

Winter 2015-2016

# Ballet Review



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Cover photograph by Gene Schiavone,  
ABT: Gillian Murphy as Aurora.

# New York

Karen Greenspan

Offering a rare opportunity and treat, Asia Society presented New Yorkers with performances and a workshop by one of the most accomplished dance and music ensembles from the country of Myanmar, formerly called Burma. This was an extraordinary occasion because organizing this tour was no small feat due to the fact that Myanmar, having been closed off from the West under a military regime until 2011, has neither the economic nor the arts infrastructure to pull off this type of cultural exchange without the experience, efforts, and commitment of Asia Society.

The Shwe Man Thabin troupe was founded in 1933 by the nation's Performer Laureate, Shwe Man U Tin Maung, who died onstage at age fifty while performing a closing number with two of his sons. The current troupe is led by family members from this performing lineage and includes dancers, comedians, musicians, and stagehands. They tour extensively throughout Myanmar performing *zat pwe*, the traditional Burmese, all-night, variety show that is a popular highlight of Myanmar's pagoda festivals. These three-night, outdoor events typically include music, dance, singing, puppetry, and comedy in entertainment from 9:30 p.m. until 6:00 the next morning. The stars of the show are the *mintha* and *minthamee* – the main male and female performers.

The group of seventeen performers (ten dancers and seven musicians) brought a taste of Myanmar's particular and vibrant heritage in a condensed two-hour showcase of the *zat pwe* entertainment form, coinciding with the Burmese New Year and Water Festival. Kit Young, cofounder of the Gitameit Music Center in Myanmar and liaison for the Shwe Man Thabin Troupe, gave a brief introduction to this Myanmar performance tradition. We were then invited to imagine ourselves seated outdoors under the starlit nighttime sky as the *hsaing waing* (classical Burmese percussion ensemble) got off to a rollicking start with an

energetic, syncopated overture. Comprised of tuned drums, pitched gongs, cymbals, wooden clapper, and an oboe, this melodic percussion ensemble sat across the back of the stage behind its distinctive, gilt-framed enclosure. The performance rekindled memories of my own experiences learning and viewing Burmese dance during my travels to Myanmar just over a year ago.

Every Burmese dance performance begins with an invocation and offering ritual to the Buddha as well as to the *nats* (pantheon of thirty-seven pre-Buddhist spirits). The two belief systems coexist quite happily in present-day Myanmar and are acknowledged through a danced offering. A *minthamee* performed the candlelight cup dance as an offertory. At Asia Society this was accomplished with skill and grace by a female dancer crouching on her knees in various poses while holding in each hand a battery-lit lotus flower that she manipulated with wrist and arm rotations. She eventually came to her feet and scurried from one side of the stage to the other carrying the flickering lotus lamps.

Another female dancer carried the Golden Bowl of Offerings (fruits and flowers) and with it danced energetically, moving from one side of the stage to the other. Dressed in a colorful, glittery version of the traditional female Burmese costume – a long, narrow, wrap-around skirt with train and a short, tight-fitting jacket that flairs out above the hips – she flicked the train of her skirt with a backward kick of her leg, one of the signature female moves in Burmese dance. Fluid, pliable hand gestures and some shoulder shimmies sent her rolling to the floor and finishing in a “puppet pose.”

The third section of the danced offering, to crashing cymbals, involved both dancers on their feet, flexing at their elbow and wrist joints in sharp angles. This angularity in the arms and the collapsed poses that frequently end a dance are a result of the influence of the highly developed marionette tradition in Myanmar. Two male dancers joined in and added some welcome athleticism with large

leg lifts and aerobic jumping – in an instant, on the floor; in another, up in the air.

The men wear the traditional costume of wide-legged, ankle-length trousers with a folded loincloth allowing them to dance with open legs. Their jackets usually hang straight. When singing or delivering repartee, the mintha may wear a vibrant-colored, wrap-around skirt with generous amounts of glittery decoration – as both men and women in Myanmar wear the *longyi*, the traditional Burmese wraparound skirt. The men also wear elaborately decorated *gaung baung*, tied head wraps, and both sexes are decked out in sparkly earrings and strands of pearls. The gender differences in the Burmese dance vocabulary are driven by the costume design, which evolved from northern Burmese court dress during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This court style was heavily influenced by Thai court fashion, as there was much cultural crossover between the two, culminating with the Burmese sack of the Thai capital of Ayutthaya in 1767.

The company director, Shwe Man Chan Thar, offered an original take on a duet called *The Royal Duet*, normally danced by the lead mintha and minthamee. Innovated by his father, the founder of the company, this comedic version has the mintha dancing both roles. He sang and danced dressed as the mintha, then disappeared behind a curtain held onstage by two attendants. He returned dressed as the minthamee, singing and moving in the feminine style. Each time he withdrew for a costume change, the two clown attendants performed silly, slapstick routines. The pace of the character and costume changes picked up until, in a frenzy, the mintha reappeared from behind the changing curtain, clearly ruffled from the rush. He was partially dressed in the male mintha costume and partially dressed in the female minthamee costume. With a classic “sad clown” expression, he discovered his mistake.

Another mainstay of the Burmese dance repertoire is a puppet dance. Marionette theater known as *yokethay thabin* developed into

a highly technical performing art during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the royal court. In those times, wooden puppets were preferred over human performers for portraying the popular *jataka tales*, a collection of 547 morally instructive fables depicting earlier incarnations of the Buddha. Being made of wood, the puppets were considered pure because they could not succumb to human frailty.

Burmese marionette performers manipulate their puppets to move in a complex human fashion – even performing actual dance choreography. Some marionettes have up to sixty strings to enable these complicated movements, whereas the usual puppet requires around twenty. Reciprocally, Burmese dance has incorporated many of the marionette movements and their wooden quality with stiff, jerky, angular poses.

In this tradition, the troupe performed *The Dance of the Marionettes*, featuring a puppet (and female puppeteer) and mintha San Min Aung, who stole the show. The dancer, clad in a persimmon-colored, silk, wraparound skirt and white, chiffon, glitter-embellished jacket, crouched low as he tried to befriend the marionette. With the unphased ease and naive quality of a puppet, he danced a formidable crouching solo with angular arm movements. He wagged his head and danced a conversation with the marionette until he collapsed. The puppeteer mimed pulling the dancer’s strings, bringing him back to life, so the human puppet and the wooden marionette could perform an intricate duet together. In a touching surprise, the marionette leapt into the dancer’s arms and ended the piece.

A Buddhist dance-drama is typically part of the show, and we were regaled with *Mara Sends His Three Daughters to Tempt the Meditating Buddha*. In this tale, a mintha, wearing a scary, green mask with evil headdress, danced Mara, the King of Evil. In his attempt to lure the Buddha away from enlightenment, he orders his three daughters to distract the Buddha from his meditation. Each minthamee mimed receiving the directive from her father, danced

her version of seducing the Buddha (a projected image on the backdrop of the stage), and faced Mara after failing her mission. Finally, Mara deployed the entire family in an unsuccessful tug-of-war to unseat the Buddha from his unshakeable *nirvana*. The dance was mostly gesture driven with pantomime and pouting faces.

The mime and facial expressions were employed to comic advantage in the campy, extemporized dance sketch, *Folk Dance Medley and Competition*. Riffing on traditional ethnic dance customs (Myanmar has more than 135 ethnic groups), the choreography is a competition dance between two young males vying for the attention of a young village maiden. Completing the humorous scene, the hsaing waing produced instantaneous, energetic, orchestrated responses to the slapstick choreographic jokes and exaggerated male dancing.

In *zat pwe*, the final two-hour segment that ushers in the dawn is called *hna pa thwa*. It is a free-for-all tapestry of improvised dialogue, music, singing, dance, and mime. Shwe Man Thabin's closing number included the entire cast with the three lead minthas dancing downstage center. They each unwrapped a long swath of their sequined indigo, violet, and floral print skirts; tied them together like an exotic maypole; and romped around in a circle while singing and joking.

The men are clearly dominant in this performing art. This was captured in a Myanmar moment, during the curtain call, when huge floral bouquets were presented to this performing family dynasty's three male leads – who gladly accepted and then danced with them.

## Saratoga Springs

Jay Rogoff

New York City Ballet tackled its fiftieth summer season at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, once again two weeks long, with a reduced task force. Injuries, maternity leaves, and temporary defections to Broadway required a handful of the remaining principal

women to display multiple personalities. Their versatility and genius helped NYCB keep seven Balanchine classics in good form, restore sparkle to Robbins' *Goldberg Variations*, and triumph in new works by Justin Peck and Alexei Ratmansky, in addition to presenting Peter Martins' splendid new *La Sylphide*, discussed elsewhere.

*La Valse*, AWOL from Saratoga since 1991, featured a controversial performance from Sara Mearns as the doomed girl in white at a ball. "She's out of control from the start," one friend complained. She evasively plunged past Jared Angle and they hungrily lunged at each other in hysteria. In contrast, she calmly, calculatedly chose the accessories Justin Peck held out to her, not thrusting her arms violently into the long black gloves, but entering them lovingly. Her psychological reading involved a horrifying double reverse when she discovered, to her distress, she can't seduce Death. Marika Anderson, Gretchen Smith, and Lydia Wellington excelled as the high-fashion Fates, arms and hands semaphoring heartlessly.

In *Symphony in C's* adagio, Mearns likewise showed her range, the queenly control of her deep *penché*, supported again by Angle, yielding to melting backbends over his arm. (Teresa Reichlen, in the same role, seemed too tall for Angle and fainted with less abandon, but her death spiral that culminates the movement stops the heart.) Marc Happel's new pancake tutus still look wrong; they Russify Balanchine's French ballet (it's Bizet, after all), turning into *Swan Lake* this greatest of all anti-*Swan Lakes*.

Fairly new to *The Four Temperaments'* Sanguinic variation, Mearns could lead more with her hips, but her *battement* is stunning and her leaning arabesque, falling off *pointe* into Tyler Angle's care, is gorgeous. At two other performances – sadly, her only appearances of the season – Ana Sophia Scheller perfected her seductive, extended hip-slither. Floating in Angle's arms, she nailed Sanguinic's stoic gaiety. In *Melancholic*, Gonzalo Garcia and Anthony Huxley excelled in different ways. Watching Garcia's precise falls, as his hands