

# Old (New) Master in a New (Old) Role

By Deborah Jowitt

**DEGAS: THE DANCERS.** At the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. (through March 10).  
**AMERICAN BALLET THEATER.** At Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. (December 20). Premiere of David Gordon's *Field, Chair and Mountain*.  
**NEW YORK CITY BALLET.** At New York State Theater (December 11). *The Nutcracker*.

Edgar Degas must have drawn or painted the dancers of the Paris Opera hundreds of times, yet it was never the finished ballet, the perfection of form that absorbed him. The exhibit that George T.M. Shackelford has mounted at Washington's National Gallery scrutinizes, with exemplary sensitivity, how Degas saw dancers. What he saw was endless preparation: the adjusting of a costume, the tying of ribbons on a slipper, the backstage chats with libidinous frock-coated balletomanes, the pliés out of the footlights' blaze, the laborious développés at the barre, the sitting around and waiting to be called on in class, to be needed in rehearsal, to dance on stage.

The women—and it was always women—in his oils and luminous pastels, or pastel over monotype are both lovely and coarse. Their heads are often dwarfed by their modish hairdos, their bodies squat, their legs knotted from forced turnout. Yet the sunlight and the stagelights that slant into gloomy studios and corners of the theater make their white skirts gleam and rim their weary, artless gestures with brightness. The seated woman in a pastel dating from the 1880s bends far forward to adjust her slipper, resting her shoulder against one knee. She could be a washer-woman at work except that her shining back and dark head reach downward from a halo of white tulle and an extravagant blue sash.

Shackelford has arranged the exhibit around several major works or themes. The first room is devoted to the stage or backstage areas before or during performances. A dancer, seen through the heads of pit musicians takes her coquettish bow. Detailed heads of men pointing opera glasses every which way frame a distant blur of the ballet from *Robert le Diable*. A dancer, half out of the painting, warms up on stage amid painted shrubbery while a top-hatted gentleman gravely assesses her battement, or her leg.

The centerpiece of the second room is the famous large oil of Jules Perrot giving a class. In the third, the focal point is the statue (a copy) known as *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*. From there, spectators move to the series of extremely long, narrow works (about 17 inches by 35 inches) that suggest portions of a continuous frieze. The last room shows works dating from the 1890s, when Degas's eyesight was foundering in a sea of color.

What is remarkable about the exhibit is the way in which works have been grouped so that a painting is flanked by preliminary sketches for it or by related studies or simply by some of Degas's many enthralled, yet meticulous, assaults on the same theme, the same pose, the same model. The chalk studies that surround the statue of the knobby-kneed child in the real gauze tutu reveal how scrupulously he investigated the minute variations in how she clasped her hands behind her back, and what large differences these might make. Alter the angle, the tension, and her attitude changes from resignation to attentiveness, from relaxation to nervous readiness.

In the last room, over and over, dancers adjust the recalcitrant shoulder straps that are supposed to be, it seems, half on and half off the shoulder. Only one of four women glistening in chartreuse stares onto the stage; the other three twist and crane to pluck at these ruffles. The same action executed by nude women reads otherwise; they might be

scratching their arms or rubbing lotion on themselves.

It was a coincidence, I thought, that I was to see, that night, a ballet that David Gordon had made for American Ballet Theater. Usually a work "constructed" by Gordon invites the viewer to consider it the way you'd look at the Degas show—noting the way context alters a repeated action, hearing a spoken word slide out of one meaning into another, understanding how the finished work can comment on the process by which it had been made.

But there isn't much—as Merce Cunningham has so wisely and maddeningly



Clark Tippet and Martine van Hamel in *Field, Chair and Mountain*

## DANCE

said—that you can count on in this world. Gordon's *Field, Chair and Mountain* isn't a "construction," it's a piece of choreography, a real ballet, with no rough edges or pedestrian movement or witty talking. Gordon was astute to realize that the brainy, low-key pieces with which he regularly dazzles the audience for "post-modern" dance would be lost on opera house stages and suit ABT's traditionally mute virtuosi not at all. When the ballet is brilliant—as it often is—I accept the new David Gordon with pleasure; when it falters—as I think it does—I find myself wondering why he had to jettison quite so many of his usual predilections.

The music, John Field's *Seventh Piano Concerto* (1832), is romantic in a fussily tempestuous manner. It sounds—almost throughout—like an endless, heavily ornamental cadenza. We may, perhaps, credit it with leading Gordon toward a fluid, understated style—an almost constant unfurling of steps, with few poses—or to the lovely idea of having the dancers always enter from stage right and exit stage left—an intricate panorama that is pulled gradually across the stage in much the same way that Santo Loquasto's low Japanese-screen panorama of a brown mountain is reeled across the stage during the second part of the ballet. But the witty echoing of motifs is more like Gordon than Field, and it's wonderful to watch the mountains appear and remember Martine van Hamel's first entrance: a smooth, sober garland of chainée turns on point all the way across the stage and off.

I think that Field's music may be in part to blame for the aspects of the ballet that bother me. One is a dynamic sameness within some sections. The other is the two closely related pas de deux for van Hamel and Clark Tippet. These duets stay knotty and intricate. For all their even-tempered air, they look crabby in some way. I begin to see Tippet's hands as mauling van Hamel's ribcage, so con-

stantly does he twist her, release her, grab her again.

After van Hamel's chainées, six soloists burst onto the stage in a boiling cluster. A woman flies through the air in a supported leap, someone spins and falls, a man grasps a woman's hand and pulls her past him. This is an approximate description of what the audience sees. The choreography for these six dancers (Chrisa Keramidas, Elaine Kudo, Lisa Lockwood, Wes Chapman, John Renvall, and John Gardner) constitutes the most felicitous blend of ballet steps and Gordon's sensibility in the whole piece. The smooth turns, arabesques, and leaps from the academic vocabulary look fresh, loosened. And they alternate with catch-me-when-I-fall-back moves (later picked up by Tippet and van Hamel), and other more casual sorts of partnering. In the softly churning, quite rapid activity—every person or couple on a separate track—men occasionally help other men, women other women. They handle each other tenderly and with courtesy, but without phony romance.

Loquasto's costumes for this first part are understated grayish-white clothes. But when, after the first pas de deux, the corps of 12 enters and spreads out across the stage, the costumes have become persimmon colored. This dance, in front of the gradually appearing mountain range, is more spread out—a field of activity with the slowed-down dreaminess of Field's accompanying nocturne.

The others get their turn in persimmon clothes, but for the last section, the squads of 12, two, six return wearing loose pale blue shirts over tights or trousers. They're equipped with folding chairs—a conceit Gordon has explored before. The audience enjoys the unusual games. Here come the poses. Now it's my turn. Now yours. Partnering on chairs. A slew of simultaneous trios with two people looping together while one sits out until he gets scooped up and another drops into the chair. A fine sort of Musical Chairs, with someone's gesture bumping another off the chair and down the line to greet another, who... It's a very busy, engagingly silly scene, and somewhere in the middle of it, a backdrop descends: it shows a steep mountain studded with folding chairs.

It should come as no surprise that David Gordon can make a successful ballet,

can work convincingly in an unfamiliar idiom. And when I ponder what I have described as its flaws, I become less sure about whether Gordon abdicated too much of his own style, or not quite enough. In the venues where Gordon usually presents his work, the audience—close to the action—can watch a single idea, a single quality being investigated for a long time without getting bored. The intimacy makes every small modulation visible and interesting. A company like ABT, performing in an opera house, thrives on large changes in the stage picture and frequent gold-mounted climaxes. Were I to see, for example, Gordon's chair duets and trios up close, I'd probably be enchanted by subtle individual variations I could scarcely take in at the Kennedy Center.

And speaking of variations on themes and lives of dancers, the annual *Nutcracker* pilgrimage always thrusts new and bewitching images my way. George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker* is one of the few ballets in the NYCB repertory that make use of the many talented children in the School of American Ballet. Through its delights, we can see, as through a palimpsest, to the Ivanov ballet which the child Balanchine knew from his days as a student at the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg.

Such children, then and now, learn from their stagework things that they can't learn in class: how the grown-up dancer each most idolizes performs on different evenings, how a role alters according to the dancer who performs it.

Watching Maria Calegari (the Sugar Plum Fairy) and Lourdes Lopez (Dewdrop), I thought that growing up in Balanchine means, in part, learning to be careless—learning to let the dance's phrasing shine through the steps and not insisting that each step be perfectly enunciated. Calegari is the more febrile, the more flyaway, but Lopez has a grand sense of the dimensions of a dance, not just of its individual steps.

And the more advanced of the children have this same musicality and daring in fledgling form. The little Polichinelles who frolic out from Mother Ginger's skirt are already dancing—not just laying steps end to end like dominoes. The stage and classroom are not the same, and they know that already.

## Bust Your Nutcrackers

By Otis Stuart

**BALLETFORE.** At the Theater of the Riverside Church (December 15 and 16). *The Nutcracker*, choreographed by Matthew Nash.

**THE FEDICHEVA BALLET COMPANY.** At the Fashion Institute of Technology (December 15). *The Nutcracker*, choreographed by Kaleria Fedicheva.

Nothing brings out the old "Bah, humbug" faster than *The Nutcracker*. Spines stiffen at the tinkle of a celesta. But I think the problem with much of what we have come to think of as *The Nutcracker* lies with what Edwin Denby characterized as the ballet's identity. He wrote that it "is a fantasy ballet for children, like a toy that a grownup makes with thoughtful care. Grownups watching can slip back into a world they have left. . . . And *The Nutcracker* is also the story of a child's presentiment of handsome conduct, of civilized society. . . ." He was speaking of the great Balanchine version performed annually by the New York City Ballet, but he also defined a kind of standard for works proposing an assessment of innocence. That standard is lofty and, like Christmas, it demands accuracy and sincerity and not a shred of patronizing. Otherwise, it's not just a joke. It's noxious.

Two recent area productions of *The*

*Nutcracker* illuminate this issue of identity. The Balletfore company, under the direction of Diana Byer, presented a 55-minute concert version. The Fedicheva Ballet Company from Glen Cove, Long Island, under the direction of Kalerina Fedicheva, former star of the Kirov Ballet and People's Artist of the Soviet Union, staged a three-hour version. That should settle the question of scale pretty quickly.

The Balletfore production tells the whole story—party, Drosselmeyer, Snowflakes, and all. The opening scene is performed in black and white against a black and white toy backdrop. Sugar Plum brings on the color. The miming is swift and sure and halfway to dancing. The rhythmic pacing is a marvel. The single distracting result of the urgency is that we find out too quickly which child is Clara: she's wearing point shoes. Drosselmeyer is not only a magician, but a juggler as well. The Enchanted Kingdom is right next door.

The choreography is by Matthew Nash, and choreographers of any contemporary productions of *The Nutcracker*, a brave lot, should resign themselves to unfair comparisons as long as the State

Continued on next page