

Winter 2015-2016

Ballet Review



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

theorist Noverre and others. The British have long appreciated a story told in movement, and Bourne's *Scissorhands* satisfies that penchant in a way that stands out in theatrical performances today. It is no wonder it has been a worldwide hit.

New York

Karen Greenspan

The show at the Rubin Museum of Art (New York), *Becoming Another: The Power of Masks*, features nearly one hundred masks and costumes from across the Northern Hemisphere, including Siberia, Mongolia, the Himalayas, Japan, and the Northwest Coast of North America. The exhibit's overarching theme is that across cultures and throughout time, humans have sought to spiritually empower and trans-

use chanting, drum beating, dances, rattles, masks, and weapons to induce trance and traverse into the spirit world. At their potlatches – communal gift-giving feasts that include rituals that reinforce their shamanic beliefs – native tribes of the Pacific Northwest use transformation masks for storytelling.

A particularly dramatic piece carved by contemporary Cherokee artist Tsungani Fearon Smith, Jr., depicts an animal face that mechanically opens to reveal a human head made of wood inside. This type of mask conveys ideas of the changing of animal spirits into human ancestors and is used by the Kwakwaka'wakw people in communal ceremonies when performing dance-dramas with music, song, and dance to reenact the powerful transformation of their ancestors.

The displayed, full costume of a Tibetan oracle is a striking piece of attire – especially the headgear made of a metal frame surrounded by little skulls, topped by a larger skull with red hair and three flaming metal blades! A veil of hairlike fringe covers the oracle's face and eight flags mounted on wooden sticks extend from the metal headband. These flags echo another series of flags extending from the waistband of the costume making for a one-man, bannered procession. The outfit is paired with a costume and video recording of a Mongolian shaman performing a divination, providing a context that brings the costume to convulsing life.

The sacred *cham* (Himalayan Buddhist dance) masks exemplify masks used in private and communal rituals as well as danced storytelling. The display notes provide informative accounts of the particular story dramas and details about the characters represented by the exhibited masks.

Little information, however, is given about the transformative processes in which the ritual masks play a part. For instance, many of these masks come from Bhutan, Mongolia, and Tibet, where they are worn by monks or lay practitioners as they perform dances considered to be the sacred wisdom of the cherished Buddhist master Padmasambhava. In some



Tsungani Fearon Smith, Jr.: Transformation Mask (1979), collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

form themselves through using masks to take on the identity of another. These transformational processes often involve dance and music. Remarkable commonalities exist between the masks and traditions in the North Asian and North American belief systems.

The masks are organized around three principal cultural practices: shamanism, communal ritual, and theatrical storytelling. In many situations, however, these practices extend into more than one category.

In shamanism, the medium transcends worlds and communicates with or takes on the identity of a supernatural entity. Shamans

cases, the monk performer meditates on a deity and its qualities before donning the costume and fearsome (or peaceful) mask through which he will transform himself into an emanation of the deity with the intention of overcoming forces obstructive to enlightenment. The monks will often perform several hours of unseen dance rituals within the temple before dancing outside in the monastery courtyard for the public. The dancers perform these dances and the dance-dramas with the intention of benefitting the entire community as well as all sentient beings.

All members of the community, old and young, turn out in their finest attire to witness three days of these dance rituals at their annual village festival. The mere viewing of these dances is considered a powerful source of liberation and blessings.

The Mongolian cham mask of Begtse Chen provides one of the highlights from the exhibition. This uberwrathful, reddish mask represents the protector of the leader of Mongolian Buddhism. Like most wrathful protectors in Tibetan Buddhism, Begtse Chen destroys enemies of the dharma (Buddhist path) and all obstacles to enlightenment. The stunning, large, and dramatic mask is decorated with approximately six thousand tiny pieces of coral through a technique used only in Mongolia. Its overwhelming heaviness suggests that it would have been worn by a strapping monk who could handle the physical challenge of dancing under its weight.

Japanese masks from the noh and kyogen theatrical forms exemplify masks used for storytelling. But again, the exhibition provides little detail on the process of transformation or the theatrical context. In noh, the performer treats his mask with sacred respect. At a recent noh workshop at Japan Society, noh Master Yamai Tsunao, of the 1400-year-old Komparu School in Japan, narrated the dressing process while he was assisted in putting on the countless layers of his elaborate costume. When it came time to put on his mask, he bid us *sayonara*, explaining that once the mask is tied on, he leaves his ordinary

existence and transforms into the character.

The backstage “green room” in noh theater is called the “mirror room.” It is where the actor goes to “greet” and tie on his mask in the mirror room ritual. The mask, when worn, is not frozen in an expressionless state. The performer manipulates it to catch the light at different angles, thereby altering its expression and rendering it capable of portraying countless shades of human emotion.

The show’s elegant layout creates a sense of mystery with restrained lighting revealing the masks (some displayed in glass cases) against dark walls. But, its obvious flaw is the lack of audiovisual treatment dealing with how these masks are used and made meaningful. After all, they were not designed to hang on a wall. They were intended to transform performers, and thereby transform viewers, by enhancing highly theatrical and kinetic performances or rituals. The masks must be inhabited to breathe meaning into them as they are all used in performance – whether an unseen private ritual or a communal affair. To exhibit their essence, the masks must dance.

Since my initial visit, the Rubin has added some rich, supplemental programming – lunchtime dance ethnology films, evening lectures, and weekend workshops. However, this exhibition begs for video installations. Most viewers have no idea what these dances or dramas look like – the movements, the energy, the spatial formations, the sounds, the setting, the accompanying costumes. The masks displayed in *Becoming Another: The Power of Masks* demand a presentation that is extraordinary, for they are meant to rouse, tease, scare – somehow move us out of ordinary experience. To do that they must be shown in action.

Washington, D.C.

George Jackson

George Balanchine’s ballets can serve as ends in themselves or as vehicles for different sorts of dancers and points of comparison with other choreography. Both approaches are at home in the nation’s capital.

The Suzanne Farrell Ballet, sponsored by the Kennedy Center, exemplifies the art-for-art's-sake way. Farrell's vision of what Balanchine meant with each distinct piece pervades the dances she stages.

In contrast, The Washington Ballet's director Septime Webre uses Balanchine work in his company's "Tour-de-Force: Balanchine" programs in order to display particular dancers and the values of diverse dance makers. Last season it was Balanchine's *Theme and Variations* and this season (2014/2015) it was his *Serenade* to which Webre added historic excerpts and brief pieces by local choreographers and by international names on the contemporary scene.

Theme showed that the Washington Ballet could be respectably regal. However, in *Serenade* the company's women conveyed Balanchine's concept of the eternally feminine rather mechanically.

Vainonen's *Flames of Paris* duo made aesthetic sense on the 2014 bill because its choreographer, like Balanchine, came from Mariinsky schooling and wanted to reinvent the classical heritage. That program's remaining choreography by Choo San Goh, Edwaard Liang, Elaine Kudo, Tamás Krizsa, and Webre, however, seemed chosen by happenstance.

Some of Webre's 2015 picks served to say goodbye to departing dancers or hello to ones returning. Jared Nelson, a strong stylist for many seasons, partnered guest Michele Jimenez (a former Webre favorite) in *A Sweet Spell of Oblivion*. Britain's David Dawson choreographed this overly smooth duo to Bach and bathed the pair of veteran dancers in rejuvenating illumination. *Rooster (Suite)* (The Rolling Stones) by Christopher Bruce, another British choreographer, featured the reliable Zachary Hackstock (like Nelson, about to retire from full-time dancing) and Aurora Dickie (going to join Nacho Duato's company in Berlin).

The most interestingly complex of the 2015 program's many moody encounters, Christopher Wheeldon's *There Where She Loved* (Kurt Weill), featured the steadfast Sona Kharatian,

returning from a long convalescence, along with Luis R. Torres. With Jonathan Jordan vivid and yet elegant in the male role, Balanchine's *Tarantella* proved to be the best of the familiar items, which included duos from *Esmeralda* and *Le Corsaire*.

Others of the Washington Ballet dancers suit Balanchine variably. Kateryna Derechyna and Esmiana Jani have the streamlining; tiny Maki Onuki is lightning quick but lacks the line; strong Corey Landolt freezes when not moving. A new work, David Palmer's *Suite Nancy* (Sinatra) seemed more nightclub routine than inventive ballet, but *The Art of War* (to Hans Zimmer music) by Andile Ndlovu, presented Landolt as a shimmying, leaping warrior reveling in courage and fun.

"Tour-de-Force: Balanchine" is a minuscule portion of The Washington Ballet's programming that concentrates on family entertainment, American story ballets, and Lilliput versions of the classics. Farrell's is not a full-fledged company since it now performs only one weekend per year. Nevertheless, these projects along with what's brought by visitors (including an annual week of New York City Ballet) provide local audiences with a fairly regular, year-round Balanchine diet.

Chicago

Joseph Houseal

Chicago's splendid Haymarket Opera Company continued its string of extraordinary baroque opera performances, featuring expert baroque music and singing of course, but also expert baroque gesture, costume, hair, and dancing. Haymarket's spring season *Don Quichotte* by Georg Philipp Telemann, performed at the architecturally ideal Mayne Stage, was directed and choreographed by baroque dancer and scholar Sarah Edgar.

Here Edgar brought to life a German score with its corresponding sensibilities of marches rather than minuets. Edgar and Haymarket have done successful Italian and French operas, each time capturing something of the aesthetic of the time, and each time utilizing