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City Ballet's September Start

SHOT IN THE ARM FOR DANCE LOVERS

Bill T. Jones and Garth Fagan bring home their bacon

By Robert Gottlieb

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DANCE

Ballet in September used to be dead as a dodo. Now, with City Ballet's ingenious decision to give us four weeks of repertory in the early fall, having cut down on the relentlessly long spring season when dancers, critics and audiences droop on the vine, we wake up after the dog days of August with something to look at. It's unfortunate that this became possible only when the financially floundering City Opera was forced to decamp from the David H. Koch Theater. (To be fair, this is one thing we can't blame on David H. Koch and his politics.) But at least the opera's loss is dance's gain.

It seems as if the box office results have justified the change—there were well-stuffed houses at most of the performances I attended—although attendance was undoubtedly enhanced by all the hype for the Paul McCartney/Peter Martins debacle, *Ocean's Kingdom*, with the nonfail *Swan Lake* (also Martins) to further pack them in. Good marketing, bad ballet.

But there were artistic gains to offset the deplorable gimmickry of *Ocean's Kingdom*. The company as a whole is looking strong. With most of the dead wood of recent years given their obligatory farewell galas and gone with the wind, the younger stars are stepping up to the important roles and frequently making strong impressions.

The single best performance I witnessed was Sterling Hyltin's in the "Rubies" section of *Jewels*. Ms. Hyltin is an odd one. Although she has a perfect small-scale body, a large-scale technique and unaffected charm, and has been given many opportunities, she's never really claimed a significant part of the repertory. So her triumph in "Rubies" is particularly gratifying. Ms. Hyltin's quicksilver, fearless attack is right for Stravinsky—she's already been effective in *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* and *Jeu de cartes*—and she's even improved as Terpsichore in Stravinsky's *Apollo*, a role she lacks the essential amplitude for, as she does for *Swan Lake*. Her current performance in "Rubies," with its blend of delicacy and brio, is just about the most effective since the great original, Patricia McBride.

Andrew Veyette—along with Robert Fairchild one of the company's two most talented young male stars—made his "Rubies" debut opposite her, and the combination worked. He still has to lay on some extra macho swagger, but all the elements are there, and the two of them grasp that "Rubies" is a ballet about the two of them in their gleeful competition and complicity. Meanwhile, the towering Teresa Reichlen, as the biggest ruby of them all, dominates the scene without hogging it—it's her best role, and she's stunning in it, not only a sight for disbelieving eyes but a technical marvel: she sails through the three often-fatal arabesques penchées without even noticing that they're impossible. To see a "Rubies" so close in spirit and execution to what Balanchine intended was badly needed balm.

"Emeralds," that exquisite essence of French glamour and piquancy, had its ups and downs. Abi Stafford, for once, was relaxed and imaginative in the great Violette Verdy role; Ashley Boudier was faithful to it, but she's an impulsive dancer, not a languorous one. Jenifer Ringer was stiff and brittle as the second ballerina, though slightly less so in her second performance, but I'm afraid she now detracts from the famous "Emeralds" perfume.

As for the climactic "Diamonds," Wendy Whelan is past it (not that she ever was it). Maria Kowroski has somehow channeled Suzanne Farrell in this role, though she lacks Ms. Farrell's technical strength and imagination. (Who doesn't?) What Ms. Kowroski is is beautiful, in the Farrell manner and with the Farrell grandeur. Everybody's favorite, Sara Mearns, is lovely at every moment, with her gorgeous back and her creamy movement. (From the start, "creamy" has been the critics' adjective of choice to describe her.) Her dancing is so full-out, so engaged, that she's irresistible, yet I still don't find her definitive in many roles. "Diamonds" was one of our last chances to applaud Charles Askegard, who retired on the final day of the season. To the end he was a generous and super-adroit partner, always giving everything he had. His technique had begun to erode, but never his commitment. And he could be funny and sly—as he was in the Peter Martins sailor role in *Union Jack*. Best of all, at least for a number of the ballerinas, he was tall! Mr. Askegard is one of old-timers we'll miss.

Another debut: Robert Fairchild in *Apollo*. When it was over, I could only think, "What a nice guy!" But *Apollo* isn't a

nice guy, he's a god coming into his own. With nice girl Hyltin opposite him as Terpsichore, it was a little like watching two adorable kids at the junior hop. But Mr. Fairchild has all the equipment (even if he isn't a natural *Apollo* like Chase Finlay), and he will ripen in the role just as Balanchine's *Apollo* is meant to ripen. Best by far in the cast was Tiler Peck as Polyhymnia, but whenever she's on stage she's almost invariably the best. She can do everything, and with a deeper musicality than any of the other City Ballet women. She almost succeeded in making Christopher Wheeldon's programmatic *Mercurial Manoeuvres*—and its unyielding Shostakovich score—seem appealing. Why the company doesn't exploit her talents more fully is one of the mysteries.

Other young dancers are proving what an amazing job the School of American Ballet is doing in providing the company with waves of fresh talent. The unfolding drama of New York City Ballet continues. The new dancers are on the whole more technically polished and secure than those of the past, even if they generally have less dance expressivity. This is also true, of course, of movie stars, musical-comedy stars,

opera stars: the great ones of the past were bigger than life. (Ms. Farrell was the last.) Today, we settle for—we seem to prefer—lifelike.

In the past several weeks two old-timers of the modern dance world have been showing off their wares. Both Bill T. Jones and Garth Fagan have had big Broadway triumphs—*Fela!* for Mr. Jones, *The Lion King* for Mr. Fagan. Both companies draw strength from their veteran dancers. And neither choreographer works on the highest level. But there the resemblances stop. Mr. Jones has courted, or at least welcomed, notoriety and hype—he's unmistakably ambitious; Mr. Fagan just seems to go about his business, making dances, touring and turning up at the Joyce every couple of years.

Mr. Jones has been the pretentious one, but he seems to have calmed down. His recent season was dominated by rather bland duets, which all too frequently add up to athletic doodling. Moments of stillness are inevitably interrupted by eruptions of movement. There's synchronized jumping, there's slo-mo, there's gasping and grunting. The best of the pieces on show was *Blauvelt Mountain (A Fiction)*, whatever that means, which Mr. Jones made with his late partner, Arnie Zanes, more than 30 years ago. Paul Matteson and Jennifer Nugent are an earnest young couple who walk a lot, run around a lot, fight, spoon and bat single words back and forth: "Milk," "Cow," "Farm." They're very touching and convincing, helped by being dressed in the casual elegance that Liz Prince's costumes always provide.

Mr. Jones also revived *Continuous Replay*, which he made with Mr. Zanes in 1977. This is the one in which the whole company turns up nude, a fairly depressing sight. Gradually they get dressed, proving yet again that dancers look better with their clothes on.

Mr. Fagan's work is wholly admirable if not wholly interesting. His strongest point is his company—these are uniformly energized and exciting dancers. Most amazing is Norwood Pennewell, who's worked with Mr. Fagan since 1978 and is as assured, relaxed and commanding as he's always been. How does he do it? Tall, long limbed, with a becoming little mustache, he's a paragon, reigning over his flock through his inborn authority—an example to us all. His is a natural Apollonian presence, whereas the new male star, the Haitian Vitolio Jeune, is Dionysian to the max. He's shorter, compacter, and explosive. He just can't help coiling a little tighter, jumping a little higher, staying aloft a little longer. Mr. Pennewell is a cool cat, Mr. Jeune is a hot cat. And a star presence—he's even appeared on *So You Think You Can Dance*. The women are terrific, too—especially the contained but deeply expressive Nicolette Depass, who's been around only since the mid-'90s.

Mr. Fagan's new piece, *Madiba*, is an abstract celebration or meditation on Nelson Mandela. To not much purpose: It's sincere, but that's not enough. (Mr. Pennewell has a new piece, too—*Liminal Flux*—very much in the Fagan tradition.) Most of the music Mr. Fagan favors is of the portentous-jazz variety (*Madiba* is danced to Abdullah Ibrahim). His choreography isn't very memorable, but that's O.K.—it isn't concepty, it isn't vulgar, and it shows off his admirable and exhilarating dancers.

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