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Dodging the Footprints

Ballet dancers are seen as sort of . . . veal. Kept in little boxes, and told what to do and don't eat this and report to this mark on the floor and do these hard steps and never grow up. I'm against all of that. I want them, as individuals and very gifted artists, to bring all of that into play, instead of just following the painted footprints on the floor. That's not interesting.

—Mark Morris

WITH THIS TYPICALLY SALTY AND LOVING COMMENT for a TV Artists Profile, Mark Morris set a tone of idealism for San Francisco Ballet's festival of new works last spring. Morris, who's had a long association with the company, was one of ten choreographers commissioned to come up with a collective hurrah that would top off SFB's 75th anniversary season. The event, which compressed ten premieres into three consecutive nights, repeated over two weeks, had few if any precedents in the ballet world, and it succeeded less for any individual creative breakthrough than for demonstrating the institutional strength of the company led since 1985 by Helgi Tomasson.

It would be over-optimistic to expect a flood of masterpieces from a project like this. Even the most analogous American effort, the New York City Ballet's 1972 Stravinsky Festival, yielded only four lasting creations, all of them by George Balanchine, out of 21 new ballets and *pièces d'occasion*. San Francisco's festival produced three or four audience favorites and a few less popular works that represented imaginative reformulations of classicism. Most impressive was the collective effort of the dancers, technical and musical personnel, and the front office, to learn, mount, and pay for it all. Of the six holdovers scheduled for the company's 2009 season beginning in January, none strayed very far from the classical footprints, even Mark Morris'. The pieces that I thought rattled the conventions most successfully won't be making a reappearance.

Real innovation works its way into the mainstream slowly and subtly. The now-generic style of contemporary ballet, an accessible display of all-dance, eclectic movement and elaborate partnering, is partly rooted in Jerome Robbins' Chopin ballets of the 1960s and '70s. Those works resurfaced this spring at the New York City Ballet in its Robbins retrospective and charmed the audience again, though they were quite

idiosyncratic in NYCB's repertory of the time. Big arts institutions create the audiences they need, not the other way around, and SFB seems to be playing a cautious game.

The festival's most imaginative work, Julia Adam's *A rose by any other name*, undertook a deconstruction of the classic *Sleeping Beauty* from the ground up. Discarding the Tchaikovsky music, Adam picked Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, in a selection for piano and orchestra, on which to build her story. This substitution allowed Adam to scrub the pomposity and sentiment off the old ballet and reset its protagonists into an odd but oddly sympathetic perspective. Incidentally, she brought out the drama in an iconic Bach score that dancers have exploited in the past for its formal possibilities—see Jerome Robbins' *Goldberg Variations*, for example.

Adam kept the basic story line: A princess is cursed by a jealous fairy but spared by benevolent magic until true love can release her into the world again. I don't know if it was Adam's choice to work with only ten dancers or if she accepted an assigned solution to what must have been a nightmare of casting, even for a company of seventy-plus dancers. But the limitation forced Adam to compress the sprawling *Sleeping Beauty* populace into a corps de ballet of five men, who doubled as fairies, Aurora's suitors, assorted courtiers, and stage managers who brought on the simple scenic effects and removed discarded ones. The principals were Aurora, her parents the King and Queen, Carabosse the evil fairy, and a curious, two-sided Prince/Lilac Fairy.

Julia Adam's prologue for her intriguing retrofit introduces the King and Queen, who move like pensive mannequins. Stiff-legged, with arms that lock rather than encircle, they shed their clothes and jewels; then, nearly naked, they touch each other's bodies with flat hands, hug each other, and roll stiffly together on the floor in a puppet-like clinch. Aurora and the prince will repeat this love scene at the end of the ballet. Told within this parenthesis of intimacy, the story shifted its main concern, from being a presentation of power and virtuosity to an affirmation of love. In place of opulent sets and costumes, designer Christine Darch and lighting designer James F. Ingalls created spare but beautiful stage effects. The stage managers screen off the sleeping princess with branches attached to their fingers. Aurora's awakening provokes a shower of rose petals.

To tell Aurora's story, all the characters use the same move-from-the-joints style, often turning in profile to the audience. It's not that they don't dance. In fact, they jump, turn, travel, and do complicated ballet steps, all of it made more effortful because of this imposed body attitude. The wicked Carabosse digs one pointe and one flat foot into the floor, tilts over, and changes direction erratically, as if so overcome by rage she can't collect herself. Aurora the innocent seems a passive witness much of the time, standing still while the drama unfolds around her, or dancing with her upper arms pressed close to her sides.

By making the characters two-dimensional, Adam displaced the *Sleeping Beauty* from its nineteenth-century fairy-tale grandeur to a more proletarian venue—a wacky comic strip perhaps, or a science fiction romance. The look is very similar to what Paul Taylor devised for his detective-story *Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)* (1980). Here too the choreographer invents a flat, mechanical movement language to layer a different story onto a well-worn plot. In both cases, the characters take on an endearing fragility and strangeness.

A rose . . . is filled with skewed references to classical ballet. Stilted gestures distort the standard mime. The prince dances with one hand pressed to his chest and the other extended, “faithful” throughout an entire solo. Aurora doesn’t prick herself on the spindle, she holds it against her palm and dances while Carabosse inspects her to make sure the spell is taking hold. Climactic scenes are abbreviated to perfunctory devices. After the spindle-prick, the men lift Aurora and they all collapse together, almost dutifully. The fairies present their gifts to the infant Aurora in variations that flash back to Marius Petipa’s originals with a playful spin. Some of the most famous tropes are turned upside down. In the Rose Adagio, traditionally a test of the ballerina’s balance and assurance, the suitors do most of the work, promenading and lifting her, supporting her in the air while her feet make little running steps. She lets them propel her around and watches while they compete for her favor.

Adam’s idea of giving both the prince’s role and the Lilac Fairy’s to a single male dancer did puzzle me. Perhaps the choreographer intended some kind of postmodern gender spin, but the device was confusing, the characters unclear. You could see where you were in the shadow plot most of the time, but things began to go off track in the iconic Vision Scene, where the Lilac Fairy has to reveal the sleeping Aurora to the prince. Still, most of Julia Adam’s inventions made sense to me, and I admired her revisionist courage.

Julia Adam is a former principal dancer with San Francisco Ballet who’s been choreographing since 1993, contributing several works to SFB’s repertory and pursuing a freelance career further afield since her retirement from dancing in 2002. Helgi Tomasson’s choice of Margaret Jenkins was a more adventurous commission, although it was Adam’s ballet that turned out to be the most offbeat item in the festival.

Jenkins, a modern dancer, has been a leading force in San Francisco dance since 1970, as choreographer and director of her own company, and mentor and earth mother to generations of dancers. She’s taught at SFB School but had never been invited to choreograph for the company. Jenkins seized the opportunity to enrich the dancers as well as challenge herself. Prompted by her associate, poet Michael Palmer, she started with the myth of Ariadne as a reflection of this creative journey.

Thread was a dance of luxurious movement that served to express metaphorically the conflicts and desires of its subjects. In this way, I

thought, Jenkins was leaning back to the Greek dance-dramas of Martha Graham. Curious, when her own roots lie with Merce Cunningham's anti-drama aesthetic. Jenkins dispensed with a literal story, and with two of the myth's main characters, Theseus and the Minotaur, centering instead on Ariadne, to suggest the perils and adventures of going into a mysterious place. Visualizing another male-female character duality, Jenkins split the role of Ariadne between two dancers, rather than assigning both characters to one as Adam did. The stage was divided horizontally by Alexander Nichols' scrim with an entryway cut in it, and during much of the dance Pauli Magierek, the leading woman, stayed behind it while Damian Smith, downstage, seemed to echo her movements. Eleven other dancers served as an unconventional corps de ballet in a tide of movement that ebbed and eddied without actually channeling into a stream of narrative.

Thread was one of those dances that might have been clearer if its literary antecedent hadn't been divulged to us through Jenkins' pre-performance interviews and Palmer's voiceover poetry. I was happy with the luscious way the dancers moved; they seemed inspired by working with Jenkins, and her process must have been new to them. First of all, she didn't go into the studio with the movement all ready to set on them. Like other busy freelancing choreographers, Jenkins made some core phrases on her own company dancers, then brought the material into the SFB rehearsals to be developed by the cast members. This demanded a degree of improvisation some of them had never experienced. Bay Area composer Paul Drescher supplied the score after *Thread* was made, so the dancers rehearsed in silence, becoming more attuned to cues in the movement and the moves of the other dancers than they'd be when working to existing music.

It's fairly common for a choreographer to be uncertain where her dance will end up when she starts, or to be willing to abandon her initial storyline once the dance looks like it's going in another direction. Even asking the dancers to have a hand in creating the movement is a standard practice today. But the SFB dancers reported the whole experience was new for them, evidently a provocative and interesting one.

Yuri Possokhov disclosed a shadow-theme for his ballet, too. He'd been going through a difficult transition from principal dancer to resident choreographer with San Francisco Ballet. The end of a dancing life is a traumatic passage; Possokhov found an elegant way to explore this underlying struggle. He organized *Fusion* around three groups of four dancers, each with a different identity. Over the course of the dance, a gradual process of synthesis seems to occur. By the end, one group has taken on the identity of another by adopting its movement theme. A transformation of some kind has taken place: an initiation, a conversion, maybe the evolution of a dance idiom. On the stage *Fusion* is as much a pure-dance ballet as Jenkins' work, though more formally arranged and more closely tied to the classical movement vocabulary. It develops meaning solely through its own operations.

The fusion invoked in the title concerns not only the passing on of movement, which stands for identity, but the overlay of one style or culture on another. Possokhov's musical choices themselves represent fusion. The score is grounded in the mystical, quasi-Middle-Eastern music of Bollywood composer Rahul Dev Burman, arranged by Osvaldo Golijov. Placed in the middle of the ballet, it's surrounded by the 1950-ish movie modernism of Graham Fitkin. Not exactly classical, not exactly Arabic, not exactly pop, the eclectic mix of fast, complex drumming, jazz piano and boogie-woogie, and melismatic chants lends a driving energy as well as a meditative calm to the dance.

Four men dressed as Sufi dervishes in full-skirted robes sit cross-legged on the floor in a tight square, all facing the same direction and thrusting their torsos out in ritualistic spokes. Four other men and four women, in modern dancewear, appear in similarly formal units that open out to allow a variety of interactions and partnerships. A long central sequence begins with Yuan Yuan Tan posed as a sort of oдалисque. The Sufis seem to be trying to block her when she runs toward a male partner (Damian Smith) who's waiting for her in the wings. Twice, she makes her way through them and rebounds back onto the stage. The third time the man carries her in. As they dance a pas de deux, the Sufis look on and then whirl around and through the couple, as if conferring their approval.

After a series of jazz-influenced solos, duets, and shadow dances, the Sufis seem to pass their movement theme on to the four male dancers, and the ballet ends with the converts alone, hypnotically swiveling their torsos.

The specter of classical ballet hovered over everything in the festival. As source, interlocutor, target, it supplied a vocabulary and a set of images to be revered or derided. Sometimes the classical model could absorb alien influences, as in Possokhov's and Jenkins' pieces. Sometimes it was deliberately overturned, as in Adam's deconstruction. In *The Ruins Proclaim the Building Was Beautiful*, the Canadian choreographer James Kudelka writes its epitaph in seductive, misogynistic terms.

To a sinister post-Romantic score (by Rodney Sharman after César Franck), a corps of women in ragged pink tutus and wispy, disheveled hair dance in uncoordinated lines and erratic timing. They're set upon by three men in frock coats and Count Dracula makeup. These intruders flail their arms maniacally but keep their bodies rigid. In a series of tortured variations, they seize and grope the swans, carry them in graceless positions, herd them with whips. Although the music is repetitive, the dance keeps finding new ways to replay this feast of cruelty. Yet the scenario of oppression never changes.

Finally the swans and their masters leave. Yuan Yuan Tan, who's been one of their leaders, is reincarnated in a sexy red cocktail dress and spike heels. She dances a modern duet with Pierre-François Vilanoba, a struggle of wills in which the stronger antagonist always wins. He hauls her around, she tries to resist, he yanks her back. He has no vulnerabil-

ity at all. Eventually she dies. He leaves. I found it impossible to tell if Kudelka was sympathetic to these forlorn women or just exploiting history's unlearned lessons.

Val Caniparoli, another SFB alumnus who's gone on to an independent choreographing career, wanted to make a piece with dramatic roles for five women, and their associated men, with a contemporary gender-reform theme. *Ibsen's House* turned out to be a string of duets and solos in period costume, to music of Dvořák, an old-fashioned work spiced up with the gender-buzz that preoccupied so much of the festival. I admit that after Lorena Feijoo's tempestuous Hedda Gabler, I found fewer and fewer distinctions among the heroines (Nora in *A Doll's House*, danced by Molly Smolen; Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*, Dana Genshaft; the Lady from the Sea, Courtney Elizabeth; and Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*, Nicole Grand), and I spent the rest of the dance vainly rooting around for clues in my threadbare literary baggage.

Paul Taylor came up with another of his déjà-vu views of American culture in *Changes*, to the sixties pop recordings of the Mamas and the Papas. Taylor appended site-specific references dreamy and dour ("California Dreamin'" and "California Earthquake") to his almost-formulaic retinue of carefree adolescents holding back their anxieties with rock'n'roll. Courtney Elizabeth as the Earthquake went kind of out of control, falling and rolling in the middle of the crowd, a center that couldn't hold. Taylor's one odd episode was "Dancing Bear," about a boy in Doctor Dentons and a kindly preceptor who could have been either an oversized teddy bear or the father he wished he had.

The dance ended with an upbeat escapism. Former Taylor dancer Patrick Corbin, who set the work and served as Taylor's spokesman in San Francisco, hinted that the era of the hippies could inspire us today with its flaky optimism. Sweetness may have worked once; now it looks as disingenuous as a campaign commercial. According to the program notes, Taylor once made a piece for San Francisco Ballet called *Bouquet of Vultures*. I wish I'd seen it.

The other four ballets, while different in style, were all formal exercises that dazzled the audience but evaporated immediately. There was Stanton Welch's *Naked*, to the Concerto in D Minor for Two Pianos by Francis Poulenc, a totally unobjectionable, unremarkable academic work with contrasting duets—a steppy allegro one and an underwater adagio one—a slow group dance to Poulenc's gamelan-chiming pianos, and all the things you'd expect solo dancers and couples to do to the composer's changeable moods. Christopher Wheeldon's *Within the Golden Hour* left even less of an imprint, despite its craftsmanship and its generosity to the fourteen dancers. I think he wasn't helped by the eclectic score of Ezio Bosso, which began with the weirdest sounds a conventional orchestra can make and proceeded to cherry-pick

through stoned Philip Glassian ostinatos, waltzes, pseudo-Baroque sounds, and five-count metres.

John Adams conducted the premiere of his “Son of Chamber Symphony,” written for Mark Morris’ *Joyride*. The music was really dense, but rather than calling attention to it, as Morris usually does, the dance had me following another line of thought. And Isaac Mizrahi’s gold unitards, with large LED numbers endlessly cycling across screens on the dancers’ chests, made their own statement. Mizrahi said he was thinking of something “weirdly robotic.” *Joyride* seemed more classically designed, and employed more classical steps, than Morris’ usual work. As a guest choreographer working internationally, he’s becoming more balletic and less eccentric in his movement style. The most interesting thing in this dance for me was the four duets, in which the couples worked in tandem, four different ways—side-by-side movement, matching movement for short partners instead of tall ones, back-to-back movement, and parallel movement far apart on the stage. It was an effective and classical way to assert Morris’ ideas about egalitarian dancing.

Jorma Elo, the latest most-wanted choreographer phenomenon, made *Double Evil*, to some real Philip Glass and contemporary Russian music of Vladimir Martinov. Elo can create the fastest, trickiest movement to evoke the most rapturous audience screams per minute, and as such I guess he was the perfect closer for the festival’s triple-header programming.¹

During my week’s visit to the Bay Area, I was impressed not only with the ambitious New Works Festival but with the reach of activities surrounding it. San Francisco Ballet behaves with the expansiveness of a comfortable institution within the city’s cultural life. Not only was it able to command the considerable funding for the anniversary year’s undertakings, it staged a lot of outreach, promoting its own accomplishments but at the same time educating the public to a bigger view of the ballet enterprise.

The sense of altruism can slip away easily in the competitive atmosphere of today’s high arts. It’s a tricky balance that these institutions maintain, between stability and progressivism, self-perpetuation and reinvention, retaining the old supporters and cultivating young new ones. SFB recognizes that there’s a symbiosis between the company and professionals in the community who can speak to the public in more independent voices than company insiders. Two pre-performance panels, open to the public, enlisted critics, choreographers and scholars to discuss the role of technology and the future of creative work. The company generated a magazine-format program book, distributed free to the audience, which included a fluff-resistant essay on each of the ten commissioned choreographers by Cheryl Ossola.

¹ The San Francisco Ballet will be performing a selection of these works from October 10 to 18, 2008, at New York City Center.

Dance critic Rita Felciano curated one of several exhibitions of photographs, films, designs, costumes and props from the company's long history for the SF Performing Arts Library and Museum. Felciano was also recruited to contribute commentary on a half-hour KQED profile of three participating choreographers. There were displays of costumes and photos in the San Francisco airport, and an unusual exhibit, "Innovation in Tradition," created for the lobby of the War Memorial Opera House, where the company performs, by former principal dancer Muriel Maffre. In a cluster of glass display cases, Maffre assembled a three-dimensional collage of objects, writings, photographic material, and graphics to suggest aspects of the creative process. Maffre says she was inspired by Joseph Cornell's boxes to bring archival papers and artifacts to life within a fantasy setting.

As a permanent reference to the anniversary year, the company commissioned a lavish coffee-table book from dance historian Janice Ross, with a documentary DVD narrated by Peter Coyote inside the back cover. (*San Francisco Ballet at Seventy-Five*, published by Chronicle Books.) Despite its unwieldy lap-size format, this is a volume you can actually read. In lively language, Ross downplays the stock tactics of dance company biographies: the chronological lists of successes, the gushy tributes, the up-from-obscurity narrative. Instead, she explores the company as it is today—with flashbacks, of course—by roaming the halls and studios of the school, checking out the Opera House from the wings to the orchestra pit to the balcony. She talks to dancers and director Tomasson, to teachers, coaches, visiting choreographers, physical therapists, and administrators whose job includes making sure the right donors get to meet the right dancers. There's a certain amount of "They dance like angels" commentary from journalists and company associates, but this book gives an extraordinarily well-rounded access to a major ballet organization in action. It accomplishes the celebratory purpose it was meant for, but it also shows us how those onstage thrills really get manufactured in a civilized world.