

sova, Claude Bessy, Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux, Imre Dosza, Richard Englund, Jan Nuyts, Merle Park, Ben Stevenson, Momoko Tani, Violette Verdy and Patricia Wilde.
ROBERT GRESKOVIC

WASHINGTON, D.C.

American Ballet Theatre began its forty-fifth anniversary national tour at Kennedy Center Opera House (Dec. 18-Jan. 6) with programs of mixed repertory that were poorly attended, followed by sold-out runs of last year's *Cinderella* and the first American staging of the *Romeo and Juliet* choreographed by its new artistic associate, Sir Kenneth MacMillan.

The season's coup was David Gordon's first ballet for a classical company — and what a ballet it is! *Field, Chair and Mountain* inspired consummate performances from the six soloists, the ensemble of twelve and especially from principals Martine van Hamel and Clark Tippet. Like Gordon's work for his PickUp Co., *Field* is a witty, invigorating conundrum. Gordon has chosen the music of the nineteenth-century Irish composer John Field, whose seventh piano concerto is in two movements (the first enfolding a slow nocturne); Gordon and collaborators Santo Loquasto and Jennifer Tipton make it look like three.

In his "downtown" work in small performance spaces, Gordon uses language as a major element. He has had to abandon it in the opera house, but he uses elements of classical ballet as if they were spoken language. Gordon revels in ballet's workaday practice, its absorption of social and folk materials, its spectacular effects and feats and especially its partnering.

In the first half, he creates the sensation of a horizontal moving field on which the ballet unfurls, as if it were a panorama. Van Hamel and Tippet alternate with soloists and ensemble in continuous currents of movement that traverse the stage from wing to wing. They seem to be on a track that bends out of sight and brings them back on moments later. Dancers link



Robert La Fosse, Leslie Browne as the fated pair in ABT's new staging of MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*

up and exchange places, give and take support, are lifted, turned, folded, slid and pushed (but not shoved). The spirit is companionate, respectful, tender and occasionally passionate. For the nocturne, Loquasto adds a layer of citrus chiffon to the blue-gray dancewear, and as dancers modulate across the stage, a painted mountain range on folding panels spreads slowly across a burnt orange mesa under a cobalt blue sky — like something out of New Mexico.

Once all twenty dancers and nineteen metal folding chairs are onstage for the last part, they stay there — but not put. This is more like the Gordon we know: dancer and prop; dancer as prop; prop as dancer — arranged and rearranged with a child's free-flowing imagination and a choreographer's sure sense of design. Van Hamel and Tippet have a risky, intricate trio with a chair, like mountain climbers working on a flat surface. As a game of

musical chairs ends, a triptych mountain range studded with folding chairs scrolls up behind the company, signaling the finale. The stage is awash with dancers and chairs recapitulating sundry images, while Van Hamel is promenaded on her toe, poised precariously on a chair at center stage, assured, calm and radiant.

Field's music tends to ramble and Gordon occasionally meanders too, but this is a minor flaw in a work that astonishes the eye and mind and consoles the heart. *Field* doesn't have the intimacy of Gordon's company works, where personal relationships are so much a part of the fabric and Gordon and his wife Valda Setterfield are parental figures. But then relationships in a ballet company are different. What Gordon shows us is that dance is a cooperative art. *Field* grows richer with repeated viewings. Seen in one light, it seems to be about interdependency in work and life, the necessity of linkage and support, affiliation and trust. In another, it might be a parable about ballet — first part performance, second part rehearsal, with Van Hamel the prima ballerina, Tippet her sympathetic partner and the ensemble and soloists exchanging places and roles — all engaged in work that never ceases in its challenges.

Since MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* came on the heels of the Joffrey Ballet's Cranko production, I expected to see why it has been accused of borrowing heavily from Cranko. Given the two versions' joint debt to the Lavrovsky, I was struck with how different they are. MacMillan's is the more lavish, a grand production costing \$900,000 that boasts Nicholas Georgiadis'

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