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New York Theatre Ballet Moves Its Relevés Downtown

By Marina Harss

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At a recent informal performance hosted by New York Theater Ballet at St. Mark's Church, 40 or so people crammed into a studio on the second floor. Children sat cross-legged. Two company members danced an Agnes de Mille pas de deux. The production manager, also a puppeteer, did a melancholy number with a wooden board as a prop. A 10-year-old girl from the school performed a dance she had choreographed, based on a haiku she had composed.

Steven Melendez, a longtime member of New York Theater Ballet, rehearsing at the company's new studio at St. Mark's Church. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

"Studio paintings," she recited, "show my dreams, capture my life. In the bright dance blaze." The feeling was convivial, like a show held in someone's living room. It was hard to believe that this gathering might never have taken place.

Just a year ago, New York Theater Ballet was facing an uncertain future. The company of 12 had been turned out of the dusty old wood-paneled studio in Murray Hill that had

been its home for 30 years. The building, a parish house, had been sold by its owner, the Baptist church next door. Diana Byer, the company's founder and artistic director, embarked on a frantic search. But everything was too expensive, too small, too far-flung.



Diana Byer, the artistic director, teaching a children's ballet class in the second-floor space. Credit Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Then the company's luck turned, partly because of another's misfortune. The Incubator Arts Project, an experimental theater group, announced it was closing and leaving its space on the second floor of St. Mark's, a progressive Episcopal church in the East Village. In July, New York Theater Ballet signed its new lease.

On Wednesday, the ensemble will begin its inaugural run at New York Live Arts, a theater in Chelsea known more for its experimental dance programming than for ballet. As Live Art's artistic director, the choreographer Bill T. Jones, said recently by phone: "We've been asking ourselves, why, in the downtown world, is there no classical ballet? You've got to go right up close to it and get to know it, not as a general idea but as something living and breathing."

It's a brave new world for this hard-working troupe: a new home, new audiences, an updated repertory. For much of its life, its bread and butter has consisted of intimate works by mid-20th-century choreographers like de Mille, Antony Tudor and the whimsical experimentalist James Waring, as well as ballets for children. Most of these works are seen as too obscure, too old-fashioned and too intimate in scale for the big companies. Even Tudor's "Lilac Garden" and "Dark Elegies," widely considered masterworks, are seldom programmed. Ms. Byer, who studied with Tudor in the 1960s,

is determined to keep them alive. "They make the piece live from within," Alastair Macaulay wrote in *The New York Times*, reviewing a performance of "Dark Elegies" in 2013.

For almost 30 years, the company has performed short seasons at Florence Gould Hall, an unprepossessing space tucked under the French Institute Alliance Française on East 59th Street, where the troupe continues to perform children's ballets. The dancers also go on yearly bus and truck tours that take them to destinations like Rutland, Vt. (population 17,292), and Hanceville, Ala. (population 3,205). They'll drive for five or six hours and then put on a show, often in a school auditorium.

The Theater Ballet dancers have grit; there's nothing precious about them. They don't all look like the intimidatingly long-limbed athletes one thinks of when one hears the word "ballet." They're hardworking, well-trained, musically sensitive dancers of various physiques and backgrounds. Ms. Byer's teaching style is based on classes she took with Margaret Craske, a British teacher who emphasized subtle shifts of weight, compound steps and a supple use of the head and shoulders, not big effects.

The company's style tends to be contained and unadorned. Even so, there are standouts: Steven Melendez, who started at the school when he was 7, is an exceptionally fine dancer with a noble bearing and a heroic quality. Nayomi Van Brunt, a recent recruit and a former apprentice at Atlanta Ballet, is bright and athletic, with a sparkling jump.

"They dance Tudor with an extraordinary simplicity," the British choreographer Richard Alston said in a recent phone interview from London, "and a very strong sense of the oddness that makes Tudor's language as powerful as it is."

When Mr. Alston created "A Rugged Flourish," in 2011, it was a major accomplishment for the company: his first American work. That collaboration was the beginning of a kind of renaissance for Theater Ballet, with a greater emphasis on new, more adventurous work. That renewed energy is reflected in its program at New York Live Arts, which is to include two premieres.

One of those is Pam Tanowitz's "Double Andante." Ms. Tanowitz, a kind of molecular scientist of dance, places steps from the classical lexicon under a microscope, toying with symmetry, asymmetry, continuity and partnering conventions. In part because she wanted to feature Michael Scales, the company's pianist, she has set the dance to the second movement of Beethoven's Sonata in D major (No. 15).

For a new quartet by Nicolo Fonte, a veteran of Nacho Duato's *Compañía Nacional de Danza*, "There, and Back Again," Ms. Byer commissioned a score for piano and violin from Kevin Keller, an American composer. The piece, danced off pointe, is based on "Hansel and Gretel."

Another initiative is the company's exploration of Merce Cunningham's modernist idiom. The 1964 trio "Cross Currents" was staged for the company by the former

Cunningham dancer Jennifer Goggans. To get used to the unfamiliar style, the dancers took classes at the Cunningham Trust.

Back at St. Mark's, after a gut renovation, rehearsals and classes are in full swing. Despite the tight space, barely large enough to contain Mr. Melendez's leaps, the studio is welcoming, with high ceilings and light streaming through vaulted stained-glass windows. The dancers have to negotiate their way around two pillars, but they don't seem to mind. As Mr. Alston had said earlier, with a chuckle, "They're quite thin pillars."

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