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Ballet Review



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Boston Ballet Going on Fifty

On the cover: ABT's Polina Semionova
and Marcelo Gomes in Alexei Ratmansky's
Symphony #9.

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**Cover Photograph
by Marty Sohl, ABT:
Polina Semionova and
Marcelo Gomes in
Alexei Ratmansky's
Symphony #9.**



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Kathleen Breen Combes in *Symphony in Three Movements*. (Photo: Gene Schiavone, Boston Ballet)

Momentum

Jeffrey Gantz

Boston Ballet approached its fiftieth anniversary year with a fair bit of momentum after a rewarding spring. The company showed off its versatility with solid productions of *The Sleeping Beauty* and Balanchine's *Coppélia*, a program of Jiří Kylián, and one that sandwiched Wayne McGregor's *Chroma* between Balanchine's *Serenade* and *Symphony in C*. Now in his eleventh season as the ballet's artistic director, Mikko Nissinen has established a level of corps dancing that the city had previously seen only in visiting companies. He has promoted dancers from the ranks. His principals make up in emotional resonance for what they might lack in pyrotechnics. He has developed a company that is as comfortable in contemporary works as it is in story ballets.

Nissinen has also become increasingly acute in his choice of contemporary repertory. Kylián's *Bella Figura* and William Forsythe's *The Second Detail* have grown into company staples. Boston Ballet has become a leading exponent of its resident choreographer, Jorma Elo, whose work is now being done by companies all over the world. Nissinen even mined New York City Ballet for a neglected gem, Jerome Robbins' *Antique Epigraphs*.

Of the trio of pieces – none of which had been done before by a North American company – on the spring Kylián program, *Tar and Feathers* (2006) was the wackiest. The floor, in keeping with the title, is bisected, black house left, white house right. Towering over the black side, on stilts, is a baby grand piano. Tomoko Mukaiyama – the only pianist to perform in this piece, apart from, on one occasion, Kylián himself – plays snatches of Mozart (the Andantino from Piano Concerto No. 9) and Dirk Haubrich and improvises, at times reaching into the sounding board.

The white side is occupied by a large clump

of bubble wrap that looks like an ice sculpture; the dancers approach it with trepidation. There are outbursts of what sounds like a dog barking, and a voice (Kylián's) recites lines from Samuel Beckett's last poem, "What is the Word," many of them starting with the word "folly." Toward the end, five of the six dancers appear behind the bubble-wrap sculpture wearing black wigs, smeary red lipstick, and bubble-wrap skirts.

The piece is, at the simplest level, about crossing the divide. It's one-way traffic: the dancers who go from the white side to the black look back longingly, but they never return. It's also about expression; the dancer who starts it off on the white side (Kathleen Breen Combes on opening night) seems to be trying to get words out, as if, like Joe Chaikin, to whom "What is the Word" is dedicated, she had been stricken with aphasia. The Bubble Wrap Five likewise appear to be trying to speak, as if they were the Bubble Rap Five. What distinguished the ballet's performance in general, and Breen Combes's in particular, was its tenderness. What could have been trashy was made transcendent.

The other Kylián works were less striking. *Wings of Wax* (1997) boasts an uprooted tree hanging upside down overhead, with a spotlight slowly circling it. The significance of that tree and the Daedalus-and-Icarus title is left to the viewer. The piece opens with the pas-sacaglia from Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* and closes with the twenty-fifth variation from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The eight dancers, after some initial skirmishing, break into four male-female couples who explore, in the usual Kylián fashion, sexual politics. The choreography can look blandly familiar at first, but nuances emerge from repeated viewings.

Symphony of Psalms (1978), set to Stravinsky's 1930 Boston Symphony Orchestra commission and backed by a plethora of hanging Persian carpets, could have been called "Rite of Appalachian Spring." It's a simple, somber, sometimes spiky hymn of invocation and celebration, the sixteen dancers like amber waves of grain.



Kathleen Breen Combes, Whitney Jensen, and Robert Kretz in Kylián's *Tar and Feathers*.
(Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, BB)

The remaining spring work that was new to Boston, *Chroma* (2007), did not disgrace its Balanchine neighbors. Sporting a white set by minimalist architect John Pawson and a score combining Joby Talbot's White Stripes orchestrations with his own original music, it twisted its ten dancers – six men, four women – into extreme extensions and combinations.

Breen Combes again set the tone on opening night, bobbing at Bradley Schlagheck as if they were ducks preparing to mate. What makes *Chroma* unusual is the way it resembles a conversation rather than a set of monologues. The dancers don't explore their own

bodies or the space around them so much as they respond to one another in specific ways.

Boston Ballet last did *Serenade* in 2007, *Symphony in C* in 1998. The latter looked sharper and crisper this time out, not at the level of the Paris Opera Ballet corps I saw do it in 2003, but right there with American Ballet Theatre's production last May. Breen Combes and Jeffrey Cirio were especially playful in the scherzo. What the performances didn't have was a truly dreamy pair to stretch out the Adagio.

In *Serenade*, I missed Melanie Atkins' haunted, rhapsodic Russian Girl from 2006, but I did like the way Adiarys Almeida, in the same role, beamed at the audience at the end of the waltz,

as if to say, “That was how Mr. B wanted me to do it.”

The season ended in early July with a London season – arguably the most important tour in Boston Ballet’s history – that should be counted a success. I saw the first three of six performances at the Coliseum; they gave a fair statement of where the company is just now. The first performance, at least, was sold out and the reviews largely positive.

One could quibble about the two programs: Balanchine’s *Serenade* and *Symphony in Three Movements* sandwiching Nijinsky’s *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* and Elo’s *Plan to B*; *The Second Detail*, Wheeldon’s *Polyphonia*, and Kylián’s *Bella Figura*. The Nijinsky, although it received thoughtful readings from its two casts, seemed isolated; *Plan to B* is not the best introduction to Elo; and the most gratifying thing about *Polyphonia* was company pianist Freda Locker’s

traversal of the difficult György Ligeti score. The ballet still looks like bargain-basement Balanchine. I might have paired *Faune* with Robbins’ *Faun* and cast Sabi Varga and Whitney Jensen, who were enigmatically perfect (not to mention sexy) when the company staged Robbins in 2011. And since to my mind Elo’s *Sharper Side of Dark*, with its Goldberg Variations score and hint of narrative, is more representative of his aesthetic than *Plan to B*, I’d have preferred it in the second program.

What the London critics saw, in general, were solid performances deserving of respect. What most of them didn’t experience was a plethora of memorable solo turns. Cirio and Misa Kuranaga were cited for their electricity, Breen Combes for her warmth and wantonness. No question that Breen Combes lit up the tour. She and Paulo Arrais were a teasing Eve and Adam at the center of *Symphony in Three*



Whitney Jensen in Elo’s *Plan to B*. (Photo: Gene Schiavone, BB)



Movements, she and Bo Busby were the core couple in *The Second Detail*, and her bare-breasted duet with Rie Ichikawa tugged at the heart of *Bella Figura*. But it was her Russian Girl in *Serenade* that caught my eye. It did not catch the critics' eyes because she was in the second cast, but she was searing in the last movement, and the performance also had Seo Hye Han as a rapt, vulnerable Waltz Girl and Dusty Button as an inviting yet inscrutable Dark Angel.

The other revelation from the second cast of the first program was Ashley Ellis with John Lam in



Serenade: Ashley Ellis and Nelson Madrigal, and Seo Hye Han and Lasha Khozashvili.
(Photos: Gene Schiavone, BB)



Rie Ichikawa and Kathleen Breen Combes in Kylián's *Bella Figura*. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, BB)

Faune. The opening-night duo, Lorna Feijóo and Altan Dugaraa, conveyed Nijinsky's two-dimensional stylization, but Lam, after a static start, became unnervingly human, and Ellis was just as unnerving as she sniffed at him. Ellis had a good tour: she was a pleasing, if not eye-popping, Waltz Girl opposite Nelson Madrigal in *Serenade* opening night, and then both gracious and generous partnered with Schlagheck in the "Wedding Dance II: Quickly Come Here Pretty" section of *Polyphonia*. In the latter piece she surely benefited from the coaching of ballet master Larissa Ponomarenko, who danced that section when Boston Ballet first presented *Polyphonia*, in 2007.

The company did not bring its own orchestra; instead, music director Jonathan McPhee conducted the Royal Philharmonic in *Serenade*, *Faune*, and *Symphony in Three Movements*. The strings in particular were lush. The quick tempo for *Serenade* was remarked on; it wasn't too quick, but it didn't quite let the dancers show

off their phrasing. One other difference between the company in Boston and the company in London was the size of the stage: the Coliseum is deeper than the Boston Opera House. *The Second Detail*, aired out and less claustrophobic, didn't have the impact it does in Boston. Even Thom Willems' pounding score sounded less abrasive. And in *Bella Figura*, the topless sections – all nine dancers in the Torelli Siciliana, and then Breen Combes and Ichikawa in the heartrending Lento of Lukas Foss's Salomon Rossi Suite – seemed distanced, almost veiled. Too bad, because this is a company that looks good up close. If its shortcomings – flaws in ensemble and spacing were noted – are palpable, so is its engaging personality.

The fiftieth-anniversary season will begin in September, when the company will present a free edition of its annual "Night of Stars" gala outdoors, on Boston Common, to an audience expected to number between forty and eighty thousand. The season proper will in-



Erica Cornejo as Carabosse. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, BB)

clude *La Bayadère* and Frederick Ashton's *Cinderella* plus Elo's *Close to Chuck*, Harald Lander's *Etudes*, and works by Spanish National Dance Company artistic director José Carlos Martínez, Prague National Theatre artistic director Petr Zuska, and young Swedish choreographer Alexander Ekman.

After the final program, Balanchine's *Jewels*, the company will tour to the Kennedy Center in Washington and then the Koch Theater at Lincoln Center. That last date represents a kind of closing of the circle, since Balanchine was an early adviser to Boston Ballet and contributed some of his works to the company at no cost.

It's too bad the season itself couldn't have been more of a backward glance. Nissinen's recent programming has narrowed down to story ballets (a necessity in Boston) and contemporary Europeans. The company's former

American repertory has fallen out of favor: Tharp's *In the Upper Room* and *Waterbaby Bagatelles*, Cunningham's *Breakers*, Taylor's *Company B*, de Mille's *Rodeo* and *Fall River Legend*, and former resident choreographer Daniel Pelzig's *The Princess and the Pea* and *Nine Lives: Songs of Lyle Lovett*.

We've also lost older British works like Tudor's *Jardin aux Lilas* and MacMillan's *Winter Dreams*. And three of the company's most engaging story ballets – Ashton's *La Fille Mal Gardée*, Cranko's *Onegin*, and Stanton Welch's *Madame Butterfly* – haven't been seen in some time. It would be good to be able to look at where Boston Ballet has been as well as where it's going.

Nissinen's other pressing challenge lies in the ranks of his principals. Back in the mid 1990s, toward the end of artistic director Bruce Marks's eleven-year tenure, Patrick Armand,



Misa Kuranaga and Jeffrey Cirio as Aurora and Désiré. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, BB)

Paul Thrussell, Rob Wallace, Olivier Wecxsteen, and Yury Yanowsky commanded the Wang Theatre stage, dancers of technical virtuosity and artistic elegance. Those qualities are in short supply among the current men, although Yanowsky, who will be entering his twenty-first season with the company, can still ignite.

Principal James Whiteside left in 2011 to become a soloist at ABT, where he is flourishing, to judge by the two performances I saw him give in May, as Gremin in *Onegin* opposite Diana Vishneva's Tatiana, and partnering Paloma Herrera in the first movement of *Symphony in C*.

Arrais, who was promoted to principal last year, is a buoyant, insouciant dancer, but now he's returning to the Norwegian National Ballet. Madrigal, who joined the company in 2003,

is a likably boyish presence and a good actor. He's not a bravura dancer, however, and, like Yanowsky, he's getting on in years. Lasha Khezashvili has big jumps, but they're not always under control, he lacks authority, and his partnering needs to improve. Jeffrey Cirio, barely twenty-one, has the technique and the personality to be a star, but he reads small.

The roster of principal ladies is in somewhat better shape, even after the departure of Sarah Lamb in 2004 to the Royal Ballet (where she's now a well-regarded principal) and the retirement of Ponomarenko in 2011. Breen Combes is a sensuous, emotionally complex dancer whose "Diamonds" with Yanowsky in 2009 was one of the most moving performances I've seen from Boston Ballet. I wonder that she doesn't turn up more often on opening night.

Not that Misa Kuranaga, who combines precision with poetry and a hint of subversiveness, isn't a treat to watch. She and Cirio were the opening-night Aurora and Désiré in *The*

Sleeping Beauty and the opening-night Swanilda and Frantz in *Coppélia*, and all I really wanted from them was a bit more amplitude.

Lia Cirio, Jeffrey's older sister, is regularly



Forsythe's *The Second Detail* with Isaac Akiba. (Photo: Gene Schiavone, BB)



Lorna Feijóo in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*.
(Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, BB)

paired with Khozashvili; although they're well matched physically, they seldom look comfortable together. She has strength but not always flow, and this spring she tended to struggle in balances. Lorna Feijóo, whom New Yorkers will remember from her stellar 2004 NYCB guest appearance in *Ballo della Regina* with Gonzalo Garcia, and Erica Cornejo, who came from ABT in 2006, are still treasured performers, but they, too, are getting on.

Pregnancy limited Cornejo's appearances this spring; she did turn her Carabosse into a major role, beautiful and bitter in equal measures. How many dancing years she'll have left when she comes back is a question. The same

applies to Feijóo, who was out injured for much of the season.

Ellis has just been promoted to principal. She's not a prepossessing performer, but she's versatile, her technique is secure, and she finds many pleasing details. Her Aurora was prim and proper, as if she were channeling a teenage Queen Elizabeth II; it was an intriguing reading. Her Swanilda, however, had no inner child.

Almeida, effervescent as both Aurora and Swanilda, will have seemed to some a more obvious promotion choice. She and Joseph Gatti came to Boston from Cincinnati Ballet in 2010, both as soloists who seemed likely to be promoted. Both have lost time to injuries, however; this spring was the first real look we had at Almeida.

But if the immediate future is a little cloudy, there are bright lights on the horizon. Isaac Akiba is a Boston native who started in the company's Citydance program at age nine and has risen through Boston Ballet School (North America's largest) to join Boston Ballet II and now the first company, where he is a second soloist. Seo Hye Han, from Seoul, won the senior gold medal at the 2012 Boston International Ballet Competition and was offered a company contract. She filled in at short notice as the Waltz Girl in *Serenade* and had featured roles in both *Chroma* (where she did the Breen Combes role as a kind of Asian Bond girl) and *Symphony in C*. Bradley Schlagheck and Brittany Summer are two more corps members who have shown marked improvement over the past couple of years. They might never make principal, but they attest to the solid foundation that Nissinen has put in place.