

Spring 2015

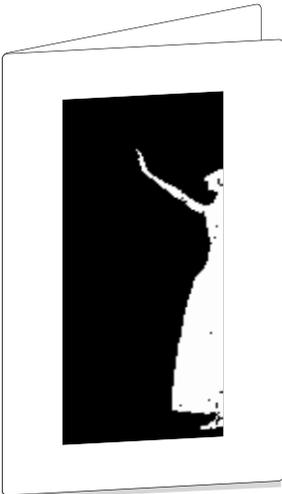
# Ballet Review



## **Erasing Borders Festival of Indian *Dance from Ballet Review Spr. 2015***

On the cover: Olga Smirnova and Evan McKie in *Onegin*  
at the 2014 Youth America Grand Prix Gala.

Photograph by Hideaki Tanioka, YAGP



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Spring 2015**

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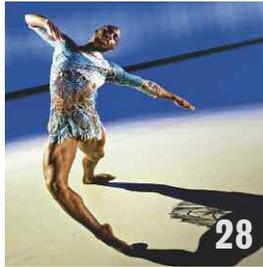
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Cover photograph by Hideaki Tanioka, Youth America Grand Prix: *Onegin* with Olga Smirnova and Evan McKie at the 2014 YAGP Gala.

Janáček's piano solo "The Tawny Owl Has Not Flown Away" (the owl is a bad omen in Czech folklore), found the boxes forming a giant sofa (or a tomb) and the couple, stripped to their underclothes, imprisoned there before the man left and the woman, clutching a rose, curled up.

—This conceit became a bit obvious toward the end, but Sabi Varga, tightrope between vulnerable and implacable, and Kathleen Breen-Combes made you wonder which one was Death; then for a while it seemed that Breen-Combes might escape. The six ensemble women, as they gamboled about the upright stones with their men, gave an odd poignancy to the notion of being dead.

—No question that "Death and the Maiden" hovered over *Cacti*—the presto tarantella finale of the Schubert string quartet formed a major part of the score, played first by a wandering onstage string quartet (made up of conservatory students and subway buskers) and then by the orchestra.

—While a hysterically pretentious offstage voice described us all as "members of the human orchestra," the sixteen dancers, on what resembled giant Scrabble tiles, knelt, slapped the tiles, slapped their bodies, played at martial arts, vocalized, struck poses as if to spell out words, air-conducted the orchestra, and ran in place—not always facing in the same direction. Eventually each performer came back out with his or her own personal, potted cactus as the lights on either side flashed "Cacti" back and forth.

—In the second section, the tiles were turned into a sculpture, Irlan Silva wriggled down a length of white mat as if the Furies were after him, and a couple went through a rehearsal sequence while the voice over presumed to tell us what they were thinking ("I always forget this part," "It's not always about you," "Is there much left?"). Whitney Jensen and Jeffrey Girio were deadpan funny here, and though Ekman's spoof of postmodern dance (and postmodern critics) wore a little thin by the end, his choreography held up. The sight of Lia Girio traveling two dimensionally across the stage

like a figure from a classical frieze was as hilarious at the conclusion (when she carried her cactus) as it had been at the beginning.

—In the middle of the run of "Prieked" (the program of *Études, D.M.J. 1953-1977*, and *Cacti*, its title referring to the rose thorns and the cactus spines), Boston Ballet offered its fifth annual "Next Generation" evening spotlighting the dancers of Boston Ballet II and the students of the largest ballet school in North America.

—In honor of the company's fiftieth anniversary, we got *Scotch Symphony*, which the Boston Ballet performed on the opening program of its first subscription season, January 25, 1965, with Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein in the audience. It hadn't been seen here in decades, but the student cast looked idiomatic. (It can't have hurt that the school's director is former NYCB principal Margaret Tracey.) BBII members Brett Fukuda and Andres Garcia were a youthfully exuberant couple, and Skyla Schreter strutted confidently through Patricia Wilde's Scots girl role.

## New York

Karen Greenspan

In summer 2014 the Indian subcontinent sent its emissaries to perform its many classical dance traditions in an array of venues throughout the city. I attended the Erasing Borders Festival of Indian Dance dedicated to raising awareness of the performing arts and artists of India. It was presented as part of the Downtown Dance Festival, launched in 1982 by Jonathan Hollander's Battery Dance Company to be a public forum for dances of all genres. The magnificent outdoor site in Robert F. Wagner, Jr. Park, part of Battery Park City, added to the sublime spectacle.

Under the welcoming gaze of the Statue of Liberty, with the backdrop of the Hudson River populated with ferries, sailboats, and gentle waves occasionally kicking up a splash on the park's esplanade, dances were performed – praising gods and, more importantly, erasing borders. During this summer of unspeak-

able violence, war, and killing at countless borders across the globe, the notion of erasing them and reaching across great distances to share and celebrate the commonality of the human experience through dance – before a body of flowing water – felt redemptive.

Of the eight forms of classical Indian dance, several that were new to me were included on the program. The evening opened with Yamini Saripalli dancing a kuchipudi piece, *Ode to Lord Ganesha* (the Elephant God), considered to be the remover of obstacles. Kuchipudi is an early form of south Indian dance-drama that expresses love and devotion between man and God. Brahmin men originally performed it, but today, female dancers frequently perform it as short solo pieces from the longer dance-dramas. Although Saripalli's floating head and neck isolations captured my interest, she did not incorporate much use of distinctive facial movement or expression in her performance. She also lacked the assurance and commitment needed to render a true and believable sense of spiritual devotion.

Prabal Gupta, an exponent of the kathakali form, danced a powerful, dramatic piece evoking Lady Macbeth. Kathakali developed in the southwest Indian state of Kerala on the Malabar Coast facing the Arabian Sea. From the region's indigenous inhabitants, worshippers of the Mother Earth Goddess, comes this super-exaggerated form of dance-drama performed primarily by men. Prabal Gupta, a distinguished performer of female characters, provided a window into Lady Macbeth's soul. He employed an unusual fluttering of two fingers, bringing to mind the stirrings of greed in her bosom. A choreographed controlled quiver in his cheek muscles followed the finger flutters. Gupta then used a diverse display of eyeball movements to characterize Lady Macbeth's spiraling into complete derangement with total mastery of the minutest isolations.

Kathakali's incredible attention to and command of the body is attributed to a very long and arduous training that includes hours of deep and painful massage – of every muscle, nerve, and joint – devised to develop this

complete control. The eye choreography was no accident; kathakali has an entire vocabulary of glances that are perfected through a series of exhaustive eye exercises that easily consume the first two hours of a dancer's day. The ideal performer should be able to convey every possible nuance through the use of the eyes. Remarkable!

In a provocative gesture, Gupta tossed a dagger to Macbeth (who is imagined and invisible) – goading him to kill King Duncan and seize the throne the three witches foretold would be his. The dancer frequently returned to a pose with his arms extended straight out to the sides from the shoulders with hands hanging down limply from the wrists. I discovered this is the basic position in the kathakali idiom.

Gupta wore a white costume with elaborate decoration and jewelry on the bodice and a richly colored purple and gold scarf/head-dress. Kathakali makeup is applied in a lengthy process to exaggerate facial features in a stylized unnatural way. This is a very high-maintenance dance form devised for high drama.

In stark contrast to the kathakali experience, the petite and graceful Noopur Singha offered *Krishna Nartan*, a manipuri evocation of Lord Krishna. The dance had a delicate, fluid quality as Singha performed the continuous flow of lyrical movement carving out circular patterns. The range of dynamics increased as the dance developed to include spritely leaps and spins – always with a sense of precision. Singha wore a much more natural makeup than is used in the other more stylized classical dance forms and her facial expression remained serene. Her costume's headdress included a peacock feather standing on top of a protrusion of silver confetti that added to a feeling of lightness already present in the movements and Singha's graceful dancing.

Sustaining a dynamic spinning sequence that flashed diagonally across and then around the stage, Sanjukta Sinha immediately captivated the audience with the opening of her

kathak presentation. Then she stopped on a dime. Her attack of the movement and her lightening speed provided a lively contrast to segments in which she floated across the stage with her open and generous carriage of the shoulders, supporting her flowing arm and hand gestures. Her rhythmic footwork, amplified by the gungurus (anklets of jingle bells), was punctuated by surprising moments of stillness. Sinha projected masterful artistry in her kathak performance.

The Sattriya Dance Company, formed in 2009, performed the sattriya dances of Assam in northeastern India, just south of the eastern Himalayas. This dance tradition began in Hindu monasteries known as *sattras*, and has been practiced by celibate monks since the sixteenth century. Sattriya, recognized in the year 2000 as the eighth classical dance form of India, has a repertory of mythological dance-dramas and devotions possessing all the elements set out in the *Natya Shastra*, the ancient scriptural code of the aspects of ideal dance and drama. Anita Sharma, a renowned performer and teacher in the Assam dance community, performed *Nandi*, an invocation to Lord Krishna. Sharma praised the god's beauty and splendor with her compact body, precise gestures, and competent dancing.

This piece was followed by Madhusmita Bora and Prerona Bhuyan performing the duet *Ram Bondona*, a depiction of Lord Ram's life. Ms. Bhuyan's handsome, full-length, narrow, white costume with accompanying white turban was noticeably different from all the others and specific to the sattriya tradition. Though all the music on the program was recorded, the music for this duet sounded like a saccharin soundtrack from a Bollywood soap opera. It is too bad; it debased the dancers and the dance.

Srishti Dances of India, a company specializing in the odissi form, performed the final offering of the evening. The piece, inspired from the *Gita Govinda*, the twelfth century epic Sanskrit poem, portrayed Vishnu's ten avatars, manifesting to save the world from destruction. Performed by dancers of varying

levels of talent, this work relied heavily on static poses and lacked physical and emotional intensity. The most interesting aspect of their performance was the fact that they incorporated three odissi dancers and two bharatanatyam dancers with the costumes and idiomatic movement style of each. The bharatanatyam dancers exhibited a greater facility with and use of facial expression.

The evening's performances offered the exotic swirl of color, sound, and movement of Indian dance evocations of and devotions to the gods who embody qualities to which humankind has always aspired. Erasing borders through the exchange of cultures just might be one of those divine qualities, in which case, the festival's dancers themselves were the deities, performing the work of gods.

## Berlin

Darrell Wilkins

~~Michael Clark brought his *animal/vegetable/mineral* to the Haus der Berliner Festspiele for the 2014 edition of *Tanz im August*. The work premiered in 2012 at the Tramway in Glasgow and the Barbican, London, and then was expanded for touring.~~

~~—In terms of dance, the work has three main features: an abstract dramaturgy, a classical movement vocabulary, and a “fuck you” attitude. But the music and lighting are often at cross purposes with the dance. And by the end of the evening, the music and lighting have obliterated whatever merits the dancing may have had—the music by its weakness, the lighting by its strength.~~

~~—Clark works in a tradition that includes choreographers like Robert Joffrey, Twyla Tharp, and Karole Armitage, who have wedded the classical vocabulary of dance to some form of popular youth music. (Steve Paxton and Trisha Brown also used popular music, of course, but little trace of the classical vocabulary is visible there.)~~

~~—Balanchine with *Who Cares?* (to Gershwin) and Forsythe with *Quintett* (to Gavin Bryars) could be said to have contributed two master-~~