

JUNE 2009

REVIEW

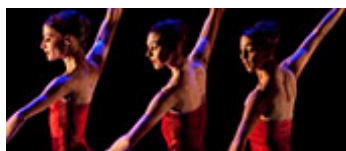
## ballet.magazine

*Boston Ballet*

*Ballets Russes: 'The Prodigal Son',  
'Le Spectre de la rose',  
'Afternoon of a Faun',  
'Le Sacre du Printemps'*

*May 2009  
Boston, Wang Theatre*

*by Carla DeFord*



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The “Ballet Russes” program at Boston Ballet struck me as a series of meditations on the primitive: how it flares up in the psyche and how it is integrated into civilization. “The Prodigal Son,” “Afternoon of a Faun,” “Le Spectre de la Rose,” and “Le Sacre du Printemps” all reflect, to some extent, on human instincts, and considering that these ballets (in their original form) were created at a time when Freud’s theory of the unconscious was taking hold, this orientation is not particularly surprising.

Although “The Prodigal Son” is based on the familiar parable of Luke 15:11-32, Balanchine’s version puts much more emphasis on the son’s debasement than does the scripture. The son, played by Jared Redick (who is retiring after this season) rebels against his father. Forsaking his family home, he falls in with a bunch of blackguards who introduce him to gluttony, drunkenness, and fighting, but it’s sex, in the form of the Siren, well danced by Kathleen Breen Combes, that really does him in. Redick gave the role his all and was affecting in some of the more dramatic moments. When the Siren did her introductory solo, however, he was seated upstage and watched her without reacting to her mesmerizing presence.

At the end, stripped of everything he owned, the son, like Lear on the heath, is reduced to “the thing itself.” He literally crawls back to his home, and as he approaches his father on his knees, he puts his hands behind his back as if he’s been handcuffed. When the Father finally extends his arms in forgiveness, the son



curls up in them, and the tableau is quite moving. In hindsight, however, I found the utter humiliation of the son disturbing. Jesus's goal in the parable is to encourage repentance, so he invokes not only the primitive desire for pleasures of the flesh but also the yearning for paternal love. Balanchine's focus is on the former much more than the latter. This leads me to wonder: could the son's return be a metaphor for Balanchine's view of the lowly dancer's relationship to the exalted choreographer? Now there's an unsettling thought.

In "Le Spectre de la Rose" the primitive force is the Spectre himself who appears to a young girl just returned from a ball. As the personification of a rose, the Spectre represents the girl's erotic desires, to which she awakens when the Spectre invites her to dance with him. I saw James Whiteside as the Spectre and Larissa Ponomarenko as the girl. They made a stunning couple: well matched technically and in terms of artistic maturity. The softness of Whiteside's port de bras joined with his prodigious leaping ability made him a near-perfect Spectre. When he and Ponomarenko went into the air together, it was breathtaking. Their performance led me to wonder whether this partnership might be, as the song says, the start of something big. One can only hope.

In "Afternoon of a Faun" the central character is half man and half animal, so he lives entirely by instinct. When confronted with a nymph who doffs her clothes to bathe, he's stunned by the apparition. Having been aroused by her, he climbs up on a rock, lies on the scarf she left behind, and satisfies his instinctual drive. It's all highly ritualized, with the faun and the maidens moving in poses that evoke ancient Greek urns or bas reliefs as well as Art Deco style. Altankhuyag Dugaraa as the faun gave an impressive performance. For a great faun, however, one must turn to Nureyev, who made the creature both animalistic and touching.



Jorma Elo's *Le Sacre du Printemps*  
© Rosalie O'Connor



The blockbuster of the evening was choreographer Jorma Elo's "Le Sacre du Printemps." With its set consisting of a line of fire, its sparkly red costumes, explosive Stravinsky score, and tale of a maiden chosen to die in an ancient Russian ritual, there was no dearth of primitive instincts on display. The men performed incredible athletic feats; Sabi Varga, as the maiden's lover, was

especially notable for his multiple pirouettes, and James Whiteside, having recovered from his exertions as the Spectre, did more spectacular leaping. Larissa Ponomarenko was the Chosen One and Yury Yanowsky her tormentor. For me, this is not an easy ballet to watch in any version, but Elo's was especially harrowing in that he had the sacrificial maiden nearly tortured to death at least six times. (I tried to keep count.) She was stabbed twice, smothered, throttled, had what looked like epileptic fits, and was lifted and carried off against her will. In the end, Elo allowed the maiden to survive while her tormentor was vanquished. Although I was relieved that the Chosen One escaped her doom, I wondered what that meant in terms of the ritual. If she was supposed to die for the good of the community, what would happen to the community if she survived?



Maybe there was a clue in the costumes: almost all the men were bare-chested and wore red satin pants; only the tormentor also sported a red sequined vest. At first he reminded me of the dapper Mr. Applegate in *Damn Yankees*; then I realized that if he'd had a top hat, he would have fit right into the finale of *A Chorus Line*. He certainly seemed to be the most devilish as well as the most aggressive person onstage, so in terms of both ritual and pure drama, perhaps his demise was sacrifice enough.

Be that as it may, I cannot conclude without recognizing the contribution made to this performance by the Boston Ballet Orchestra under the direction of Jonathan McPhee. The ability of the ensemble to show such mastery in playing Prokofiev, Weber, Debussy, and Stravinsky in a single program certainly confirmed its status as one of the great orchestras of the world. Bravo!

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