

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kevin Burdette

Espying Balletic Heights

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

I couldn't pass up the opportunity to see classic works by classy companies at ballet-drenched Lincoln Center last week. I was in the city for research at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, adjacent to the Metropolitan Opera House. The library's closing at 6 p.m. gave me just enough time to grab a bite of dinner and take my seat at the Met for American Ballet Theatre (ABT) on Tuesday evening, May 27th, and at the David H. Koch Theater for New York City Ballet (NYCB) on Wednesday, May 28th. The opportunity afforded me a chance to see great dancers, in great companies, on great stages, dancing great works. Just do it!

And I did. Not a review of the performances, this essay is a reflection on the experience of being *there* and doing *that*.

The enormity of the red-carpeted Met lobby, its chandeliers glittering, its liveried ushers, its stunningly dressed (well, in some cases) patrons is delicious in itself. Looking straight out at the fountain on a late-spring evening, and at the hordes of people hanging out and criss-crossing the plaza, feels like an iconic New York experience. Finding my way to a high-up seat in the nearly-full house, I peered down at the far-off stage. Yet that stage seems vast—deep, wide, and well used for its nearly 50 years supporting dance and opera.

ABT performed its production of *La Bayadère*, with choreography by Natalia Makarova “after Marius Petipa” (his version premiered in 1877, St. Petersburg), and music by Ludwig Minkus, arranged for ABT by John Lanchbery. It's one of those evening-length dramatic narratives—exotic, fantastic, and a fine springboard for a range of virtuosity. This is evident in the solo roles of Nikiya, the temple dancer (danced by Gillian Murphy); Solor, a warrior (Denys Nedak, a guest artist from Ukraine); and Gamzatti, the Radjah's daughter (Isabella Boylston). These dancers tell their stories of crossed and hopeless love, displaying their emotional maelstroms, while dancing precise, difficult, exposed choreography where multiple tours, jumps to knee-landings, extended balances, and precise allegro are just the start of the challenges. Also virtuosic is the corps de ballet, which, in this work especially, must be so precise that we believe we are in a land beyond time when the almost endless line of ghostly Shades dance their almost endless arabesques penchées, snaking across the

stage. And finally, in the third act, the Bronze Idol (Zhiyao Zhang) comes alive in front of the “temple” set and electrifies the audience with a lightning-fast, almost mechanical jumping solo that left me breathless in its precision and super-human demands. It was fun to see a big, utterly fantastic, and not-too-emotionally-draining story that let me enjoy Petipa/Makarova’s attention to detail and to the revelation of the ballet vocabulary as crystallized by its Franco-Russian standard-bearers.

Perpendicular to the Met is the Koch Theater—less extravagant, even a bit dowdy in its austerity. The view of the plaza is less expansive, but the stage feels even vaster than the Met’s, perhaps because I sat somewhat closer in the also almost-full audience. This place houses the company that George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein built, weaving together the classical formulas of Petipa with the modernist experimentation of the Ballets Russes to yield the astonishing New York City Ballet. The program was so, so different from *Bayadère*, unfolding that same evening, again, next door. At the Koch, four works, all from the mid-twentieth-century to the present, highlighted where ballet has been since the Petipa era.

Two Balanchine works—*Concerto Barocco* (music by J.S. Bach) and *Who Cares?* (music by George Gershwin, arranged by Hershy Kay) abandoned sets and exotic costumes for the simplicity of bodies perfectly and visibly in motion on an unencumbered stage. The quality of the music in each case was exactly met, if not extended, by the choreography and the crystal-clear performances. But most delicious of all, to me, was Jerome Robbins’ *Other Dances*, a pas de deux created in 1976, originally for Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov, for a gala fundraiser to support the Dance Division of the New York Public Library. For that reason, too, I loved it! But its elegance—the grand piano, played live on stage (music by Frédéric Chopin, played by Cameron Grant), the two dancers (Tiler Peck and Gonzalo Garcia), in simple blue costumes—was entrancing. Here were two people dancing, beautifully, in a friendly, supportive, responsive, and sometimes surprising way as they held hands, danced apart or together, acknowledged the musician, encompassed the audience with their glances and gestures. Rapturous! These “other” dances, it seemed, could have gone on to infinity and not run out of quiet inventiveness. The evening also featured Benjamin Millepied’s 2013 work, *Neverwhere* (music by Nico Muhly), with striking lighting (by Mark Stanley) and rather noisily flapping plastic costumes (by Iris van Herpen and Mark Happel). It was tight, angular, dramatic, and mysterious. The men danced barefoot, the women in black point-shoe boots. Very hot! It added a darkly futuristic spice that the cherry-on-top *Who Cares?* softened, as a top-notch dessert should.

I loved them both—ABT of historical reconceptions and full-length dramas, and NYCB of sharp, tight one-acts. If I had one ticket-price only to spend, I’d probably opt for the latter, for work that grew up when I did, but I am so glad I splurged for both nights and saw ballet’s past, present, and (I hope) future surging across Lincoln Center’s stages.

American Ballet Theatre at the Metropolitan Opera House, Tuesday, May 27, 2014,
<http://www.abt.org/performances/orderinformation.asp>

New York City Ballet at the David H. Koch Theater, Wednesday, May 28, 2014, <http://www.nycballet.com/Season-Tickets/default.aspx>

By Lynn Matluck Brooks
June 2, 2014