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Review: At New York Theater Ballet, Safe Bets Become Bold

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Amanda Treiber, left, and Elena Zahlman in Jerome Robbins's "Rondo" on Friday at Florence Gould Hall. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

New York Theater Ballet is a chamber troupe addicted to modernism, staging works by choreographers, past and present, who have extended and challenged the pure-dance aspects of dance theater. Because plenty of its works are by the dead — Vaslav Nijinsky, Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor, Agnes de Mille, Merce Cunningham, Jerome Robbins, James Waring — it's easy to think of it as a nostalgic troupe, picking up small-scale old pieces as an alternative to the ubiquitous Balanchine uptown.

Yet this isn't nostalgia; it's active curiosity. Theater Ballet likes its dances tough and lean, with very few wow endings or love stories. Its artistic director is a woman, and it has a good track record in commissioning new dances from other women choreographers. And it likes its music live.

The program it presented on Friday and Saturday, at Florence Gould Hall, exemplified this. On paper, three pieces by [Jerome Robbins](#) (usually Mr. Accessible) and a world premiere by [Richard Alston](#) (who, at 69, is Britain's most senior acclaimed choreographer) may look undemanding. In performance, they proved dense, complex, uncompromising: dances about dance and dancing, laden with intricate choreographic detail with an emphasis on tight-knit musicality.

Mr. Alston's creation, "The Seasons," set to John Cage's score of that name, is dedicated to the memory of the critic and scholar [David Vaughan](#), who influenced Theater Ballet, and who died in October. Mr. Vaughan — whose credo was that the ABC's of contemporary classicism were Ashton, Balanchine and Cunningham — was also among the first to give serious attention to choreography by Mr. Alston, who first dedicated a work to Mr. Vaughan in the 1970s and shared those dance beliefs. In a program note for "The Seasons," Mr. Alston refers to the period of 1946 to '47, during which Ashton made "[Symphonic Variations](#)" (largely based on the theme of the seasons); Balanchine made "[The Four Temperaments](#)"; and Cunningham, using Cage's new score, made "[The Seasons](#)." Cunningham's work, though a success, did not survive after 1948; Mr. Alston took inspiration from this master's later dances.



From left, Ms. Treiber, Ms. Zahlmann and Alexis Branagan in the world premiere of Richard Alston's "The Seasons."
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

With just seven dancers (appealingly dressed in pastel colors by Sylvia Taalsohn Nolan), Mr. Alston's version of "The Seasons" economically charts the changes of a year's climate: The admirable Steven Melendez is Winter, who (after an introductory ensemble) begins the work and later closes it. In different male-female duets, the choreography suggests different aspects of human love in spring, summer and

autumn. There's no eroticism, but the various kinds of colloquy and participation make the dance harmonies of each duet wonderfully layered.

Mr. Alston makes marvelous steps, lines and phrases (especially striking shapes occur with the dancer's back to the audience). The choreography cleanses the palate. All the dancers are quietly confident and individual: Erez Milatin, who joined the company last year and dances the Summer duet with Alexis Branagan, has a particular glow.

You can see why the three items by Robbins — “Septet” (1982), “Rondo” (1980), “Concertino” (1982) — have long since been omitted from retrospectives of his works by larger companies. None of them is an obvious hit, or tries to be. And yet I suspect none of the 20 Robbins revivals at New York City Ballet this May will do nearly as much to extend our knowledge of Robbins as these three. (As with all of Theater Ballet's repertory, I wish these works could have been seen on a stage at least four times the size; they were all made for the Lincoln Center theater now called the David H. Koch, to which Robbins had been long accustomed.)

These short pieces, made for small casts, demonstrate the most generally overlooked side of Robbins: the pure-dance craftsman who analyzed musical scores, the composition of dance phrases and the alchemy with which the two could join. “Septet” and “Concertino” were both made for City Ballet's 1982 Stravinsky Festival. “Septet,” for three men and two women, is set to Stravinsky's two-piano reduction of his 1952 score of that name. “Concertino,” for one woman and two men, is to the composer's “Concertino for String Quartet” and “Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo.” “Rondo,” for two women, is to Mozart (the Rondo in A Minor, K511 for solo piano).