

Spring 2016

Ballet Review





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New York

Karen Greenspan

Kudos to Asia Society for an unusual programming delight, “Viewpoints: Classical Connections with Wendy Whelan, Parul Shah and Qian Yi.” The program, conceived and moderated by Asia Society’s Director of Global Programming, Rachel Cooper, brought together three acclaimed female performing artists who have reached the pinnacle of their careers as performers of classical dance forms and now have chosen to diverge from this path and embark on a course of creative encounters.

Their journeys were presented with an introductory biography, short live solo, video clips, and a revealing and at times surprising panel discussion. Cooper expertly managed the evening with warmth and familiarity conversing with each principal before and after the short solo.

Qian Yi, an internationally recognized leading performer of kunqu, the 600-year-old classical Chinese operatic form comprised of both song and dance, performed an aria of romantic longing from the epic *The Peony Pavilion*. She danced a slow, wistful choreography of long, floppy sleeves that she manipulated in sudden spiraling bursts as she walked about in circular floor patterns and inclined her body and head to form curved poses.

Yi’s graceful fingers gestured as her wrists flowed in delicate circles. Nothing could match the expressivity of her dreamy eyes as she tugged the length of her sleeve like a memory she could not let go of. She wore a simple grey tunic over black silk pants. The only costuming elements were the long white extensions sewn onto the end of the shirtsleeves and her turquoise slippers topped with matching feathered pom-poms.

This heart-melting performance was followed by an excerpt from *Slow Dancing*, David Michalek’s video project with Qian Yi performing ten seconds of movement slowed down to about eight minutes of hyper slow motion. In full kimono costume with makeup and wig, Yi performed a phrase about the passage

of time – illustrated by the short life span of a flower that blooms in the morning and lies dead on the ground by day’s end. One could utterly drown in the extraordinary changes of expression in her eyes and face as they were magnified in space (on the screen) and suspended in time – details that ordinarily would escape the viewer. David Michalek was present to describe his project that debuted as an outdoor installation at the 2007 Lincoln Center Festival. It is a privileged look at “how art unfolds.”

Parul Shah introduced her contemporary kathak idiom by reminding the audience that *kathak* means “storyteller.” Originally kathak was a folk form through which the stories from Indian mythology were told. The rise of the Mughal court (1526-1857) and its traditions shifted kathak’s emphasis, adding a strong pure dance (nonnarrative movement) component.

Shah gave a brief demonstration of classical kathak technique, set to the rich melodic percussion of the tabla player, as well as a tongue-twisting vocal enunciation of kathak rhythmic syllables. Then, performing a solo from one of her own contemporary kathak creations, *All That Is In Between*, Shah filled every millimeter of her petite physique with communicative energy in an explosive display of exacting footwork beneath lyrical arm gestures – all while striking assured, expansive lines.

The choreography excited me when I saw it at the 2015 Dancing the Gods Festival of Indian Dance at NYU’s Skirball Center, and it is a natural hybrid of kathak and modern dance elements smoothly homogenized within a contemporary framework. Shah danced a playful sequence drawing on the classical concept of *abhinaya* (bringing out the inner life of the character), in which she seemed to follow and momentarily catch something (possibly a bird, a butterfly). She repeated and developed the movements, dancing with her captive until she eventually set it free. Could the captured object have been a metaphor for herself?

Wendy Whelan candidly spoke about her

post-New York City Ballet journey of creative curiosity as she amusingly admitted that after practicing ballet for forty-five years, she is now struggling to break all the rules that she learned. One of her most daunting challenges is learning “how to release.” She exhibited her perfect command of flowing through angularity as she presented her solo from *Ego et Tu* by Hubbard Street resident choreographer, Alejandro Cerrudo. The piece is part of her recent project, “Restless Creature,” a series of four duets danced with the choreographer of each duet.

Rachel Cooper commented on how the title captures the idea of Whelan’s current state of restlessness as she pursues new possibilities for employing her dancing instrument. Performed in stocking feet, the solo allowed for exploration of nonclassical lines and shapes. However, the unrelentingly contained, controlled energy confined the solo to a series of poses and did not push Whelan to move with any degree of abandon or “release.”

The presented cut from *Slow Dancing* captured Whelan performing the final moments of a balletic phrase. She rose from the landing of a jump to unfurl into a magnificent, upward, upper back extension. Michalek (who is married to Whelan) eloquently caught and amplified the beauty of her extraordinary range of motion.

In a warmly human and humorous panel discussion, Cooper guided the three muses from the pedestals where we keep them, down to earth and into our hearts, where they openly revealed their excitement and vulnerability as they pursue new courses of creative expression. Whelan, almost giddy from her post-NYCB freedom, clearly stated her goals for this chapter in her professional life as “to have a good time, to feel good, and to learn. I just want to make friends and try new things.” Later she clarified, “I am having a good time, but it’s incredibly challenging. I like challenge, obviously. So I am trying something new each project I do.”

Shah expressed feeling fewer physical and creative constraints as she moved outside of

her classical technique and into contemporary forms. Perhaps classical Indian dance more freely translates into modern expression. Shah acknowledged that classical kathak technique is embedded in her being and she did not make a conscious decision to do contemporary dance. It was, rather, a thematic choice. She simply wanted to dance about new and different subject matter – and she did.

The naked moment of surprise came after Yi’s admission that she could never have accomplished this kind of experimentation in China. In one breath, this self-effacing, angel-faced, ageless practitioner of Chinese high art unleashed a whirlwind of emotion – from describing kunqu opera as all about “making circles” to recounting an experiment in which she roller-skated with 500 ping-pong balls on a raked stage.

Yi had just returned from the Spoleto Festival in Charleston where she performed in Jennifer Ma’s new opera, *Paradise Interrupted*, in which she used those kunqu circular patterns to create the final aria about personal liberation and “painting one’s own life.” Coming from a culture and a classical form that dictate how and what to do, she confessed she now must learn who she is without being told. She finally paused to breathe, reflect, and then poignantly summed it up, “I have to redraw the circle of myself.”

Jacob’s Pillow

Jay Rogoff

The small-scale L. A. Dance Project, which Benjamin Millepied continues to direct while running the Paris Opera Ballet, performed for the first time at Jacob’s Pillow in 2015. The eight-member troupe, shepherded by new associate artistic director Carla Körbes, showed the strength of its dancers and the limitations of some of its choreography, all performed to canned music. The company’s ragout of ballet and modern dance vocabulary – no toe shoes in the whole program – looked appealing in the intimate Ted Shawn Theater.

Justin Peck’s 2013 *Murder Ballades*, for six