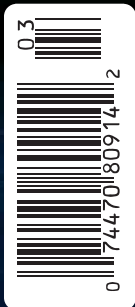


Fall 2016

Ballet Review



insky, quickly seduces the Eastern heroine, perfectly interpreted by Ana Turazashvili. The contrast between the classical dancer and this enigmatic Scheherazade ends dramatically, as we are shown with Pechorin lamenting (or perhaps meditating) at her grave. Curiously, the evening is advertised as for adults only. Is this because of the suggested rape scene? Western ballet stages are much less cautious, especially after Kenneth MacMillan and Roland Petit.

“Taman,” with its atmospheric sets and music, is the shortest section. The tall Vladislav Lantratov has an elegance similar to and contrasting with the raw beauty of the character Undine, danced by the Bolshoi star Maria Alexandrova. Both are impressive, particularly in the high jumps, as well as in their flexibility and their charisma. Bolshoi dancers tend to convey emotions like no other. While some might find it overdone, for an audience less familiar with the piece, it was heart-breaking.

“Princess Mary,” the final part of the triptych, fills the second half of the evening. The stage is filled with an evocative set representing a hot springs resort. Four characters appear and this time Pechorin is embodied by Vyacheslav Lopatin. His charm comes less from his stature and more from the refinement of his dance. These qualities appeal to Princess Mary (the tiny Nina Kaptsova) as well as to Vera (Daria Bochkova). The three become a quartet with the addition of the much too loyal Grushnitski (the splendid Artemy Belyakov). This reminds us of *Onegin* – especially the duel scene, which is cleverly depicted here by the director. This last part comprises many ensembles and it is clear that, despite the recent turmoil within the company, the dancers remain in very good shape. Before the curtain goes down, the three interpreters of Pechorin gather as a trio. Is he a villain or modern hero? The audience can decide.

The Bolshoi has achieved a new and exclusive full-evening work, without the effort of having had to restore an apparently lost masterpiece. It will not appeal to foreign audi-

ences in the same way it was received in Russia, but this new facet of a contemporary classical ballet renews an art form that some Casandras are regularly tempted to proclaim dead.

New York

Karen Greenspan

ArtsBrookfield, in its mission to animate its grand public space in the Winter Garden at Brookfield Place in Lower Manhattan, offered a two-week series called “Transcendent Arts of Tibet and India.” This unique programming presented performing arts traditions of a spiritual nature – some of which are quite ancient in origin.

The first week featured eleven Tibetan monks from the Drepung Loseling Monastery – now headquartered in the state of Karnataka, South India, since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 forced the flight of many spiritual aspirants from their monasteries in Tibet. Unsuspecting tourists, commuters, employees, residents, and so forth, encountered the friendly maroon-robed, shaven-headed monks as they engaged in their religious practices of creating a mandala (cosmic diagram sometimes used as an anchor for meditation) of colored sand, multiphonic chanting, chod, and the dancing of cham (Himalayan Buddhist sacred dance). These were very unusual sights and sounds to come across in a luxury shopping complex, and they made quite an impression on passersby.

In their sacred chanting, the monks cultivate an extraordinary vocal ability in which the chant masters simultaneously intone three separate notes, creating a complete chord. They accomplish this vocal feat by controlling the muscles of the vocal cavity and reshaping it while singing and intensifying the natural overtones of the voice. As they transform the vocal box into a natural amplifier, they produce a primal sound that is deep, rich, and otherworldly.

Situated on the large, middle landing of the amphitheater-like stairs that is a crossroads

between the World Financial Center (now called Brookfield Place) and all of Lower Manhattan, the monks conducted a lunchtime performance of the Tibetan ritual, chod. They sat cross-legged on the floor, faces veiled with black, braided fringe extending downward from their headbands, holding the smallish ritual *ganta* bell with the left hand. They used the right to keep time with the two-sided chod drum by rotating the upright forearm and wrist back and forth causing two attached, pendular beads to beat the drum.

The monks chanted the eleventh-century liturgy disseminated by Machig Labdrön, a revered female Tantric Buddhist practitioner and teacher. The goal of this advanced meditation practice is to “cut through” mundane suffering caused by ignorance, anger, and self-grasping by visualizing one’s body as an offering feast to the deities and enlightened beings.

It was quite an irony to witness these contemplatives framed by Burberry, Ermenegildo Zegna, and other luxury brand shops. The authenticity and sincerity of the practice clearly touched the hearts and minds of people of many diverse backgrounds as a steady stream approached the head lama afterwards for further explanations or to request a blessing.

The final evening offered a staged performance of more sacred music and introduced sacred dance, or cham. The Winter Garden was filled with a large crowd and a stage was set up in front of the towering glass facade that looks out onto the North Cove Marina and Hudson River. The monks performed tidbits from three cham: *Zhanag Cham* or Black Hat Dance, *Durdag* or Skeleton Dance, and *Sengye Garcham* or Snow Lion Dance. The Snow Lion Dance came off best as the giant, white, shaggy costume inhabited by two dancers pranced off the stage and circumambulated the audience before returning to the stage for its humorous mimetic routine. The cuddly looking beast with its endearing, batting eyelid antics was entertaining and accessible despite its representation of the fearless quality of the enlightened mind.

The Black Hat Dance is a sacred ground purification rite frequently included in many Tibetan Buddhist prayers and rituals, while the Skeleton Dance, also known as Dance of the Lords of the Cremation Grounds, is performed wearing white skeleton masks as a reminder of the impermanent nature of existence. These dances are composed of symbolic steps believed to have spiritual power and are usually performed with a critical mass of dancers using spatial patterns designed to create mandalas on the ground.

Instead, in this performance, only two monks danced in a limited range on the small stage while the rest of the monks performed as the “cham orchestra,” playing the ritual music that accompanies these dances. Repositioning the dances in a central space with the audience seated around the performers as the cham are performed in situ (at sacred festivals in temple or monastery courtyards) would have helped to convey the notion that these sacred steps are usually performed in a ritualistic floor pattern in a space that has been consecrated through song, dance, procession, prayer, incense, and offerings. The essential experience to impart was that these dances (along with the other performed events) are conceived and enacted not as entertainment, but with the intention of generating energies conducive to peace, healing, and transcendence.

Week two featured Malini Srinivasan, Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer, and associated artists performing her choreography. In addition, several instrumental and vocal artists rendered some of India’s classical music traditions. Srinivasan explained that she approached the challenge of performing in the engulfing public space by “using the multiple natural stages to transform the space into opportunities for encounter and to enhance the architecture.”

For the week of performances, Srinivasan chose the Hindu Lord Krishna in his various phases and iterations as her connecting theme. Monday through Thursday’s programming offered casual, thirty-minute choreographies

adapted in ways that intermingled the dancers and their narrative with the space and the public, allowing for direct and personal engagement without the constraints of ticketed or preferential seating. Friday evening, Srinivasan danced an evening-length, solo Bharatanatyam margham (ordered choreographic structure) with live music.

Krishna Dances and the Gopis Watch came to life within reach as Kiran Rajagopalan danced Lord Krishna among those seated at the café tables adjacent to the Winter Garden's giant wall of glass. Meanwhile, the sylph-like *gopis* (lovelorn female admirers) threaded themselves through the palm trees and among folks seated on benches in the central court. For their ethereal dance depicting their enchantment by Lord Krishna as he played his flute, the *gopis* wore costumes of white chiffon skirts with layered tops in radiant jewel tones.

Srinivasan took a creative leap with her art installation-in-the-making called *Stealing the Queen's Royal Jelly*, inspired by Brooklyn artist Reet Das's painting by the same name. The choreography explored bees and their life cycle as they engage in work, play, love, cooperation, construction, and death. Tatiana Popova, lusciously dressed in red and gold silks, portrayed the queen as she spun a diagonal across the Winter Garden and sat on the floor amidst audience members next to her gold lamé shawl and brown basket, fingering its golden contents.

Six other performers danced among the au-

dience, performing aspects of the bees' life cycle. In a bee factory line, they collected golden snippets (pieces of gold fabric, felt, and twine) from the queen's flower basket and danced them over to a far-off palm tree where fiber artist Jenna Bonistalli (also costumed as a dancer bee) worked. Throughout the piece she received the golden bits and pieces and fastened them to the palm trunk, slowly constructing a fiber art honeycomb.

The piece reached a joyous climax when the bees completed their labors, broke from the stylized classical Indian dance vocabulary, and let loose with a romping Gujarati folk dance around the tree with the golden honeycomb. *Stealing the Queen's Royal Jelly*, as adapted for performance in Brookfield Place, combined visual art forms, dance forms, and evocative recorded music by Anupam Shobhakar and Zakir Hussain to create a rich and varied experience.

By the end of the week when Srinivasan performed her full-length (two and a half hour) Bharatanatyam solo recital entitled *Rasa in the Round*, a dedicated following packed the central amphitheater-shaped stairs at the back end of the Winter Garden. Seated around her in a semicircle on the landing-cum-stage, seven accomplished live musicians accompanied the performance. *Rasa* is Sanskrit for sentiment, emotional state, or as Srinivasan defined it, "what the audience tastes." The musicians and Srinivasan served up a feast of tastes – starting with invocation, ending with a celebration and rebirth, and including everything in-between.

In the *varnum* (main piece of the recital), Srinivasan exhibited steely control as she balanced in *passé*, while her hands and face evoked crying as she pined for her lover, Lord Krishna. Then instantly, she leapt to the floor, her face overcome with joy as she recollected the humorous scene when Krishna stole the *gopis*' clothes while they were bathing in the river. Of course she danced all the roles – Krishna's envisioning his prankish plot, the unaware *gopis* enjoying a good splash in the



Malini Srinivasan.

Photo: Darial Sneed, ArtsBrookfield

river, their dismay when they saw their saris hanging from tall trees, and Krishna's pleasure as he watched the scene while playing his flute. After this nostalgic interlude, the heroine pursued Krishna with focused determination as she repeatedly danced toward the audience as if we were her beloved. It was a powerful conclusion.

The perfect platform for Srinivasan's range and command of abhinaya (mimetic aspect) was a section called "Navarasa" (Nine Rasas). The all-instrumental music was inspired by a poem by Adi Sankara describing nine different emotions that can be visualized in the eyes of the Divine Goddess. Srinivasan portrayed the Goddess in her experience of attraction, anger, wonder, fear, laughter, heroism, compassion, devotion, and peace – changing to each in an instant. Then she went on to embody her beloved, Shiva, as well. This "tour de sentiment" was movingly played by the talented violinist Arun Ramamurthy, who was also its composer.

As dusk turned to night, visible through the soaring glass panes of this glorified shopping mall, the lights were dimmed to a warm glow casting light and shadow on these practitioners of ancient steps and sounds. The gathered crowd huddled on the stairs in rapt attention. Srinivasan had succeeded in transforming the mundane into the sublime.

New York

Janet Mansfield Soares

Martha Clarke's career has flourished since her Juilliard student days: first, with Anna Sokolow; then Pilobolus; her company, Crowsnest; and beginning with her 1984 creation, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, countless dance-theater works since. A MacArthur "genius," she now garners a Signature Residency Five Playwright contract, and her distinguished career shows no sign of slowing down. Her first production for the Pershing Square Signature Center in Manhattan was the successful *Chéri*, based on the writing of Colette and starring Alessandra Ferri and Herman Cornejo. Her

second, a reenvisioned *Angel Reapers*, had a winter run in 2016.

An earlier "in-progress" configuration of *Angel Reapers*, commissioned and performed at Duke's ADF in 2010, was then shown at the Joyce Theater, New York City in 2011. For this Signature revision, Clarke cast her favorite actress from her 2014 *Threepenny Opera* Atlantic Theater Company production, Sally Murphy, to play Eldress, Mother Ann Lee. Lean and fair, Murphy seems against type for the Shaker leader, but her superlative voice and stage presence more than compensate. Casting the five men goes smoothly, too. Nicholas Bruder, Rico Lebron, Matty Oaks, Andrew Robinson, and returning yon tande (formally Whitney Hunter) – all strikingly masculine – are rough-hewn powerhouses. Four of the women, Sophie Bortolussi, Asli Bulbul, Lindsey Dietz Marchant, and Gabrielle Malone, from earlier renditions of *Reapers*, are onboard to serve as valued contributors.

For the eleventh role, Sister Mary Chase, the young orphan raised by the Shakers, dozens of hopefuls are first sorted out vocally. The remaining ones are asked to return for movement sessions. A dancer that I recommended might have been right for the part because of her inherent joyfulness. She made it through the rounds, alongside the recent Juilliard dance graduate, lanky, supple mover, Ingrid Kapteyn. "Your recommendation is terrific, but Ingrid's withheld mysteriousness is a nice contrast," Martha ruminated. Considering a fellow alumna (albeit years apart), she is also fascinated with Ingrid's natural ability to sing and act, hitherto untapped by the present dance department's technical regime. ("Technique, schmetnique!" Martha loves to complain.)

Sensing that Ingrid had won out, the other potential told me, "I would have loved to perform *Angel Reapers*. But I kind of knew the way Martha gave me a hug after that audition that she'd be making another choice (those Juilliard kids!)"

Weeks of previews began on February 2 with performances extended through March 20,



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