



critical
dance

New York Theatre Ballet: Double Andante; Cross Currents; There, And Back Again; Alice-in-Wonderland Follies

New York Live Arts, New York, NY, February 19, 2015

Jerry Hochman

In the latest program in its “Legends and Visionaries” series, and the first to be performed at New York Live Arts in Chelsea, New York Theatre Ballet continues to present ‘little’ (and no so little) dances that connect dance past with dance present, and to enlighten audiences with the sheer variety of its programming (one classic revival; one repertory revival, and two new pieces) and competence of its dancers. It’s exciting to watch this little company – even on a night with sub-zero windchill. Particularly exciting for me is the opportunity to see dances for the first time, or anew in a different context. And here NYTB did the impossible. It made me reconsider my response to Merce Cunningham.

I’ve often written that I’m not a Cunningham fan. Although I recognize his contribution to the art and his place in the dance pantheon, as an audience member I care less about innovation and avant-garde experimentation than I do about visual and intellectual stimulation, regardless of the choreographic label. Aside from ABT’s production of “Duets”, which I appreciated but didn’t find particularly entertaining, what Cunningham pieces I have seen I’ve found deadly dull. “Cross Currents”, an early piece of his from 1964 that NYTB has now revived, is different, and it’s shockingly good.

A trio of dancers moves in space to Conlon Nancarrow’s “Rhythm Studies for Player Piano”. The operative word is ‘move’. These dancers are not static, posing bodies; the movement is virtually non-stop. And there’s some semblance of interaction between them – not a thematic connection, but a musical, movement connection. Although they’re independent entities, cross-currents of movement, the three at times move in sync with one or both others, or slightly off sequence, as they traverse the stage. Or they pair off; or one dances solo. And the dance has significant variety. Even though the dancers are barefoot, there’s a mixture of feverish

movement and walking, of balletic lyricism and angularity, and an abundance of pure, exhilarating, fiendish speed. Moving that fast and that intricately, with the precision and relative stiffness that the choreography demands, was a stretch, but Amanda Treiber, Alexis Branagan, and Choong Hoon Lee delivered.

My only complaint is that the piece doesn't end. At some point, the dancers move offstage right and disappear into the wings, while the music continues, as if the dancers were simply passing through a space into which background music is being continuously broadcast. But that aside, this was galvanizing dance theater, even though there was no story, no physical connection among the dancers, and no effort made to connect on any emotional or pseudo-emotional level with the audience. It worked because it never stopped looking interesting and visually exciting. And I'm in NYT's debt for opening my eyes.



Steven Melendez, Amanda Treiber, and Choon Hoon Lee in 'Double Andante'. Photo © Rachel Neville

Equally exciting, but less of a revelation, was Pam Tanowitz's "Double Andante", which premiered the previous night. Although it features a small army of twelve dancers, it's like "Cross Currents" in that it's plotless, has a sense of angularity, and is fast-paced, precision dance. But it's not at all derivative (even though Tanowitz has Cunningham roots). On the contrary, there's a balletic flow to it, and there are connections of sorts between the dancers, usually as changing pairs. Choreographed to Beethoven's "Sonata in D Major Opus 28 ('Pastorale') II. Andante", the piece is somber, but not mournful, and carries a hint of wistfulness. Strangers on a stage; connections made but not kept.

“Double Andante” opens with Treiber in front of a curtain, alone, moving to some inner direction. The curtain behind her opens to reveal a stage filled with dancers, all individual entities. Treiber walks to one dancer, apparently making some minimal effort to connect, and then the dance more formally begins. The movement quality is programmed, with each dancer appearing to do his or her own thing – but the result isn’t a hodgepodge. Rather, it’s life, or a slice of it in time, reduced to its individual essence, with the stage populace moving unpredictably but not uniquely, and sometimes connecting with others (pairings dominate); sometimes not. Tanowitz uses the entire stage, and has her dancers twist, turn, pose, shimmy, lie down, rise up, and through it all move as if they were navigating prescribed pathways. A choreographed equivalent, perhaps, of Piet Mondrian’s “Broadway Boogie Woogie”.

The work is fairly evenly distributed among the cast, but I particularly liked the effort by the company veterans, Treiber and Elena Zahlmann, both of whom had exceptional nights, and Branagan, who dances with a burning intensity. I note also that the credits include an ‘Assistant to the Choreographer’ – a title I do not previously recall seeing. The assistant was Ashley Tuttle, a former principal dancer with ABT.

“There, and Back Again”, choreographed by Nicolo Fonte to a commissioned score by Kevin Keller, is inspired by the Grimm fairy tale, “Hansel and Gretel”. Although I didn’t find the distillation of the story particularly successful on its own terms (there are just four characters: ‘A Witch’ – essentially a hybrid Stepmother and Witch from the original Grimm fairy tale, ‘A Girl’ – Gretel, ‘Her Brother’ – Hansel and ‘Their Father’), it is an interesting piece to watch.



‘There, and Back Again’. Photo © Rachel Neville

Keller's score for piano and violin is a winner. It provides exactly the right amount of inherent tension and melodrama, particularly in the form of extensive, amplified (by microphone) string plucking, which conveyed an eerie, gothic timbre of hidden terror.

The piece opens with the Father and the Witch, and Hansel and Gretel, upstage, separate from each other, as if occupying different rooms in a house. The Witch (or, at this point, the stepmother), promptly begins to plant evil thoughts in the Father's brain. She covers his eyes, whispers in his ear, and seduces him with movement that is not only sensual, but powerful. The Girl and her Brother then awaken, and sense the presence of evil. And the ballet proceeds much in this way throughout – one mini-scene involving one pair of dancers alternating with another involving the other pair – until the Witch battles with the Brother, and then the Girl – and is ultimately defeated.

All this sounds minimalistic, and it is. But something about "There, And Back Again" – the emotions clearly generated, even if it's not clear why they're being expressed – that takes it to a higher level. The ballet's vivid imagery and economy of movement are admirable qualities with emotional echoes of Agnes De Mille's "Fall River Legend", and Antony Tudor's "Pillar of Fire". Together with Keller's impressive score, they set a dominant and impressive mood, and permit the dancers to make the most of it. And they did.

The Witch is the dominant character, and Treiber does a superb job with it; her vivid portrayal was an emotional tornado; Zahlmann's Girl was youthful, but intelligent beyond her years, and she was the Witch's undoing; Michael Wells did well as the Brother, though was not as dominant in the story as Zahlmann. The one disappointment was Stephen Melendez's Father – not because he did anything wrong, but because the choreography apparently required him to show no emotion at all – which is precisely how he played it.

The piano playing by NYTB's music by Michael Scales, NYTB's Music Director, and the vivid violin execution by Margarita Krein, who had to stand throughout the piece, were outstanding.

The evening concluded with Keith Michaels' "Alice-in-Wonderland Follies". It's a hoot: 'Alice' goes vaudeville.

The piece, which premiered in 2002, divides the Lewis Carroll stories into twenty bite-sized skits. It's not high-brow ballet, but it's not trying to be. What it does more often than not is to make the story even more fun than it already is, in a way that is faithfully irreverent. My only quibble with it is that it goes on too long – but suggesting that a few segments might be scrapped would be the equivalent of telling the mother of twenty children to pick a few to eliminate. I particularly appreciated Michaels' choices for musical accompaniment: excerpts of pieces ranging from "St. Louis Rag" to Debussy, Schumann, and Verdi, to "Home Sweet Home", to "Glow Worm" to "Oh, You Beautiful Doll" to Sousa's "El Capitan" to Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" to a word-for-word full cast recitation of "Jabberwocky," to Mozart's "Twinkle



Twinkle Little Star” (not the ‘50s doo-wop cover).

The entire cast (many of whom did double or triple duty) merits considerable praise for avoiding the temptation to be overly cute, letting the choreographic cuteness (as well as the imaginative costumes designed by Sylvia Taalsohn Nolan and sets by Gillian Bradshaw-Smith) speak for itself. That having been said, the performances by Zahlmann as Alice, Treiber (with stage-spanning tail) as The Cheshire Cat, Carmella Lauer as Caterpillar, and Mitchell Kilby and Seth Ives as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, were especially noteworthy. And then there is this fabulous daredevil Baby and some lovable Hedgehogs, students from NYTB’s affiliated Ballet School NY.

Elena Zahlmann and Steven Melendez in ‘Alice-in-Wonderland Follies’.
Photo © Rachel Neville

One of NYTB’s missions, since its creation in 1978 by Artistic Director Diana Byer, is to present infrequently performed ballet masterpieces and new works by emerging choreographers, and to do so in a way that makes the ballets and its dancers accessible, and the performance a personal experience for members of the audience. With this program, NYTB has done it. Again.