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REVIEW

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American Ballet Theatre

*Balanchine - Tchaikovsky Spectacular:
'Allegro Brillante',
'Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux',
'Mozartiana', 'Theme and Variations'*

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New York, Metropolitan Opera House

by Eric Taub



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I spent a lot of time thinking about feet at American Ballet Theatre's Balanchine/Tchaikovsky program at the Met last night. Oh, and also about Balanchine and Tchaikovsky. It's nice to see ABT back, and back doing real choreography to real music (they'll make up for it next week with *Le Corsaire*).

First up were *Allegro Brillante*, and then *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*. Oddly enough, ABT still spells the composer's name "Tchaikovsky," rather than City Ballet's fussier, if perhaps more correct, "Tschaikovsky." Set to what would have been T(s)chaikovsky's Third Piano Concerto, *Allegro* looks very much like Ballet Imperial/Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 2's baby sister. Lots of charging about, melodramatic chaine turns, and a ballerina-worshipping role that's not much short of Ballet Imperial's among Balanchine's "Tchaikovsky gut-busters." When ABT staged Ballet Imperial a few years ago, Gillian Murphy just ate up the technical difficulties, letting out of her demure shell a fierce and

fearless, take-no-prisoners prima ballerina. I'd rather missed that gal, and was happy to see echoes of her as Murphy charged ahead. After all, it's supposed to be allegro. And brilliant. It was a treat seeing Murphy hop-scotching her way through Balanchine's tounge-twister footwork, or snapping smartly into a triple pirouette to be seamlessly collected by Ethan Stiefel, himself a bounder of great verve and brio, and quite oblivious to his reputation as an iffy partner. I particularly liked the way



he scooped up the not-insubstantial Murphy into a big shoulder-sit.

However invigorating a curtain-raiser Allegro might be (and City Ballet thinks so, too, as Wednesday night both ABT and NYCB will begin their respective programs with it), it was not quite all joy in Tchaikovskyville. As much as I love Murphy's fleetness and the bottomless well of power she can dip into in a split second (and her fierce auburn hair), she was a bit unfortunate at her extremities. I imagine her big smiles were meant to convey something of her ecstasy at mastering Balanchine's killer bout of ballerina-worship (or more likely to suck in enough air to match the ballet's killer pace), but at times I found myself thinking, "Who put the pebble in her toeshoes?" And about those toeshoes and feet: I've read up on Gaynor-Mindens, the controversial synthetic shoes of which Murphy was an early poster-girl, and supposedly they're available in varying degrees of stiffness. They don't have to be rock hard, as Murphy's appear to be. She seems hardly to roll through demi-pointe, but just blasts from flat foot to full pointe; it's like her feet are shiny pink on-off switches. Perhaps the stiffness of her Gaynors are also the cause of her never-quite-arched-enough feet. They're clearly a sturdy platform for Murphy's power, but they're not very pretty.

Overall, though, it was a winning show. David LaMarch kept ABT's orchestra blasting away at a brisker pace than was once ABT's norm for Balanchine, and the dancers Murphy, Stiefel, and four couples easily ate up the vastness of the Met's stage, so much deeper than the State Theater's. Indeed, the corps dancers were among ABT's strongest: Melanie Hamrick, Simone Messmer, Luciana Paris and Hee Seo, and Grant DeLong, Alexandre Hammoudi, Joseph Phillips and Eric Tamm.

Allegro ends with the danseur carrying off his ballerina in a high, dramatic lift, with one leg pointed to the heavens and her back practically draped over his shoulders, to the downstage right corner (where Balanchine was wont to observe his ballets). This is exactly how Tchaikovsky pas de Deux ends as well, and I thank ABT for making that association indelible in my mind. Tchai Pas is a famously fun bit of killer fluff, its iron armature happily disguised in flirty froufrou. As given by those two canny pros, Paloma Herrera and Marcelo Gomes, it was a little bravura masterpiece. I think Herrera's at her best when she can come to the theater, whip off a pas de deux, and head home before her attention wanders. I've often bemoaned how Balanchine's works cruelly uncover her iffy musicality, but not this night: her formidable technique was entirely at the service of her wit, and she dazzled.

As I've mentioned from time to time, Herrera's got the most beautiful feet in the business, and she uses them to devastating effect. All the delicacies I missed so in Murphy's footwork, Herrera displayed with dizzying abandon. Flexing, straightening, rolling through her toes, and ever-so-slightly over-arching as they bore her weight on pointe, Herrera's feet were as alive and breathing as Murphy's, encased in their Gaynors, weren't. When Herrera held a balance on pointe in fourth, it was as if she were presenting us with the crown jewels. Tchai Pas has a lot of tricky pointework that must look light, carefree and flirtatious; Herrera gave Balanchine's steps the ride of their lives. In one of her solos she does a simple releve on pointe while swinging her other leg into an attitude to the front, followed by a releve where the leg straightens to a high battement forward. Herrera turned this into a little symphony: her working foot, rolling into a prettily arched releve, was perfectly complemented by the curve of her sweetly presented working foot. These curves played against the rock-solid verticality of her balance, like a string pulling her upwards, and the soft, rising lilt of her arms. It was the kiss of spring becoming



summer. Gomes, by far the most interesting and versatile of ABT's male principals, was a bounding and turning ham sandwich, but his charcuterie was all for Herrera's delectation; he loves dancing for us, but even more, this night, for her.

Veronika Part also has gorgeous feet, at the ends of sculpturally recurved legs. Everything about Part's gorgeous; she's an oasis of lush. I remember when she'd dance Mozartiana five with ABT five or so years ago, not long after she joined the company, her performances were heartbreaking. She'd start out in the Preghiera showing a soul as big as Russia, but back then she seemed always to be dancing in pain, and the ballet's technical intricacies would eventually overwhelm her. For all her shortcomings, she had a great Mozartiana in her that would eventually fight its way out, I hoped. Well, Part has whipped herself into shape, become one of ABT's most interesting women (and, finally, a principal dancer), and that great Mozartiana has fought its way out, and taken off for Rio, as it wasn't at the Met last night. Part was indeed beautiful, but sadly presentational. A few days ago I'd heard some critic friends going on about Part's penchant for overacting. I felt badly hearing it, as I haven't seen Part overact; instead she's shown a charming, Mariinskyish reserve. And last night it wasn't so much that Part overacted as she slipped into the unfortunate Russian habit of finding familiar, if inappropriate, analogs for Balanchine's roles in the traditional repertory.

Such a mind-set has brought us the spectacle of three soubrettish Muses vying for Apollo's favors, and last night, Part's very Lilac Fairyish Preghiera. Part was lovely, strong and confident, lacking only a wand and a purple spotlight. But when one prays, one is not usually also the figure of authority, or so I've been told. Later, while the variations she traded with Maxim Beloserkovsky are supposed to be happy (after all, this is Balanchine's vision of heaven where, of course, one dances to Tchaikovsky), Part's sauciness was a bit unsettling. Black dress, saucy, flirty? She was doing Mercedes. Usually I try not to be so prescriptive about what Mozartiana "should" be, as I've found that ballerinas can paint this role with the surprising colors of their own essence, and I've seen it danced beautifully by dancers as disparate as Farrell, Nichols, Ananiashvili and even Miranda Weese. Part wasn't looking within herself, but was taking the easy, familiar way out; only by Julie Kent's have I been more disappointed by a Mozartiana.

That's not to say she didn't contribute a lot of beautiful dancing: she did. I remember a tiny little balance in arabesque like a gasp of surprise, or how she sank into a deep, elongated plie in fourth with her arms held high over her head, melting to the side in a stunning cambre. I suppose that made her grins and moues all the more disappointing. Indeed, before Part's return for the variations, I'd been admiring the clean and sober dancing of the four corps girls in the minuet. They'd lost the Regional Ballet Smile which plagued ABT's earlier Mozartianas; but, alas, Part found it.

Beloserkovsky's long legs looked fine indeed in his filigree solos, if perhaps a bit rushed in places, and he partnered Part well in adagios from which, it seemed, some of the trickier bits might've gotten too softened. Carlos Lopez pranced merrily in the Gigue; I suppose it's flogging a dead horse to observe that this shouldn't be a short-guy happy dance (Ulbricht at City Ballet is a worse offender). In this incarnation, Rouben Ter-Arutunian's funereal black costumes have acquired an unfortunate whiff of the crypt for the big and little girls, as faded, criss-cross gold trim on the bodices hints both at skeletal ribs and cloth that's been buried far too long in the dirt. Surely in Balanchine's heaven there are drycleaners?





Theme and Variations here danced by Sarah Lane and Herman Cornejo in 2005
© Rosalie O'Connor

Balanchine was famously fond of vulgarity, so perhaps he would've loved Michele Wiles. Actually, last night, in *Theme and Variations*, I loved her. She's toned down the more outrageous bits of her onstage persona (imagine, a night at the ballet where the cheesy smile was NOT Wiles'), and she is making smarter choices about when to try for the big balance/turn/trick, and when to let the moment slide gracefully past. She doesn't do the Russian Ballerina Princess thing in *Theme*; she's more of a leggy, healthy All-American cheerleader-in-a-tiara, and next to the even leggier David Hallberg, she looked like a million blonde dollars (Hallberg looks like a million blond kroner). She was a spinning demon in her tricky first solo with the ever-changing spots, bounding through ABT's Alonso pas de chats rather than NYCB's Kirkland gargouillades, but such are the joys of tradition. As always, Hallberg's own legs and feet seemed among the wonders of the world, and I particularly liked his tidiness in second solo, bringing his feet together cleanly in fifth between the rondes de jambes en l'air sautes, rather than the sloppy failli that's so popular now. Oh, and his double-tour/pirouettes were also great fun, as well as that one enormous sissonne in the final polonaise. While Wiles once would've been outrageously flirtatious in the long adagio, last night she was simply happy. Despite my occasional gripes about the evening, so was I.

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