

Winter 2015-2016

Ballet Review



**Ballet Review 43.4
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Cover photograph by Gene Schiavone,
ABT: Gillian Murphy as Aurora.

her fetching solo couldn't distract the guys gossiping in groups. The unorthodox adagio deploys five men lyrically and sculpturally, and the tender, playful pas between Mearns and Ramasar was Peck's best to date. During the hoedown finale, the dancers huddled at the music's pauses, deciding what play to call next, until Mearns, say, exploded upward out of their conclave. Tiler Peck (no relation to Justin), alternating with Mearns, gave *Rôdê,ô* an even lighter touch. At the ballet gala, the romantic *Belles-Lettres*, to Franck, looked like minor Peck, despite its lush partnering. Before long his extraordinary talent will solve the riddle of the erotic.

Ratmansky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, another gala exclusive, convened seven principals – Hyltin, Mearns, Tiler Peck, Tyler Angle, Adrian Danchig-Waring, Garcia, and Ramasar – as well as corps standouts Gretchen Smith, Indiana Woodward, and Joseph Gordon, in a delightful ensemble work. Instead of the familiar Ravel orchestration, Ratmansky uses Mussorgsky's original piano score, excellently played by Cameron Grant, and he divests the music of all narrative associations by projecting images of Kandinsky's *Color Study Squares with Concentric Circles*.

The result is an austere, modernist ballet full of exuberance and free of bombast, with the clean humanistic elegance of Russian Con-

structivism. The opening arranges the dancers in a continually evolving grid, as if playing art history charades with the Kandinsky. The closing has the five men hoist the five women vertically, arms raised in a V for victory. In between, a sequence of continually absorbing solos, duets, and small groups illuminate the unique ways the company continues to dance handsomely together. With its no-stars billing, *Pictures* is nothing less than a celebration of the New York City Ballet.

Tokyo

Karen Greenspan

The stage at the Setagaya Public Theater was divided by two slightly separated and raised rectangular platforms. Over each rectangle hung a scale with an hourglass suspended above it. A thin stream of white sand pouring onto the scale's tray marked the passage of time as New Age sounds of gentle chimes and echoes filled the soundscape.

Then the theater went black – no curtain lights, no lit exit signs, no emergency lighting along the aisles – pure black. Complete and utter darkness is the starting point of Butoh, originally called *ankoku butoh*, meaning “the dance of darkness.” This dance movement developed in Japan in the early 1960s – a challenge to post-World War II Western cultural

and political dominance as well as a response to the constraints of Japan's own traditional dance-theater forms. From this womblike darkness Ushio Amagatsu's *Umu-suna: Memories Before History* emerged.

Out of the blackness, a single shaft of light appeared upstage center revealing another continuous stream of sand falling from above. Ushio Amagatsu, shaven and powdered white as is characteristic of Sankai Juku (the second-generation Butoh com-



Photo: Laurent Philippe, BAM

Sankai Juku's *Umu-suna*

pany that he founded in 1975 and continues to direct), stood downstage center. He wore his signature, long, narrow, white skirt with short, overdraped apron, and stood with his smooth, white, bare back to the audience. He slowly walked toward the fountain of sand and then turned toward the audience.

Ushio Amagatsu's legs remained fixed while his arms danced lyrically to the melodic strains of guitar, harp, flute, and piano of the compiled score – a group effort composed by Takashi Kako, YAS-KAZ, and Yoichiro Yoshikawa. He repeatedly gestured forward, reaching toward the audience, and then turned back to gaze at the stream of sand, creating a palpable tension between the two and an invitation into his rendering of the beginnings of life.

At the outset of the second section of the piece, "All that Is Born," the stage returned to darkness except for a dramatic red stripe of light down a center white band dividing the black backdrop and continuing down the center white strip of stage between the two raised platforms. The scales hovering above shifted – symbolizing a state of flux and disequilibrium. (They later tipped and rebalanced at various junctures during the piece.) A chorus of four dancers appeared in a half-kneeling pose upstage left. They stretched their bodies upward and opened their mouths in a visual primal scream. The music transitioned to loud, disturbing, crashing sounds as the movements became more energized – swaying, twisting, floating, pivoting back and forth.

Finally, in unison, the dancers picked up their long, full, red skirts to run forward and stop. In a breath-stopping, fractured moment, they dropped their hems back down to the floor. Sankai Juku's hallmark appearance of shaven heads and powdered white bodies erases individual characteristics and creates a timeless, genderless, austerely expressive universal body. The costuming in this section suggested femaleness in that the all-male quartet (the entire company is male) wore white, laced-up corsets and white earrings that dangled as they lifted up their red skirts

to scurry about the stage – like ladies at court.

They morphed into a bending, breathing mass of life as they shed their erect courtly posture and bowed, twisted, and nodded – caressing the surrounding space with their smooth heads. A centrally placed figure began to spin, setting off a chaotic energy in which all four dancers ran about in circles and to each of the four corners before exiting.

The entrance of three figures clad in short, white, wraparound skirts and curling up on their sides into a fetal position signaled the beginning of the third section, "Memories from Water." Hollow electronic sounds accompanied the dancers as they squiggled around, their bodies hugging the floor like primordial creatures. Occasionally their heads or legs inclined upward from the fetal position until they rose up to kneeling while reaching their hands forward like primitive sensors testing a watery environment. Returning to the floor with bodies elongated, the dancers undulated like underwater creatures. Their seaweed quality developed into a beautifully performed sequence in which the dancers lay prone, alternately lifting their heads and then their pelvises in a slow, muscular undulation.

By section four, we were reminded of the noticeable accumulation of sand on the stage because of a gesture sequence in which the dancers sank to the floor, ran the backs of their hands through the collected sand, gathered the sand in both fists, and stood as the grains poured from their fists. This tactile motif was repeated throughout the remainder of the piece – alluding to the passing of time (sands fallen from the hourglass) and earth (particles of sand), and the relationship of the former in creating the latter. The visible impressions on the sand traced by the dancers and their dance inscribed the human impact on the physical environment and left the audience with a visual memento of this dance of creation.

The following section, "Mirror of the Forests," was notable for its distinct lighting and costuming. A green-lit stripe ran down

the center dividing the black backdrop. A brilliant, royal blue light bathed the center strip of stage between the two raised platforms. Wearing long, full, white dresses cinched with an apron of wide strips of forest green hanging from their waists, the four dancers assumed an open square formation. They reached their arms in smooth, flowing movements to uplifting chimes.

As the black backdrop slowly lifted, the dancers tightened their formation, knelt on the floor, and bowed to each other. The central stream of sand flowing from the ceiling appeared as a waterfall pouring into the central strip of white flooring that was lit to resemble a flowing current. The powerful combination of visual effects, music, and movement washed the stage with a vision of humankind in harmony with nature that acknowledges our place within nature's grand design.

Amagatsu dramatically entered from the center open strip dividing the black backdrop. Another black backdrop immediately descended highlighting the contours of his stark white body. After reaching to touch the falling sand, he ran downstage right, grasping at the space then back to the sand stream. He traveled the perimeter of the stage, eventually bowing under the weight of an overpowering force. Finally, he succumbed to the pull of the sand stream and entered it.

The final section, "*Ubusu* – Birth, Beginning of Life, Entering the World," begins the cycle of creation once again in this model of endlessly repeating time. The white-skirted dancers entered one at a time from opposite corners and gradually repopulated the stage with their undulating movements. A warmly lit, white backdrop created a radiance against which the dancers' even whiter bodies resembled breathing, moving marble sculptures.

The central dancer took a seated posture – like a sitting Buddha or yogi. Eventually all of the dancers spread out to dance a sitting sequence before rolling into fetal position where they undulated through soft reaching and re-treating movements. The lights dimmed as the

dancers rolled onto their backs and folded their knees into their chests like fetuses in the womb. And the stage returned to utter darkness.

Amagatsu is a master at assembling landscapes of birth, growth, decay, and regeneration using his personal Butoh style. His gesture language is primal – with the ability to call up social archetypes from deep within the human unconscious, but without the trying-ly slow, limit-testing discomfort of other Butoh artists. Aside from his training under Butoh founders Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno and his gestation while cofounding the provocative Dai Rakuda Kan dance collective, no doubt, Amagatsu's exposure to Western classical and modern dance training, as well as the fact that Sankai Juku was based in Paris for many years, helped forge his Butoh style into a unique, highly refined, accessible idiom.

His works reflect skillfully paced, dramatic timing as well as masterful manipulation of contrasts – form and emptiness, dimness and brightness, harmony and dissonance, serenity and agitation. He captures the attention and brings the observer into an intensely focused state with increasing awareness of the most minute subtleties of expression. His staged architecture and evocative costuming conjure a timeless, all-encompassing, spiritual experience akin to a ninety-minute meditation.

The problem is that *Umusuna* feels like a diluted, repackaged version of Amagatsu's earlier work. The music was often evocative but sometimes crossed the line into treacly. The choreography of the chorus of dancers in full skirts lacked the raw, disturbing edginess that was present in *Hibiki* when the similarly corseted quartet danced like witches around a giant plastic saucer of red liquid. Nor did it provoke like the grotesque, self-admiring ritual of the ghoulish quartet in *Kagemi*.

Perhaps it is indicative of a different stage of artistic sensibility. But I still retain the memory and expectation of the intensity of experience I found in Amagatsu's pioneering productions.