

Ballet Review

Merce Cunningham's Dancers
Baryshnikov on Camera
The Kirov's New *Corsaire*
Writing with Balanchine
Forsythe's Frankfurt Ballet
Sacre's Chosen One \$4.95



convey the suggestion of the dance's title. We see their fluid comings and goings, and their stillnesses, against the studio setting of a vast cyclorama designed by William Anastasi (costumes by Dove Bradshaw) that seems to stretch forever. Cunningham, in his brief appearances both as video-dancemaker and as performer (though he's always himself), adds zest to the proceedings. The honors for the exemplary shooting must go to him and his dancers and to codirector Elliot Caplan, who managed to capture the immediacy of the rehearsals and the spirit of the dance itself.

As for video dance at its tackiest, take a supreme Tchaikovsky ballet score, chop it into fragments, and let ice skaters slide around to a rearrangement of the sparkling tunes — that's the formula Lar Lubovitch and director Tom Gutteridge employed for *The Sleeping Beauty* ballet on ice, aired by PBS in December. It was performed by a troupe of Canadian skaters, with international stars. What doomed this marriage of ice skating and ballet was obvious in the show's opening shots. Baby Aurora (Amber Baker) was shown looking as serene as a tot in a diaper commercial, while for her christening music we heard the *Garland Waltz*, intended of course by Tchaikovsky and Petipa to celebrate Aurora's sixteenth birthday. Whizzing past were a few characters only vaguely recognizable from the Prologue and Act One of Petipa's ballet, including a tattered Carabosse (Shaun McGill), who swept around in his rags like an old crow. Rosalynn Sumners, the United States's Olympic silver medalist, eventually proved a stolid teenage Aurora. Robin Cousins, Great Britain's Olympic gold medalist, was her split-jumping Florimund. Of the principals, only Patricia Dodd, a dancerlike skater as the good fairy (Lilac), demonstrated any knowledge of balletic style.

Were it not for the vandalism to Tchaikovsky's score, one could ignore the oversimplification of Petipa's scenario, Lubovitch's uncomprehending choreography, and serious omissions — wasn't

anybody capable of doing an ice ballet where it would most logically fit into a *Beauty* on ice, the vision scene? Nevertheless, the show did make one wonder what a choreographer with a true feeling for ice dance — Christopher Dean, for instance — could do with a similar challenge.

Dance on Camera

David Vaughan

"DAVID GORDON'S *Made in U.S.A.*," opened the new season of "Dance in America" in October. Collaborating with Don Mischer as director, a thorough professional who does not feel the need to impose a visual style of his own on the material, here was the work of a choreographer confident enough to make the medium serve the dance rather than dominate it. The result was one of the most enjoyable and stimulating recent programs in the series. The show's stars were Valda Setterfield and Mikhail Baryshnikov, supported by members of the David Gordon/Pick Up Company and of American Ballet Theatre. Of the three pieces, the first, *Valda and Misha*, was a duet made for the occasion; the other two, *TV Nine Lives* and *Murder*, were from the repertoires of Gordon's company and ABT, respectively.

The duet is charming, involving dialogue in which Setterfield and Baryshnikov talk about why they came to America. Both did so for the same reason, essentially — to open up new possibilities in their dance careers. ("Why didn't you just stop dancing?" Baryshnikov asks Setterfield when she says there was nowhere for her to dance in England; "Don't be silly," she replies.) As they talk, they dance together, occasionally to some fragmentary piano music, and we get a lovely sense of their pleasure in each other's company. The dance is seen against a cartoonlike décor of a room, with additional animated effects,



Valda and Misha: Setterfield with Baryshnikov in "David Gordon's *Made in U.S.A.*" (Photo: Mitzi Trumbo/WNET, New York)

the work of John Sanborn and Mary Petrillo, who are credited with the design and creation of "video sequences," and Rocky Pinciotti, who did the animation. The show was taped in Los Angeles.

In most of his pieces, Gordon takes an idea, or a movement motif, and rings all the possible changes on it — and then finds some more. (It's rather similar to what Ashton does in *Monotones*, or to comic effect in *Tweedledum and Tweedledee* or the lovers' quarrel in *The Dream*.) In *Valda and Misha*, the motif is that of one partner initiating the other's movement by pushing an arm, or a leg. The logo for the ads for this program was a sketch of a folding chair. The duet ends with Setterfield and Baryshnikov on and around such a chair — at one point he sits on her lap — and this provides a segue into the next piece, *TV Nine Lives*, in which Gordon again explores the choreographic possibilities of that object, this time with a group of guys in Western gear, among them Baryshnikov

and Setterfield, who makes brief appearances, disguised by a walrus mustache.

One is reminded that Gordon began as a visual artist by the cropping of the video images, which goes against the received wisdom that the full figure should always be in the frame. This is a funny piece, fast and furious, performed to a medley of hillbilly tunes from vintage recordings, ending with a dance version of a barroom brawl and a shoot-out from a Western movie — thus providing another segue, into *Murder*.

The choice of Edward Gorey as designer for this ballet is an appropriate one — we are reminded of his animated titles for the PBS "Mystery" series. Gordon here is ringing changes on the theme of the whodunit: the piece begins with a series of violent deaths, all involving victims or suspects named Smith or Smythe, or possibly Psmith. (There's a Lady Smith and a Granny Smith.) This first part is danced entirely to a narration spoken by Setter-

field in a resplendent gown — an improvement on ABT's stage version, where her voice was on tape, her words often muffled by laughter and applause.

Then military-band music by Berlioz, "Symphonie funèbre et triomphale," takes over, for what proves to be an extended flashback showing (eventually) how the original corpse, a woman in white, met her untimely end. Baryshnikov appears as, among other characters, the butler (a prime suspect, naturally); as a Jekyll-and-Hyde scientist who drinks smoking liquids from beakers with alarming results; en travesti as a Camille who, when dead, won't lie down, least of all in her coffin; and as the commanding officer of a Mata Hari-like spy. All of these roles he plays with exemplary seriousness, which of course makes him all the funnier.

Of Gordon's three pieces, *Murder* is the only one using pointe work, and there are several references to other ballets: the woman in white draws a circle on the floor with a sword, like Giselle; Camille's phthisic cough is timed to the music, like Fonteyn's in *Marguerite and Armand*; when Baryshnikov whispers instructions to the spy as she prepares to seduce a young officer, we are reminded of Rothbart, Odile, and Siegfried. All this action is ingeniously set to Berlioz' score, but the ballet's prolixity does mean that some of the jokes go on a little too long.

Several seasons ago when I first heard about the Dance Theatre of Harlem's plan to produce *Giselle* in a Creole setting, I confess I had some doubts about it — why couldn't they just dance *Giselle*? If these doubts were overcome by the actuality, it was chiefly because they *did* dance *Giselle*. Frederic Franklin's production is a good, simple, accurate rendition of the ballet — the "concept" did not entail a lot of fundamental changes in the choreography, or extensive explicatory program notes, other than a brief history of Creole society.

It was wonderful that this careful, respectful production got to be seen on NBC on the Sunday after Christmas, at a time

when one might have expected the network to be exclusively occupied by football. Perhaps in the hope of forestalling viewers from switching to channels that were so occupied, Bill Cosby was brought in as narrator. I hope millions of households stayed tuned to ballet. But I can't, I'm afraid, believe that they would have gotten much of a dance experience from watching "Creole *Giselle*," as the program was called.

This is not the dancers' fault. The culprit is the Danish director, Thomas Grimm, who, I am forced to conclude, has no sense of the nature of a dance phrase. He seems to have gotten hold of the idea, possibly from some textbook, that to move the camera to follow a dancer negates his or her movement. So it may, if there is no other information in the shot that tells us about the dancer's relation to the space — the other people in it, the scenic background, or whatever. In a ballet like *Giselle*, there are plenty of things that can supply this information.

Judiciously used, camera movement can give us the sense of the flow of dance movement; injudiciously used, cutting from one camera to another can destroy that sense. Grimm makes such cuts incessantly, changing the angle, the viewpoint, every few moments, so that you become agitated anticipating change. This is much worse than if he were moving the camera itself, since the cutting makes the eye keep jumping to the new viewpoint — and by the time you get your bearings, you can bet he's shifted it yet again. Also, any cut imposes its own rhythm, which has nothing to do with that of the dance or the music. (That's why Fred Astaire insisted on having his dances filmed in long takes.)

Grimm is also very fond of shooting through bits of scenery, or between foreground spectators. Here he even shoots from inside Giselle's cottage. Whose viewpoint is this supposed to be? In the second act, he goes in for some special effects to convey the supernaturalness of the Wilis: slow motion, a freeze-frame or two. Several

times, Myrtha and Giselle are made to vanish and reappear somewhere else. This makes sense when Albrecht tries to clasp Giselle in his arms and she is no longer there, but too often the effect is used quite arbitrarily — now you see her, now you don't. A vision of Myrtha also appears a couple of times in Act One — when the mother warns Giselle of the consequence of too much dancing, and also, puzzlingly, in the mad scene when Giselle points up into the sky (is *that* what she sees up there?).

The performances — of Virginia Johnson (Giselle Lanaux), Eddie J. Shellman (Albrecht/Albert Monet-Cloutier), Lorraine Graves (Myrtha), and the rest — deserve better treatment than this. I must say again, though, that I wish someone would tell the dancers not to mouth words when they are miming. Lowell Smith (Hilarion) is again the worst offender (I have previously mentioned lip-reading him in *Schéhérazade* telling Zobeide "You — wait here"). One more question: Why did Bill Cosby keep saying that the original story is an Austrian folk tale? Gautier found it in Heine's *De l'Allemagne*.

"Celebrating Gershwin," the two-part special aired in the PBS "Great Performance" series in November and December, was an amalgam, or do I mean a mishmash, of material shot at the Brooklyn Academy of Music gala in March 1987 and in London later, under the direction, respectively, of Patricia Birch and Humphrey Burton. Tommy Tune and Drew Barrymore did a tap number as they lip-synched the recording of Fred and Adele Astaire singing "Fascinating Rhythm." The Copasetics were restricted to a couple of crossovers in Gregg Burge's rendition of "King of Swing" — the restriction should have been the other way around. (Some of the great veteran tap-dancers — Chuck Green, Sandman Simms, Jimmy Slyde, and the Nicholas Brothers — got their due in the 1987 Kennedy Center Honors, shown in late December on CBS, paying tribute to Sammy Davis, Jr.)

The big dance number was a ballet cho-

reographed by Dan Siretta for Baryshnikov and a group of nine women and eight men, which literally never got off the ground — it got hung up on the cliché of Misha-as-loner. Every time you thought he might go into a dance phrase that took off from the music, he'd start sulking again. Remembering that Siretta's inventive dances for the Goodspeed Opera House revival of Gershwin's *Lady, Be Good!* last summer lacked only a really first-rate dancer in the Astaire role, I can only regard this ballet as a sadly missed opportunity. The best dance moments in "Celebrating Gershwin," not unnaturally, were in clips of Astaire himself — the familiar one of him and Adele and Marilyn Miller clowning at a Ziegfeld audition, and one I had never seen, a brief clip in color taken on the set of *Shall We Dance?*

BR CONTRIBUTORS

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Carolyn Brown, who is still writing her book about Cunningham et al. for Knopf, occasionally teaches in such places as the Palucca Schule in Dresden, East Germany, and in Kuopio, Finland.

Douglas Dunn will choreograph and dance a new work with two former Paris Opéra stars, Jean Guizerix and Wilfrid Piollet, at the Bourbourg festival of humorous dance this June.

Viola Farber, chair of Sarah Lawrence College's dance department, will work with the St. Paul-Minneapolis dance community this summer.

Dawn Lille Horwitz teaches dance research and reconstruction in the City College of New York's graduate program.

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Valda Setterfield is working on the "United States" project, which is developing from "David Gordon's Made in U.S.A." television special.

Gus Solomons, Commonwealth Professor of Dance at Mary Washington College in Virginia this semester, will be artistic consultant to Tanzania's modern-dance company this summer.