



oglu). Of course, it attempted much more than *Surge* and was a more mature piece, but it just didn't have the same passion. Still, Binet must be applauded for the way his work has developed over the past few years. In this piece perhaps he was trying too hard.

Nuages, the piece by Jiří Kylián associated with ballerina Evelyn Hart, who performed it for many years with Henny Jurriens or Rex Harrington, is a lovely, deeply emotional, pure dance work set to the first movement, *Nuages*, of Debussy's *Nocturnes*. It was staged here by Hart and Harrington on Greta Hodgkinson and guest artist Marcelo Gomes. Premiered in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1976, it has lost none of its melodic thrust. The two dancers move around each other, sometimes entwined, sometimes set apart. Always there is a sense of passion, shot through with darkness, giving it a haunted quality.

Arthur Saint-Leon's pas de deux from *Coppélia* might seem an unlikely party piece to stop a show, but danced with joyous youth, energy, and spirit by Elena Lobsanova and Naoya Ebe, this old-fashioned charmer brought the house down. Ebe has a buoyant quality to his dancing, as well as soaring elevation and tidy footwork. Lobsanova, sometimes too cautious a dancer, let go and found the fun of the piece, making us believe she was madly in love with her partner. Her shoulders and arms were elegantly held and her pointe work was precise and lovely to watch.

Balanchine's *Tarantella* is frequently hauled

out for galas. Its fast and ferocious footwork, here danced by Sonia Rodriguez and Skylar Campbell is always fun to watch, as it matches the manic tempos of Gottschalk's *Grand Tarantelle for Piano and Orchestra*, as reorchestrated by Hershy Kay. To work, this piece has to go like a shot and the National Ballet Orchestra under David Briskin seemed a tad slow, forcing the dancers to hold back a little.

The evening closed, not surprisingly, with the feisty and flamboyant *Le Corsaire* pas de deux. You need two dancers who can connect with each other as well as with the audience. No one these days quite suggests the airborne artistry Rudolf Nureyev brought to the handsome slave, nor Margot Fonteyn's total surrender to her partner. But Francesco Gabriele Frola presented a handsome stage image and his thrilling jetés and cabrioles were exciting to watch. His partner, Jurgita Dronina is precise and lovely, but she didn't quite suggest the Fonteyn fire. Never mind, the audience in Toronto couldn't have cared less, finding in this young partnership a power that wasn't so much sexual as it was technically spectacular. If the gala evening didn't quite build to the climax you hoped for, it did make you wish that *Coppélia* might reappear on a National Ballet of Canada program before long.

New York

Karen Greenspan

In 2017, New York City's World Music Institute celebrated its sixth year of presenting "Dancing the Gods," a festival of Indian music and dance. The festival's cofounder and cocurator, Rajika Puri, reminded the audience in her annual preperformance lecture/demonstration, "In Indian classical dance, we play the gods." And indeed, the gods are still dancing among us!

I was fortunate to interview one of this year's performers, Dr. Neena Prasad. She is a dance scholar as well as a creative and eloquent exponent of mohiniyattam, a classical dance form with its origins in the South Indian state

of Kerala that borders the Arabian Sea. Rajika Puri, in her lecture/demonstration, emphasized that the dance forms are an expression of the environment of their origins – including the physical terrain – which explains the undulating, languid quality of the mohiniyattam movements that recall the ebb and flow of the sea and the soft breezes of the Kerala region. Mohiniyattam embodies *lasya*, or the graceful, feminine aspect of Indian dance.

Prasad presented four works, two of which were set to music composed by the Maharaja Swati Tirunal (1813-1846), an important force in the promotion and development of mohiniyattam. Considered a just and righteous ruler, Tirunal was also a strong patron of the arts, a prodigious musical talent, and a prolific composer. He was responsible for authoring a scholarly treatise on mohiniyattam as well as composing numerous musical works specifically for the dance form.

However, the groundbreaking work of the evening (and the festival) was Prasad's piece *Amrapali* set to music created by one of her musicians, the gifted composer and vocalist, C. Madhavan Nampoothri. The subject of the dance piece itself is quite innovative. It draws its inspiration from the story of a courtesan who became a follower of the Buddha. These are not the usual (Hindu) gods that Indian classical dancers "play." And this is precisely why Prasad chose to dance this character: to be more inclusive with regard to dancing the gods.

Amrapali was a courtesan who lived in India during the time of the Buddha, around the sixth century B.C.E. She was so acclaimed for her beauty that she was appointed the royal court dancer of the ancient republic of Vaishali. Her fame and influence grew, and the people made her their senator. There are many tales of her various suitors, however, Prasad's choreography deals with an episode in which Amrapali falls in love with a wounded soldier who is actually the crown prince of an enemy kingdom at war with Vaishali. She is imprisoned for her traitorous relationship. When her lover eventually conquers Vaishali, he sets

Amrapali free and offers to make her his queen. She refuses his offer as she is completely revolted by the bloodshed and savagery with which he has ravaged her country. In her bereft state, she comes upon the Buddha and his followers and joins them to become the only female preacher ordained by the Buddha.

From a pensive, reclining pose on the floor, Prasad creates a representation of a self-possessed woman. Finger cymbals, played by the vocalist/composer, ignite the story and bring the character to life. Using the most exacting and readable *abhinaya* (facial expression), Prasad enacts Amrapali's journey through a wide range of emotions. Her superb coordination of mudras, eye movements, and facial expression along with some magnificent eyebrow choreography completely transform her into the character. When Amrapali is freed from imprisonment by the enemy of her nation, her tremulous fingers work in concert with her facial expression to convey her revulsion at his merciless barbarism. Her quivering lip and accusatory fingers leave no doubt that their future together is dashed. She retreats to the floor dispossessed of her past and, seemingly, her future.

In this desolate state, Prasad's very core seems to crack open and emit a new emotional experience as Amrapali discovers the Buddha and his teachings. The violin's musical line also energizes her transformation. From a position in which her head is bowed and touching the floor, she uprights her torso; then her hands dance the bursting open of a flower. The energy she uses to inform the shape and motion of her hands literally dances out of her chest in this magical moment.

In a sublime and affecting marriage of movement, music, and space, Prasad stands and follows in the (imaginary) path of the Buddha. She walks a diagonal as the musicians repeat the devotional chant of the mantra of taking refuge in the "Triple Gem":

I go to the Buddha for refuge.

I go to the Dharma [teachings] for refuge.

I go to the Sangha [monastic
community] for refuge.