

Spring 2010

Ballet Review



**From the Spring 2010
issue of *Ballet Review***

**Michael Langlois:
My First Day at ABT**

On the cover: New York City Ballet's
Tiler Peck in Peter Martins'
The Sleeping Beauty.

Edited by
Francis Mason

Ballet Review 38.1
Spring 2010

Associate Editor
and Designer:
Marvin Hoshino

Associate Editor:
Don Daniels

Associate Editor:
Joel Lobenthal

Associate Editor:
Larry Kaplan

Photographers:
Tom Brazil
Costas

Subscriptions:
Roberta Hellman

Copy Editor:
Barbara Palfy

Associates:
Peter Anastos
Robert Greskovic
George Jackson
Elizabeth Kendall
Paul Parish

Nancy Reynolds
James Sutton
David Vaughan
Edward Willinger
Sarah C. Woodcock



- 4 New York – Alice Helpern
- 7 Stuttgart – Gary Smith
- 8 Lisbon – Peter Sparling
- 10 Chicago – Joseph Houseal
- 11 New York – Sandra Genter
- 13 Ann Arbor – Peter Sparling
- 16 New York – Sandra Genter
- 17 Toronto – Gary Smith
- 19 New York – Marian Horosko
- 20 San Francisco – Paul Parish

David Vaughan
23 Paris 1909-2009

Sandra Genter
29 Pina Bausch (1940-2009)

Laura Jacobs & Joel Lobenthal
31 A Conversation with Gelsey
Kirkland & Misha Chernov

Marnie Thomas Wood
37 Celebrating the Graham Anti-heroine

Morris Rossabi
41 Ulaanbaatar Ballet

Darrell Wilkins
45 A Mary Wigman Evening

Daniel Jacobson
51 *La Danse*

[Michael Langlois](#)
56 [ABT 101](#)

Joel Lobenthal
61 Osipova's Season

Davie Lerner
71 A Conversation with Howard Barr

Don Daniels
75 No Apologies: Peck & Mearns at NYCB

Annie-B Parson
79 First Class Teachers

88 London Reporter – Clement Crisp
93 Alfredo Corvino – Elizabeth Zimmer
94 Music on Disc – George Dorris
100 Check It Out

Cover photo by Paul Kolnik, New York City Ballet: Tiler Peck
in Peter Martins' production of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Michael Langlois

My first day at ABT began at ten o'clock on a sunny Monday morning in September 1980. I was twenty years old.

The ABT studios at 61st and Broadway had been demolished and the new studios at 890 Broadway were nearing completion; until then the company was using spaces all over New York City. Radio City Music Hall was my destination that day. Our new director, Mikhail Baryshnikov, had asked my former teacher, Stanley Williams, to teach company class the first week and this was, perhaps, the only thing I drew comfort from.

I rode my bicycle from my apartment at 56th Street and Ninth Avenue over to Rockefeller Center at nine o'clock. This particular bike was an orange Schwinn ten-speed I'd bought with yard-mowing money back in North Carolina when I was ten years old. As I locked it on 51st street near the backstage entrance I thought about how many times I had washed and waxed it over the years, fretting about its every blemish. It seemed fragile and out of place in New York and even more so sitting out there on the street but I had a good lock and it was in plain sight. It will be fine, I reassured myself.

After signing in with the guard I found an elevator and rode it up into the bowels of Radio City. Backstage areas of theaters are generally well-ravaged arenas of peeling paint, scuffed floors, and all manner of dramatic bric-a-brac sitting around gathering dust, rust and ruin, and this part of Radio City was no exception. It was a windowless maze of dirty, dimly lit corridors, theater crates, and mysterious doorways that went to even more mysterious places, all of which I took in at a glance as I walked toward the dressing room, the old wooden hallways creaking under my solitary feet.

I changed and made my way to the studio that, like everything else at Radio City thus far, was utterly depressing. Dim lighting cast ghoully shadows across the floor of a room that must've been a hundred feet long but a mere twenty feet deep. Painted onto its wooden surface and traveling its length was a ragged black line. It was here, I surmised, that the famous Rockettes lined up to kick their legs and do whatever else Rockettes did.

I sat down on the floor and started stretching. I still had about forty-five minutes to kill before class and figured I would need every second of it to gear myself up for the big event. After a few minutes a beautiful young black man arrived. He had dark, perfect skin that glistened even in the faint light and his lithe, muscular physique reminded me of a thoroughbred racehorse. He carried a portable barre into the center of the room, put it down, and looked over at me. "Guess I'm early bird number two."

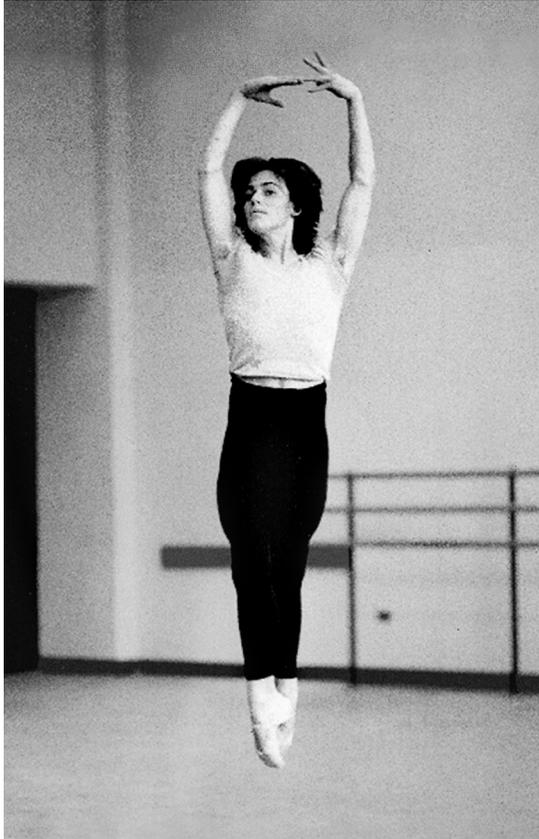
I didn't know who he was at the time but this was Ronald Perry, formerly of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Like me, he had just joined ABT but unlike me he would quickly go on to far bigger things. He became one of Jurgen Schneider's pet projects, ABT's token black male dancer and, ergo, someone who would invariably be likened to another token black man in the nearly all-white ballet world: Arthur Mitchell.

As 10:00 a.m. drew near more and more dancers arrived and with their arrival the atmosphere in the studio changed from suicidal to celebratory. The summer layoff was over and everyone was giddily reconnecting, sharing vacation stories and casting the odd glance at all the newcomers. Many of these dancers were people whose faces and names were familiar to me from the few performances of ABT that I'd seen at the Met: Terry Orr, Cynthia Gregory, Jonas Kåge, Jolinda Menendez, Marianna Tcherkassky, Fernando Bujones, and Misha, of course.

Stanley Williams arrived with his usual sense of urgency at ten minutes after ten. At SAB he would saunter in much the same,

dressed in his impeccable slacks, impeccable dress-shirt (the cuffs always rolled halfway up his forearms), and spotless character shoes. Once beside the grand piano he would chitchat with Lynn Stanford, his utterly brilliant, ever-present, longhaired Texan pianist.

Eventually Stanley would pull out his tobacco pouch, fill and light his pipe, and mosey over to the most famous person in the room.



Michael Langlois at seventeen. (Photo: Reed Jenkins)

More often than not this would have been Peter Martins, but with some regularity it might've been Peter Schaufuss or Patrick Dupond or Nureyev or Misha or Valery Panov or Richard Cragun or Suzanne Farrell or Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux or Helgi Tomasson or Adam Lüders or a host of others from the ranks of City Ballet and the ballet world at large.

This ritual of Stanley's had always irritated me. Didn't we have important work to do? I know I had important work to do. What was

all this procrastination for? There was precious little meat in Stanley's class anyway and to continually rob us of fifteen minutes of a ninety-minute class meant we rarely had time for grand allegro.

Stanley's class was, obviously, a lesson in frustration for yours truly. And yet Stanley had this unimpeachable reputation that one could not deny. There had to have been a reason why he attracted the greatest dancers in the world but for the life of me I never could figure it out. Perhaps they liked his class because it wasn't too physically demanding. It warmed your body slowly and gently and was probably a good precursor to a rigorous day of rehearsals, if that's what awaited you. But at SAB I had no rigorous day of rehearsals awaiting me. For me this was *it*.

Whatever Stanley was he was not the kind of man who ever gave you a straight answer, about anything. For him, the machinations of ballet were explained via Danish deconstructionism. You turned by not turning. You jumped by not jumping.

Stanley spent a great deal of time focusing on pirouettes and he would often demonstrate by indicating a turn and jerking his head quickly from side to side as if he were spotting and doing five or six pirouettes. When finished he would look at us and say, "You see boys, I turn, but I don't turn." If that advice didn't get the desired result he would say, "Don't turn boys, just go *fwont*."

One of Stanley's other favorite leit-motifs was phrasing. The musicality of his class was integral to his teaching and was as much a tribute to Lynn Stanford as it was to Stanley himself. Basically what Stanley seemed intent on was anticipation, moving slightly ahead of the beat and giving nothing away in terms of your preparation. Suddenly you were just *there*. How you got *there* was never explained.

If you tried to pin Stanley down about any technical matter (which I did on numerous oc-

casions) he would just giggle and say, "Oh, boys . . . I don't know . . . just watch Peter." At which point Peter Martins would dutifully demonstrate his seamless Scandinavian technique with his perfect line and Stanley would stand there, a Cheshire-Cat grin on his face, the wise Dr. Frankenstein showing off his masterful creation. Once Peter had finished, Stanley would sometimes say in his Danish-inflected English, "You see boys? You see how Peter just goes *ovah*. He doesn't jump. He just goes *ovah*."

Class began that morning at Radio City with Stanley and I felt as if I'd gone back in time to SAB, albeit an SAB without Peter Martins to put my particular tracing paper over, an SAB filled with entirely unfamiliar faces, all of whom could link steps together and dance with a cohesiveness and beauty I'd rarely seen before.

Once we got into the center I was about as far from SAB as you could get. The room was packed, the dancers all intimidatingly excellent. I tried to look like I knew what I was doing and portray some self-confidence but, honestly, I felt overwhelmed. I stood at the back and found it virtually impossible to concentrate. I didn't want to be too pushy, so I waited for the older dancers to take their turns before I did, and because there were about eighty people in class I barely danced at all.

When class was finished I had my first rehearsal in the same Rockettes room, a new staging of *Raymonda* divertissements that Misha was presiding over. I would be in the mazurka. I'd had character classes throughout my training and had always enjoyed them so I felt as if I would enjoy working in character shoes again, but it became clear after about five minutes that the honeymoon of Misha's new directorship ended as soon as class was over.

"Meg! Vad you doink!" he hollered, at Meg Potter. She looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights. "Not like dat," he said, imitating her unmazurk alike movements, "like dis." He then demonstrated how he wanted her to do it, stomping his foot on the ground and rocking his body and head before finish-

ing with a flick of his wrist and an upraised arm.

We went through the same phrases over and over again but no matter how many times we did them Misha rarely got past that somebody-just-shot-my-cat look on his face. We weren't Russian enough, apparently, and he seemed perplexed by the fact that his new crop of personally selected dancers couldn't grasp a simple thing like a mazurka, a dance any five-year-old kid back in St. Petersburg could do in his sleep.

After that first enlightening hour I escaped the depressing confines of Radio City and biked uptown to Harkness House for a rehearsal of *Jardin aux Lilas*. I arrived well before the appointed hour, again, so I could be warmed up and ready to make the kind of stellar impression I'd already made in company class.

Again, I found myself alone in a studio, albeit this time in a mirrored ballroom inside what was once the palatial home of Edward and Mary Harkness. I sat on the floor feeling as I often did at Harkness House, that Louis XIV himself might suddenly burst in and suggest we go for a hunt. But Louis never did burst in. In fact, no one did. I stretched for what seemed an awfully long time and at some point began to get worried. Surely, it was time for rehearsal by now? Finally, Danilo Radojevic opened the door. "Are you Michael? Rehearsal has started in another studio." The hunt, obviously, was over.

Once I got to this second ballroom and apologized to Mr. Tudor, not much appeared to be happening. Tudor told me to follow Scott Schlexer, a boy in the corps de ballet. Everyone was moving in a circle. The movements were subtle. It seemed so simple, yet Tudor kept going over and over it. Nothing was said about the technical aspects of the choreography really, it was more about a feeling, a sense of the movement he was looking for, a tilt of the head, an inclination of the body. I was confused. After my earlier experience with Misha this was dance on a completely different scale and one that I was totally unfamiliar with.

After all of my worrying and warming up I

found myself getting cold, mimicking Scott's movements off to the side as the group went round and round. I tried to look diligent and hard, working, but there really wasn't much I could do under the circumstances and none of what I was doing seemed to matter one iota to Tudor anyway.

Whatever Tudor was interested in had very little to do with the steps; at the same time it had everything to do with the steps. All I knew about dancing thus far revolved around executing the choreography to the best of my ability; that's what I thought dancing was about. So I went over and over the few movements I could pick up and hoped for the best. By the time rehearsal finished I was completely stumped. I wasn't tired. I hadn't broken a sweat. And while I might have learned a lot I also knew I hadn't learned much. I hadn't a clue whether Tudor even noticed me.

From Harkness House I biked back down to Radio City for a character class with Diana Joffe, a taciturn, raven-haired woman whom Misha had just hired and whose *raison d'être* in the new ABT seemed to be to spare Misha an aneurism and turn all of us ABT rookies into the Lakers and Celtics of the czardas and mazurka.

At the end of that first day I went back to my apartment feeling numb. I'd imagined beforehand that I would feel some sense of euphoria that would lead inexorably into eternal happiness because I was at last in the great

American Ballet Theatre and my dream had finally become a reality, but all I really felt was baffled and bewildered. I consoled myself with the thought that at least I was getting to work with Mr. Tudor, one of the most important choreographers of the twentieth century and someone I'd always greatly admired.

Sometime during the evening one of our ballet masters, Dick Tanner, called. I'd known Dick since I was at SAB. He had been in the corps de ballet at City Ballet and he, perhaps more than anyone else, had been instrumental in my getting into ABT.

"Michael," he said, "you don't have to go back to rehearsals for *Lilac Garden*. Mr. Tudor didn't think you were right for the part."

Not right for the part? Not right for the *part*? What part? As far as I could tell I didn't even have a part. I was just an understudy. Needless to say I was crushed. How bad did you have to be to be excised as an understudy, I wondered.

I went to bed feeling as if my first day at ABT had been much like that ragged black Rockettes line on the studio floor back at Radio City: long and full of disappointing gaps that no one was going to be filling in anytime soon.

And then the following day, after another one of Stanley's classes and another hour of Misha pulling his hair out while watching us botch the mazurka and another one of Joffe's character classes, I exited the backstage door of Radio City and looked out at the bike rack on the sidewalk. It was empty.