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A Forced Marriage: In a Performance-Packed Week, Ballet and Modern Dance Renewed Their Semi-Vows

Wendy Whelan took a (brief!) turn with the Stephen Petronio company; Ashley Tuttle was a puzzlement in Pam Tanowitz's 'Untitled (The Blue Ballet)'

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Photo by Julie Lemberger



The eternal and uneasy relationship between ballet and modern dance endures, but radically altered in tone and intensity. For decades it was war—an either/or standoff—with time-outs for wary collaborations, like the one between Balanchine and Graham when in 1959 they joined forces (sort of) for *Episodes*, or earlier, when Merce Cunningham made *The Seasons* for Ballet Society and almost two decades later presented

his *Summerspace* at New York City Ballet—only now on pointe.

Times changed, passions subsided, and brute necessity prevailed. Twyla Tharp set her sights on ballet, and ballet, hungry for major talent, succumbed. But equally important was the need of ballet dancers to have somewhere to go when their classical technique began to give way to crumbling knees and hips. Nureyev and Fonteyn fooled around with Graham; more seriously, post-ballet Baryshnikov invested his genius in Mark Morris and other major (and minor) modernists; and today it's hardly news when an ex-ballerina or -ballerino appears with a modern company. It's comparable to the way fading movie stars in the '50s recharged their careers by slumming, and triumphing, on previously despised television: Loretta Young, Fred MacMurray, Robert Young, Barbara Stanwyck, Donna Reed.

This past week brought us three examples of this forced marriage. First, and oddest, was the appearance of City Ballet's Wendy Whelan with the Stephen Petronio company. Whelan has been a stalwart ballerina whose fascinating spidery look was less suited to classical Balanchine than to Christopher Wheeldon, who made her a star with *Morphoses* and *Polyphonia* and who remains a great favorite with City Ballet audiences. But she's been in the company for more than

25 years, and she's not what she once was. Her appearance with Petronio was therefore a sensible step in her post-ballet life as well as a marketing plus for an established modern dance company that lacks box-office heft.

Here's what she did: In a solo called *Ethersketch I* (from 2003), starting upstage (wearing a gold-mesh tunic over tiny shorts) she moved slowly downstage doing standard Petronio movements, like his big swirling swing of a leg. And then—blackout. The whole thing can't have lasted four minutes. (A man in the audience shouted "More!") What can she have been thinking of? What can Petronio have been thinking of? To me, I'm afraid, it felt like mutual exploitation.

The rest of the program included a Steve Paxton shaggy-IV story (the astonishingly flexible Petronio himself telling gay-inflected anecdotes while trailing behind him a rolling IV-drip on a pole); a robust performance of what to me is his best work, *City of Twist*, a post-9/11 piece expressing admiration and sorrow for our traumatized town; and a newly commissioned work, *The Architecture of Loss*, that deals with the same material but in a more generalized and lugubrious way, the costumes (raggedy, formless, seaweedy, wan) presenting a serious obstacle to enjoying the work of Petronio's polished and expressive dancers.

The appearance of Ashley Tuttle, formerly a radiant presence at ABT, as the central figure in Pam Tanowitz's *Untitled (The Blue Ballet)* was more substantial than Whelan's but no less puzzling. Tanowitz, a highly acclaimed minimalist modernist—cerebral, austere, deliberate—has been inching toward ballet; now she's up to her neck in it. Tuttle is not only *in* this piece but observing it, as again and again she stands back from the five other dancers and watches them quizzically as well as admiringly. They're in grays; she's in blue—as the song says, they come from two different worlds.

The piece is set to Morton Feldman's endless "String Quartet #1"—a work of such austerity that it makes Tanowitz's dance look glitzy. (Well, no, nothing could, but you know what I mean.) It's so worthy, it's so impressive, it's so dull. What's interesting is that Tanowitz's work is built around Tuttle and yet she doesn't seem to belong in it. What I felt most strongly was how the dance was yearning to be performed on pointe. Tuttle's lyricism added a lovely dimension to Tharp's Broadway hit *Movin' Out*, where her classical background defined her character; here it's food for Tanowitz's ruminations. It's as if *Untitled* were taking place in her head, not on the stage.

The latest performances of the always refreshing New York Theatre Ballet reaffirmed the ballet/modern semi-marriage vows. Merce Cunningham's *Septet*, from 1953, is perhaps his most balletic work, and it's a beauty (music by Satie, not Cage, which explains a lot). The company has grown comfortable in this piece, and does it proud. It also gave a confident and affecting performance of another modern classic, José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane* (1949). This compressed retelling of *Othello*, reduced to four characters, is so brilliantly structured that it grips you from start to (horrifying) ending. Pauline Lawrence's magnificent rich costumes retain their power—they're as central to the action as the dancers. The company's leading young man, Steven Melendez, was subtle and careful as the Moor; it's not his fault that he's still more boyish than mannish. Most riveting were Philip King as Iago and Rie Ogura as Emilia.

Last year NYTB presented *A Rugged Flourish*, a new work by the leading British choreographer Richard Alston, and they brought it back last week—an example of a modern dancemaker successfully creating a work on pointe. And two young dancers from the ballet world—Gemma Bond and Antonia Franceschi—offered works new to us, both of them highly promising. Franceschi's *City Scenes*, for three couples, was convincing and fluent—nothing tentative or awkward—to a nostalgic score by Allen Shawn. Bond's *Run Loose*, to Lizst, was a quick burst of high spirits: happy boy-girl encounter, at full speed. Finally, a fascinating revival of a solo, *An Eccentric Beauty Revisited*, by the early postmodern hero and wit James Waring. Elena Zahlmann brought out its sly self-regarding humor. Satie again, and a faux-Orientalist costume after Bakst. Judson Church meets Diaghilev.

There are few ballet elements in *Hora*, the new work by the Batsheva Dance Company. (Demonstrators were carrying on outside BAM—possibly the same folk who are demanding that the Park Slope co-op stop stocking products from Israel.) *Hora* is the work of the company's artistic director, Ohad Naharin, and it features 11 of his powerful, propulsive dancers—don't get in their way! Those dominatrix thighs!

At the start, the dancers are seated on a bench at the top of the stage. In various groupings they move toward us, then erupt into their mostly floor-bound activities: almost no lifts or jumps, nothing airborne, nothing light, a lot of squatting. There's the odd shudder, the odd corkscrewing to the ground; at one point five women rotate on their bottoms. It's all outbursty rather than fluent. Worst is the use of hideously synthesized morsels of classical music—"The Ride of the Valkyries," "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune," "Clair de Lune," the *Also Sprach Zarathustra* music from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. And then, after an *hora*, it was over.

Finally, a work to which the words "ballet" and "modern" have no relevance. Yes, Boris Eifman was back at the City Center, scene of such previous excrescences of his as *Red Giselle*, *Russian Hamlet*, *Tchaikovsky* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, all of them hideous throwbacks to Sovietski melodrama. Just as Balanchine lovers can spend hours arguing over which are his greatest 10 or 20 masterpieces, Eifman connoisseurs can enjoy themselves debating which is his absolute worst. It's usually the last one you've seen, in this case *Rodin*, which thrilled its overwhelmingly Russian audience at the City Center last weekend. Alastair Macaulay calls these pieces "psycho-sexo-bio-dance-dramas" and whereas that's accurate, it doesn't fully describe the horror, the horror. (Don't worry—he takes care of that elsewhere.) Poor Rodin—not only is he suffering the anguish of Creation (a recurring theme for the hypercreative Eifman) but he's torn between his demented mistress, Camille Claudel, and his sex-starved wife, Rosa. No wonder he pounds his chest, writhes, thrusts, and contorts his face into expressions of despair. You would too if you had to visit Camille in the asylum where a flock of grimacing loonies pranced about you in white nightgowns and bonnets. There are happy workmen stomping around Rodin's studio, there are happy grape-crushers in a harvest celebration, there are happy reporters rushing in and out scribbling about the Master's latest masterpiece. But most of all there are countless lifts, alternately ecstatic and tragic. And endless ripping off of clothes—his, hers, theirs. Oh, yes—he also sculpts. So does Camille. Eifman is such a confused storyteller that it's not clear whether, as in some feminist fantasy, she really did all the work while Maestro got all the credit. But the last we see of him he's up on a platform slamming away at a hunk of marble—bang, bang, bang. Curtain.