

Spring 2016

Ballet Review





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**Ballet Review 44.1
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more appropriate that the season began, once the necessary seventy-fifth birthday celebrations were over, with *Sleeping Beauty* and ended with *Cinderella*, in which Ashton shows so clearly the result of his “private lessons” from Petipa, especially in the variations for the Seasons and the waltz of the stars at the end of the first act, again cast from all levels.

There needs to be no justification for a new and improved production of *Beauty* by some supposed “relevance.” Apart from the fact that the score is Tchaikovsky’s masterpiece, the ballet is a great work of classical art that exemplified for Igor Stravinsky “the triumph of studied conception over vagueness, of the rule over the arbitrary, of order over the haphazard.”

New York

Karen Greenspan

How perfect it was that the ancient Egyptian Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum of Art was the site of Odissi devotion. The high priestesses of this classical Indian dance tradition, Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy of the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble, filled the otherworldly space with their sublime invocations to and interpretations of the divine.

The stone friezes and sculptures of the ancient temples of the eastern Indian state of Orissa are carved with evidence that, as far back as 200 B.C.E., the Odissi dance form was performed by temple attendants as sacred ritual to the gods. Staging Nrityagram in the ancient Egyptian temple was sheer genius – and a credit to Karen Sander, former director of World Music Institute. Sander, who learned that Nrityagram had been performing in temples in India, suggested that they consider performing in the Temple of Dendur at the Met. She contacted the Met’s new general manager of concerts and lectures, Limor Tomer, who was looking for interesting ways to bring the Met spaces alive. When the dancers saw the space, they fell in love with it – and New York City dance history was made!

The final rays of daylight faded into dusk

as the four Nrityagram musicians settled themselves on the floor along the left side of the stage, behind their instruments – mardala (drum), harmonium, violin, and bamboo flute. Once the mardala was tuned to the drone of the harmonium, the rattle of the ankle bells announced the arrival of Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy, as they were escorted through the immense gallery space to the stage.

These two artists have lived, studied, taught, and danced together for over twenty years at the Nrityagram holistic dance village, located outside of Bangalore, India. Steeped in ancient practice and the dissemination of traditional knowledge, this unique institution is also committed to exploring creative expansions of Odissi vocabulary and style, as well as formulating innovative dance pedagogy.

Sen, the ensemble’s artistic director and choreographer, completely captivates with her range and display of *abhinaya* (the expression of internal emotions) through the minutest movements of her exquisitely transparent face. Satpathy, Nrityagram’s director of education, dances with unshakeable strength and a theatricality that darts out of her eyes and limbs at will.

Sitting off to the side afforded me a view behind a tiny screen that served as a stage wing. I watched as Satpathy, standing offstage behind the wing, sank into a deep plié, placed her hands on the floor in a sign of obeisance, then stood upright with hands pressed together in devotion in front of her head and then at her heart in the ritual Odissi gestures of homage to mother earth, the guru, and the audience.

Meanwhile, Surupa Sen, in her refined Brahman voice, introduced the U.S. premiere of *Shyamala Vandana*, an invocation to the mother goddess of the universe. She walked onstage making the same gestures of reverence as Satpathy had made while backstage. When she reached the center of the stage, she subtly sank into the sensual Odissi side-ward S curve stance to embody the mother goddess.

Satpathy entered the stage, her cupped

hands bearing white flower petals, which she spilled, paying homage to the image of Lord Jagannath (Orissan Lord of the Universe) usually placed on the front left corner of the stage. The two dancers began a duet in unison, boldly thumping strong rhythms with their heels as they traveled together through the space. Their footwork brought them downstage into a deep plié before two brass plates filled with more white petals. After tossing the petal offerings in the air, they repeated the devotional hand gesture at the forehead and the heart.

The dancers moved backward with the signature S curve of the spine and hips, as their hand gestures continued the prayer with finger combinations that trembled and quivered to the singer's incantation. The two alternated playing goddess and supplicant, assuming complementary poses and dancing with a vibrant, coiled energy. There were remarkable moments of choreographic detail – as when Satpathy's eyes would glide sideward, preceding her leg lifting in the same direction. Just as I thought these dancers would remain grounded in plié forever, they broke into spritely leaps and an upbeat rhythmic sequence before receding backward with a final namaste.

Dhira Samiré is an excerpt from the evening length work, *Songs of Love and Longing*, which the Nrityagram duo performed in its entirety last year at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. The piece was inspired by the *Gita Govinda*, the twelfth-century romantic ballad recounting the immortal love of Radha and Krishna. The evening's excerpt was a sensual depiction of the two lovers as they anticipate a tryst.

Sen played the awaiting Krishna with god-like assurance and largess while Satpathy acted the solicitous and doting Radha. Their electricity-charged connection was effectively portrayed as they mirrored each other's gestures while physically apart and in different

postures. The tension built until they finally connected, dancing in unison with the synchronized joy of two lovers on fire.

Each time the song's narration spoke of the lovers' bed of love along the banks of the Yamuna River, the Yamuna appeared to course



Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy.

through the dancers' arms just as the gallery pool's ripples were reflected in the Met's wall of glass windows. Satpathy's fingers seemed to emanate from her eyes, framing the sides of her face, in love's afterglow, creating a sense of closing perfection.

The third and final offering of the evening, entitled *Vibhakta*, was an ideal artistic choice for this stunning duo to undertake. The narration informed the audience that *Vibhakta* is the secret of all creation: the power of one splitting into two – the male/female duality. The descriptive poem, full of vivid imagery for the two contrasting influences, sent shivers up my spine as Sen concluded, "Her dance creates the universe, his destroys everything. I bow to the mother and the father – *Vibhakta* – the division."

The two danced a living, breathing embodiment of this principle of duality, opening with a *Nataraja* (Shiva depicted as Lord of the Dance) representation – one dancer superimposed over the other with multiple arms extended to the sides, while moving through

space. They danced in and out of complementary “photo op” poses with constant fluidity. A memorable and beautifully orchestrated pose had Sen performing a yogic backbend from a kneeling position – ending with her head touching her heels. Satpathy hovered above her, balanced on one leg. The piece concluded as they interlaced arms and exited, dancing together in unison with their polished synchronicity.

At the Met’s Temple of Dendur, Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy of the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble found a magical space equal to their superlative artistry.

New York

Nancy Reynolds

Americans fell in love with the Royal Danes years ago, an affair that continues to this day. Danish dancers, through the work of their principal choreographer August Bournonville, have long provided a peek into an earlier century, a glimpse of a quaint “Old Europe.” The Royal Danish Ballet’s ranks have included men who appear to virtually bounce off the floor, hovering in the air, and to execute turns and other toe-twisting step combinations equally well to the right and the left. (This is not common in other companies.) Both men and women radiate the joy of movement as they amaze us with speedy footwork, forceful jumps, and brilliant beats.

Over the years Danish dancers have performed a Bournonville repertory of greater size and range than any other ballet troupe. At first (1950s) Americans saw them only in divertissements – danced excerpts from full-length ballets. Later we were introduced to the handful of complete works that remain. Bournonville populated these story ballets with down-to-earth characters who could laugh at themselves and make merry while getting on with life. They provided perfect vehicles for the dancers’ skillful and heartwarming acting and mime.

Although the Danes now perform works of choreographers from around the world, the

Bournonville legacy has been kept alive in Copenhagen in both spirit and substance, even as it is now programmed side by side with Balanchine, Neumeier, BÉjart, Graham, Robbins, and many, many others.

A small contingent of “Royal Danes,” dancing excerpts by the master, appeared briefly in New York at the Joyce Theater early in 2015. The thirteen performers, mostly principals and soloists, included former ballerina Sorella Englund, now a renowned mime.

The buoyant pas de sept from *A Folk Tale* was an appropriate program opener, providing a showcase of the distinctive Bournonville vocabulary, from the tiniest jumped ronds de jambe to the large leaps with open arms known as the “Danish embrace.” But despite the dancers’ tambourines and cheery red costumes, it was immediately clear that this was to be a bare-bones presentation. The stage was empty; there would be no scenery and no live music. Technically speaking, while the dancers performed with their customary exuberance, it might be noted that a few turned-in legs and incomplete beats could be observed, especially in the dancing of the men. But what a cornucopia of movement!

Ida Praetorius and Andreas Kaas then brought youthful charm and a most endearing tenderness to the *Flower Festival in Genzano* pas de deux. Couples of varying ages have danced this piece; none could have been more touching than these two innocents glancing shyly at each other, their dainty footwork alternating with ardent, ground-covering leaps.

The *Jockey Dance*, a nod to the British love of horses with a sly quote from “God Save the King” thrown in, was performed in a militarily crisp and spritely manner by Sebastian Haynes and Marcin Kupinski. Both, in playful competition, seemed to have a lot of fun with it.

Excerpts from *La Sylphide* (act 2) were no doubt intended as the centerpiece of the program, but this truncated version of the ballet did not work either as narrative or as theater. It proved impossible to evoke the essence of Romanticism against a background of white