant dancers. But the Festival is also framed to bring out the historian-sleuth in the spectator. I'm not just talking about how delightful it is to have Balanchine's *Symphonic Concerto* danced by students of the School of American Ballet, as it was at its premiere in 1945, or to see something closer to the 1928 *Apollo* than the Balanchine-edited version now in the repertory. The revelations come also from the approximate grouping of works by date of composition.

I can understand why Balanchine in his old age found *Apollo's* opening scene embarrassing. But Leo's labor pains (the talented Anna Druyan isn't terribly convincing) as well as the swaddled Apollo's silent howls and tentative first steps deepen our sense of the god's (or the choreographer's) journey from innocence to full power. In the context of the whole ballet, certain moments become immensely poignant: the chosen Muse, Terpsichore, infuses the god with creative life by the touch of her finger; Apollo, tired by his responsibilities, drops his head into the three Muses' waiting hands; yoked for the first time, the young Muses fairly drag their

master along; then, radiating harmony and docility, they follow him up the steps, but possible, stairway to glory.

Niles Martins' sweetness and coyness help make Apollo seem very young. I like the way he dances the role, minding only that he can be reticent about stretching out in space; at times his steps give the impression of covering too little ground. His Muses, Darré Kistler, Judith Fugate, and Wendy Whelan, are full of life and spirit.

The hero of *Prodigal Son* (made in 1929, a year after *Apollo*) is also young, even babyish, and also yells silently (Robert La Fosse plays him with a fine blend of boyish brashness and vulnerability). Watching the ballet 20 minutes after *Apollo* ends, I imagine it also affirming, because for what is Balanchine's take on vice but a messy orgy of Dionysian modernism, with creepy tableaux of buggy, angular men and their bitch goddess (Hélène Alexandrou) being deceptively tender? Returning brooded to his family, the repentant hero set being taken into the embrace of tradition?

It's easy to get excited by cross-over movements. The Muses bend sideways from their line in different directions, causing their arms raised overhead in concert to flower into a bouquet; the image is parred in *Serenade* (1935) by a bevy of women. Because the next performance I saw began with *Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 2* (1941), I was less inspired to ponder *Serenade* in relation to other early Balanchine ballets with mysterious, fateful images (the 1932 *Conflow* reconstructed by the Joffrey, for example) than to view it as one of Balanchine's abstract musings on 19th-century story ballets. The women in *Serenade*, rushing in flocks, circling in

pairs with arms wrapped around one another's waist, kneeling and opening their arms in frosty patterns, bring fleeting visions of Willis to mind. While in the Tchaikovsky work, as homage to Petipa once titled *Ballet Imperial*, the courtly atmosphere, the brooding hero with his chains of constricting handmaids, the elusive ballerina, the hedges of women between which she vanishes all hint in formal and dourly original ways at *The Sleeping Beauty*. In Petipa's ballet, the 16-year-old heroine's arrival is anticipated by a flurry among courtiers; in Balanchine's *Tchaikovsky*, before the ballerina makes her first entrance, men and women walk or leap in concentric circles around an empty spot, as if carving an imaginary frame for her. Kyra Nichols, partnered by Lindsay Fischer, is wonderful: her cascaded shiver of back hops on pointe, her crescentos or disintegrated circles of chainé turns have a limpid, almost careless elegance—precision and strength taken for granted, unstressed.

Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 2 begins with bowing. It's almost a joke when the curtain goes up on the *Hailff Divertimento* (1947, newly restored via dancers' memories) and four couples in practice clothes are cocooning the same bow. But the chamber ballet, like Alexei Haimoff's music, is wry and crisp, any ceremonialness something of a facetious joke. Niles Martins bows even though he has no one to bow to, and after everyone has repeated the whole set of opening moves, he straightens up to find that Woody Whelan has bowed in to be his girl. You almost expect a double take. The ballerina's solo is oddly slow and thin, but the diet is a beauty—the strutting and reclining in his en-

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Beauty Is Beauty, Truth Is Truth

By Elizabeth Zimmer

Urban Bush Women
At The Kitchen
April 29 through May 9

The Parsons
Dance Company
At Joyce Theater
May 4 through 9

Janezella Willis Jo Zollar and David Parsons both grew up in Kansas City, but there all resemblance ends. Zollar is an African American priest, a young matriarch whose clan increases everywhere she goes; she's a spellbinder who sees all the resources of diasporic black tradition to transform and seek, to imbue as with rhythms and visions, to share her joy and her pain.

David Parsons is younger, pale, and fair; a Paul Taylor alumna whose beauty is part of his currency, and who creates dances designed to display virtuosity, to recall the Kantian equation of truth and beauty that makes most of us blink. If muscular beauty is truth, these dancers tip the scales of justice, but if you seek an intelligible connection to wisdom, vision, history, and the future when you enter the theater better to seek out Zollar and the Urban Bush Women.

The two choreographers recently showed new work and old on neighboring Chelsea stages. Parsons offered the premiere of *Shobana*, a clear homage to his mentor that recycles the leaps and bounds, the oddly angled extremities and human cargo-flings that make Taylor to generations of audiences. The men are bare-chested, the women in floppy little pastel playsuits. Parsons partners Victoria Landell, a sturdy person with the muscular definition of a bodybuilder; Christopher Kirby hosts partner Patricia Kenny to his shoulders and wears her like a helmet. The ensemble—which also includes Gail Gilbert, Alexander Kachuck, Elizabeth Koppes, and Jaime Martinez—is always in control, a relaxing circumstance for some audiences.

The new *Riff* introduced an element of chance as characterist Tony Scott, a bearded Shakespearian figure, loomed in the dark, a male charmer conjuring each of the company's men to dance for him. No mere accompanist, Scott interacted physically with the dancers, who limbered under his stick. Parsons's 1991 *Reflections of Four*, for the ensemble's women, was more composed, offering each a brief solo to crackle notes and then a quartet of bonded movement to Mozart.

The program closed with *Caught*, the choreographer's signature work, in which a strobe light helps him create the illusion of walking on air, and Nascipone, a dancer, Latin-flavored suite of dances for the company that deals in torque, momentum, and girl toying. Paul Taylor is obviously under Parsons's skin. Spending an evening with his troupe, as if reading a glossy magazine, totally engrossing, one moment, forgotten the next.

An evening with the Urban

Bush Women has the immediacy and resonance of a gospel service. All the music is live (and you sometimes have to wait for the musicians). Zollar and her band of passionate young performers forge their art from the material of their everyday lives and the lives of their ancestors, from the religious rituals and street games of generations of African Americans. Parsons and his people want to make you happy; Zollar and hers want to make you understand. The UBW offered two programs, a nighttime bill including two works in progress, and a Sunday matinee that enfolded dancers from around the city in *I Don't Know*. But *I Been Told* (You Keep On Dancing) and *Never Grow Old*, a work based on street dance forms and playground chants.

Life-Dance III, *The Empress* (*Womb Wars*) is something of a departure for Zollar, a dramatic monologue by candlelight in which she speaks in her own voice, telling stories of her own birth and that of her daughter, the child she gave up for adoption 23 years ago. These tales emerge from a feminist consciousness shaped by generations of the systematic devaluation of women, by cultures in which the birth of a daughter is greeted with dismay or worse. They are set on, under, and at a red table, winding around a series of phone conversations with a friend who needs an abortion; Zollar acknowledges that the embryo is a spirit whose "right to be here" must be weighed against a woman's right "to help it leave." Her text is poetic as well as confession, a powerful testament juxtaposed against a dance by a naked woman in obvious pain, accompanied on drums by Junior "Gabe" Wedderburn.

Nightright *Dragnet*, also candidly, is more intensely musical, featuring Ancient Vibrations,

a percussion ensemble playing Wedderburn's score, and a vocal track composed by the company that includes traditional songs from the Revival, Kumina, and Rastafarian cultures. It is also intensely private, a ritual designed to invoke a sacred presence. Its intent is not to please the audience, but to be worthy of intervention by the gods. When her ensemble—Terri Coussar, Maia Claire Garrison, Christine King, Treva Offutt, E. Gaynell Sherrod, and Valerie Wimbourne—dances, Zollar takes a graceful place in the back row, letting the others shine.

The really interesting thing about the two UBW performances I saw was the audience, full of African Americans who responded out loud, punctuating the testimony of Zollar and her troupe. Hardly passive consumers, they (and soon enough the rest of us) were involved in a fortifying process, witness to transformation.

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Dance

After another circular film (an upside-down city scene) Fleming reappears in coat and tie, standing perfectly still, on her head. She strides purposefully forward, looking a bit demented, picks up a metal rod and spins it rapidly to form an apparent sphere. Later we see her as a vague white shape beside a crescent-shaped pool. She stretches out to become a river nymph, perhaps this time an Ingres. She stands up, a bare twig in each hand, her mouth in an agonized O—surely this is Daphne, turning into a tree to escape the attentions of Apollo. Then, laying aside the sticks, she plays in the water luxuriantly, looking at her reflection—a female Narcissus? It's delightful to watch, although long; eventually Narcissus does come to seem a bit, well, narcissistic.

Near the end, Fleming is attached to a huge cloth wing that she waves about in flamboyant patterns, swirling like Loïe Fuller in blue light. The last section is more puzzling; she is curled up on a platform above the pool, engaged in complex writhings, apparently both mother and child in one. The cycle is complete. ■

ZIMMER

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Sunday's show was lighter in spirit, a jam session for the UBW and other performers including tap legend C. Scoby Stroman doing his sand dance, singer Jeanne Lee, the Ring-a-Belles (a troupe of female Morris Dancers), and three women exhibiting different styles of movement: a body builder, a go-go dancer, and a traditional African dancer. Interspersed with their turns were the several sections of Zollar's *Keep On Dancing*

choreography, derived from double dutch, stepping, and the unison chants that keep African American oral tradition alive on present-day streets. Her 1989 work demonstrates that dancing is of, for, and by the people; hauled out of our seats to join the performers on stage, we found it a most natural place to be. ■

JOWITT

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brace, or gently pawing the floor behind her with one soft foot. Later, they don't so much embrace as stretch their arms past one another, she walking in place as if the two of them have gotten hung up on each other. The ballet also features small, bright, diverse solos for the other four men and women. The lady leaves as unceremoniously as she came; her partner bows again, looks up, and whsst! Life in America.

An equal male-female population like this seems to have been a rarity for Balanchine during the 1930s and 1940s. In the Tchaikovsky, the ensemble's six men work double time to partner 12 women. *Symphonie Concertante* has two principal women, a group of six, a corps of 16, and one man. In another one-man ballet, the 1941 *Concerto Barocco*, Balanchine matched two ballerinas, then one ballerina and her partner, to the leading instruments of Bach's Double Violin Concerto. Here, in like fashion, he allies two women (SAB baby ballerinas Tara Keim and Rachel Rutherford) to Mozart's violin and viola, and their delicate question and answer and close-around-one-another banter recall the first movement of that ballet, only the designs are more intricate. In fact, the whole