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| DANCE |

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Slowly Altering Expectations

It would be nice to tie up 2010 with some sweeping theme. But the truth is that when you are in the woods, all you can see is the trees. Except of course when someone else paints a picture of your particular forest, and you don't recognize it. Jennifer Homans's "Apollo's Angels" has gotten a lot of attention for its declaration that ballet is dying, but critics have no doubt been muttering this darkly since Louis XIV was the Sun King. Ms. Homans's cutoff point is Balanchine's death, but almost 30 years later you can finally see that a new generation has brought a resolute contemporaneity to the form, offering us new ways to look at and think about ballet. Let's start the best-of list there.

1. New York City Ballet's "Architecture of Dance" festival in the spring brought together a dazzling array of top choreographers — Alexei Ratmansky, Christopher Wheeldon, Wayne McGregor and Benjamin Millepied among them — as well as décor and sets by Santiago Calatrava. One new ballet is a gamble for any company; seven is insanity. Amazingly at least two were exceptional. Mr. Ratmansky's "Namouna" was a deliriously odd and brilliant homage to balletic tradition; Mr. Mc-

Gregor's "Outlier" a foray into a world of fragmented, highly coordinated movement, all angular peaks and organic curves. Both gave us an entire world and a physical inventiveness that kept the viewer on the edge of the seat. Who said ballet was dead?

2. In a different dance universe, Nora Chipaumire and Fred Bendongué presented a duo, "Silence and Dreams," on a mixed bill at the 92nd Street Y in March. Austere yet fantastical, the piece showed these two intent performers adrift in a flower-strewn landscape that was the stuff of poetry and dreams.

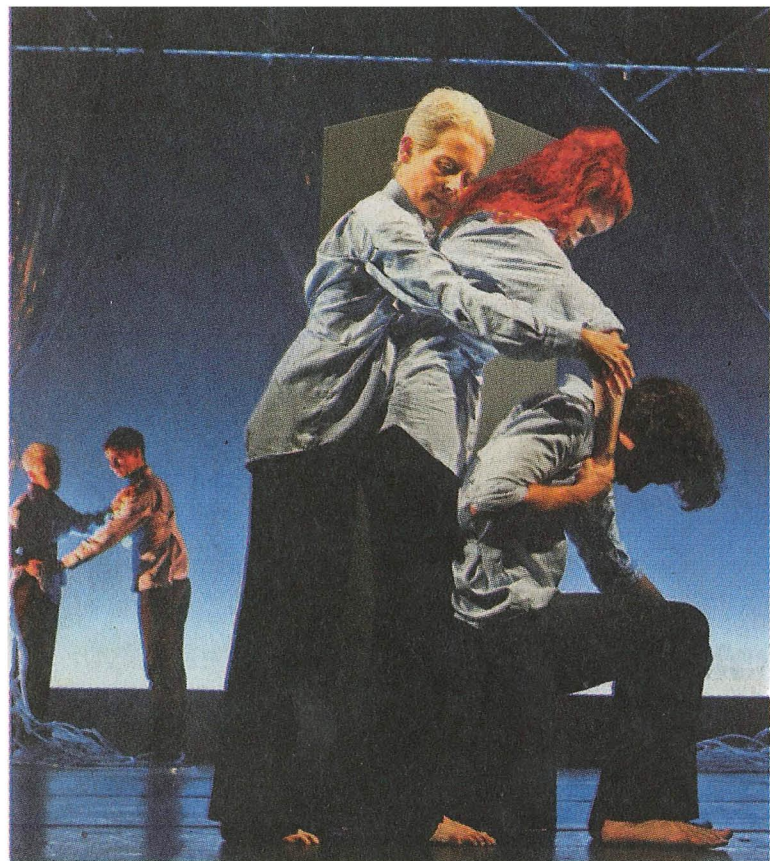
3. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music's DanceAfrica festival in May, the Illstyle & Peace Productions breaking ensemble from Philadelphia showed off some of the most thrilling dancing of the year. Like great ballet virtuosos, its members offer rigor and precision, breathtaking challenges to gravity and physical limits, and a vision of human possibility.

4. Ballet virtuosos who did just that were Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev in the Bolshoi Ballet's production of "Don Quixote" at the Royal Opera House in London

in August. The ballet might be from the 19th century, but these dancers, with their lucent technique and flesh-and-blood vitality, were firmly 21st-century creatures.

5. Pina Bausch died in 2009, but her Tanztheater Wuppertal is still in peak form. In September Bausch's "Vollmond" came to the Brooklyn Academy of Music; in October her company was at Sadler's Wells in London with "Iphigenie auf Tauris," set to the Gluck opera with a full orchestra, choir and solo singers in place. Bausch's talent for conjuring drama through movement is never more apparent than in her pure-dance pieces, and the rarity of this one made it a moment to treasure.

6. The choreographer Jonah Bokaer also turned to Greek myth in his "Anchises," presented at the Abrons Arts Center in November. There were many fine things about "Anchises," but Mr. Bokaer's masterstroke was the casting of Valda Setterfield, who, in her 70s, is perhaps a greater artist than ever. Her ability to hold a moment onstage is breathtaking; her theatrical instincts ineffable. Dance lives through its interpreters, and her mesmerizing presence makes this utterly clear.



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From left, Valda Setterfield, Jonah Bokaer, Meg Harper, Catherine Miller and James McGinn in "Anchises."