

APRIL 2009

REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**American Ballet Theatre**'Allegro Brillante', 'Pillar of Fire',
'Flames of Paris pdd', 'Brief Fling'**February 2009**Washington, Kennedy Center Opera House**by Oksana Khadarina*

© Gene Schiavone

[ABT 'Allegro Brillante' reviews](#)['Allegro Brillante' reviews](#)[ABT 'Pillar of Fire' reviews](#)['Pillar of Fire' reviews](#)[Murphy in ABT reviews](#)[Stearns in ABT reviews](#)[recent ABT reviews](#)[more Oksana Khadarina reviews](#)[Discuss this review](#)

(Open for at least 6 months)

No other choreographer in the modern ballet of the 20th century was able to convey real life drama through dance better than the British-born Antony Tudor.

A keen observer of human behavior, Tudor used the pure classical technique to express natural movements as well as emotions, introducing a psychological, introspective, dramatic style in ballet. In his work, he depicted the reality of life, presenting the emotional conflicts of his personages in a clear, expressive way, with a great sense of humanity and sensitivity. One of his most eminent ballet-dramas, *Pillar of Fire*, was presented by the American Ballet Theater as part of its mixed-bill program at the Kennedy Center Opera House in February.

This was Tudor's first work created in America, after the choreographer arrived from his native England. It was premiered by ABT (then Ballet Theater) in 1942 to a great acclaim and firmly established the reputation of Tudor as dramatic choreographer. The company revived the ballet last year to honor Tudor's centennial. The current

production was superbly staged by Amanda McKerrow and John Gardner, both of whom had the privilege of having worked with the late choreographer.

Pillar of Fire explores the themes of rejection and oppression, love and forgiveness. Set in a small, gloomy provincial town, it tells the story of Hagar, a sensitive young woman, who lives with her sisters - the Eldest Sister, an arrogant,



dispassionate spinster; and the Youngest Sister, a flirtatious and carefree social butterfly. Tormented by self-doubts, Hagar fears that the man she loves, The Friend, is more interested in her attractive younger sister. Terrified by the idea of becoming forever single like her Eldest Sister, Hagar is on the verge of emotional crisis, yet desperately trying to hide her loneliness, anguish and frustration. She feels rejected and mistreated by her siblings and desperately wishes to be loved. In a moment of despair, she gives herself to a complete stranger as if in a reckless attempt to change her destiny, only to find herself disgraced and outcast. The story ends happily, though, when Hagar finds solace in the gentle embrace of her true love, The Friend, who offers forgiveness, love and understanding.

In the beginning of the ballet, we see Hagar, dressed in an unattractive yellow gown, sitting on her porch alone. Quiet and sad, she seems lost in her thoughts. To convey her inner-struggle, she dances, stabbing the stage with sharp, pointed steps; freezing in sharp-edged arabesques; or whirling in explosive pirouettes. At times, her slim body suddenly collapses, as if of a piercing pain, making it almost impossible to see her face.

On opening night, Michele Wiles gave a subdued portrayal of the heroine - a technically strong performance, but I would have liked to see more dramatic power and physical intensity in her dancing.

Marcelo Gomes was quite effective as The Man from the House Opposite, who saw in Hagar an emotionally vulnerable woman and easy prey. Increasingly aware of her inner state, he deliberately exhibited his detachment and indifference. For him, it seemed there was no reason to make even a slightest effort to attract this plain-looking, susceptible girl. After their encounter in the House Opposite, he discarded her as if she was nothing. Distraught and humiliated, Hagar realized that her hope for love and happiness was lost forever, as was her innocence.

David Hallberg as the Friend danced magnificently. There was a sense of calmness and humility in his portrayal of the loyal man who rescued the emotionally crushed and disgraced heroine. He proved especially poignant in the final pas de deux with Hagar, where he confessed his love for her and asked her for trust and acceptance. Their final duet was utterly tender and undeniably compelling.

Maria Bystrova was the icy-cold and arrogant Eldest Sister, carrying herself with a chilling sense of pride and self-importance. And Marian Butler offered a convincing characterization of the insensitive and spoiled Younger Sister.

The company's premiere of George Balanchine's *Allegro Brillante* ravishly opened the evening. Created in 1956 with Maria Tallchief in the ballerina role, *Allegro Brillante* reflects the brilliance and intensity of its music – Tchaikovsky's single-movement Third Piano Concerto.

It's a dazzling piece for a leading couple and four supporting couples. In it, Balanchine expressed his passionate admiration and understanding of Tchaikovsky's music, translating its lyrical harmonies and vivid colorings through imaginative choreographic patterns and ingenious footwork. As such, *Allegro Brillante* is an inspiring essay on Russian classicism in music and dance.

In her assured and articulate performance of the ballerina role, Gillian Murphy sustained the dizzying tempo of the music, dancing with sparkling elegance and élan, meticulously executing every phrase and bringing an inescapable sense of glamour to the dance. She was fluently partnered by the ardent Cory Stearns. The



four-couple ensemble danced with dedication and joy, sailing through the increasingly elaborate movement passages. Despite a few uneven moments, they provided fine support for the primary dancers.



Gillian Murphy and Cory Stearns in *Allegro Brillante*
© Gene Schiavone

The piano solo by Barbara Bilach was fervent and expressive; and the Kennedy Center Opera House orchestra under the baton of David LaMarche played with rich sound and expansive lyricism.

Also on the evening's bill was a showcase of classical virtuosity, the flamboyant duet from Vasily Vainonen's 1932 four-act ballet *Flames of Paris*. It provided a perfect opportunity for ABT to show off the company's new soloist – 22-year-old Russian-born sensation Daniil Simkin, teamed with a lovely Sarah Lane.

Lightweight and agile, Simkin has amazing dexterity and flexibility. He proved a confident young artist with brilliant technical skills, dancing with exceptional fluency



and abandon, and pretty much stole the show with his incredibly daring leaps and turns in midair, which he executed so effortlessly and flawlessly that the audience literally exploded with enthusiastic cheers and bravos.

The company concluded the program with the high-spirited performance of Twyla Tharp's *Brief Fling* – a dynamic, humorous and sometimes perplexing tour-de-force with its title, costumes and music hinting at its Scottish themes.

The dance was premiered by ABT nearly 20 years ago and revived last year. Back in 1990, The New York Times' review described *Brief Fling* as “an admirably fierce and aggressive plunge into what a dance language can express within self-imposed limits.” Unfortunately, in my opinion, over two decades this ballet lost its original appeal and flavor. The nonstop and often repetitive choreography, with myriad hasty entries and exits, lacked a sense of purpose and looked rather dated. The outlandish and unattractive dance attire, designed by Isaac Mizrahi, and the ear-piercing recorded soundtrack blasting from the speakers didn't help to make the work any better.

The ballet's chief pleasure was to see Xiomara Reyes and Herman Cornejo as the leading duo. The couple navigated expertly through Tharp's challenging steps, rendering the propulsive drive of the dance with assurance and ease. The radiant Reyes lit the stage with her beautiful smile and Cornejo, who possesses a superlative technique, was in his top form. Misty Copeland, a fearless member of the dynamic modern-dance ensemble, was another standout.



[{top}](#) [Home](#) [Magazine](#) [Listings](#) [Update](#) [Links](#) [Contexts](#)

...apr09/ok_rev_abt_0209.htm

revised: 15 March 2009

Bruce Marriott [email](#), © all rights reserved, all wrongs denied. [credits](#)

written by Oksana Khadarina © [email](#)

design by [RED56](#)
