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Ballet Review





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Another young and talented dancer playing her first principal role was Letizia Galloni with, luckily, Mathias Heymann as her partner. He has danced Colas for many years now, but remains as youthful and committed as his first time. The Palais Garnier, filled with tourists at this time of the year, showed its enthusiasm with a standing ovation after the last pas de deux of the first act. Heymann was splendid in the two bottle variations, while Galloni was praised in unison applauses for her long diagonal on pointe.

The whole company was electrified by the two soloists, but in contrast, Antoine Kirscher surprised everyone as Alain. A very short and fragile character, he looked like a rag doll.

Finally, a word on Marc Moreau and Marine Ganio. Moreau has long been a Millepied favorite, but Ashton's style presented new challenges, and Moreau appeared nervous whether dancing with a staff or partnering Ganio. Nevertheless she seemed calm and precise and revealed herself as a very good actress.

Millepied has managed the Paris Opera Ballet since November 2014. As Nureyev did more than thirty years ago, Millepied has given young *sujets* and even sometimes mere *choryphées* opportunities in principal roles. This fresh air in the corps de ballet has been undeniably motivating for the new generation and this intense series of performances turns out to be really exciting.

Some young talents are rising but we can really regret that these dancers miss the time to dig into their role and Ashtonian style. If we think of these Lisés, all have been lovely "filles" but to become real "daughters," Ashton requires more intricacy and experience. They will achieve this level only if they are soon given another opportunity to deepen these roles.

Too many étoiles were preempted by the Wayne McGregor piece, and too many are scheduled to dance in Tokyo at the upcoming World Ballet Festival. This global gala is a fantastic opportunity, but should only be considered a secondary commitment after that to the company at home.

New York

Karen Greenspan

Out of the devastation of the 2004 tsunami that engulfed Indonesia and killed some 170,000 people in Aceh province alone has come a resurgence in the practice of folk dance and music. These old and new folk traditions have provided the social cohesion that has enabled healing and resilience for the people of this community in the wake of their shared tragedy and trauma.

The exuberant dancers of Tari Aceh came to Asia Society to present a performance and dance workshop as part of a U.S. tour organized in conjunction with Wesleyan University's Center for the Arts 2015-2016 program "Muslim Women's Voices at Wesleyan" as well as Asia Society's ongoing initiative "Creative Voices of Muslim Asia" – cultural diplomacy efforts aimed at providing Americans with opportunities to experience and interact with positive, humanistic representatives of Islam.

Tari Aceh is a performing ensemble from the newly founded (2009) Center for the Arts of Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province in Sumatra, Indonesia. The nine female dancers and one male musician performed music and dances from their unique island-born Islamic traditions.

An informative lecture moderated by Rachel Cooper, Asia Society's Director of Global Performing Arts and Cultural Initiatives, preceded the performance, providing a cultural context through which to appreciate the event. Because of its geographical situation along a popular trade route in the Indian Ocean, Aceh is thought to have been the place where Islam first reached Indonesia and, over time, gained a foothold in the fourteenth century. The religion was brought by traders from India and Turkey, eventually flourishing into the wealthy, powerful, and fiercely independent seventeenth-century Sultanate of Aceh.

Three subcultures were represented by the evening's program of dances. To put this in perspective, Aceh province has ten different

ethnic groups and is situated in the north of Indonesia, an archipelago nation comprised of over 13,000 islands stretching out across a width equal to that of the United States and with the fourth largest population in the world.

The dances were performed to a melodic and rhythmic, a capella, female chanting of Arabic verses describing Islamic values and teachings, legends, praises, and laments. Strong and mellifluous, the singing was frequently performed solo by petite powerhouse Cut Febriyanti, who also danced. Sometimes the chanting was accompanied by the beating of the *rapa'i*, or frame drum – the main instrument used in Acehese music. Several songs included an instrumental prelude and/or coda using a combination of the *rapa'i*, an oboe-like horn, a bowl-shaped bell, and an accordion.

The opening piece *Piyasan Raya* (A Great Celebration), first performed in 1975, is a contemporary dance based on traditional forms. Expressing joy and merriment, it is performed at secular and sacred ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions, and certain Islamic holidays. Two musicians played an introduction on the oboe and frame drum. The dancers entered as the oboist switched to chanting.

The dancers were clad in reddish-orange satin long-sleeved tops and pants over which they wore tight-fitting, knee-length, wraparound skirts of green silk tinged with golden threads. Their necks were completely covered with a black silk neck piece, and their headdresses looked like colorful chiffon scarves sewn together in a tight covering that came to a blunt point at the top of their heads. A delicate garland of rosebuds surrounded their bright orange and gold headdresses. The colorful costuming created a style of decorated modesty.

The dancers formed two lines and performed simple steps and stationary pulses while the torso, arms, and hands repeated movement patterns. The arm sequences were repeated while the dancers gradually squat-

ted to the floor, and continued while they maintained a kneeling position. Then, imperceptibly, the dancers recovered to a standing position while the arm and torso movements persisted. Throughout this celebratory dance, the singing took the form of call-and-response between the chanter and the dancers. Toward the end, the chanter sped up the tempo, and the dancers quickly skipped off the stage.

Rateb Meuseukat is an older dance, developed in the 1930s, originating from a male Muslim tradition of chanting Islamic verses. Today it is mostly performed by female dancers. It is a popular example of a sitting dance (the Acehese have sitting and standing dances). After the dancers entered chanting, dancing, and whooping, they formed a tight line across the stage and knelt down to sit on their knees and bow forward as the chanter sang the traditional greeting “*Salaam Aleikum*.” The entire dance was then performed seated on the knees with torsos bowing, twisting, and reaching, and heads turning. The hallmark of the dance, however, is the use of body percussion – slapping various body parts and the floor; clapping one’s own hands or one’s neighbor’s, finger clicking – all at a breakneck speed that keeps increasing.

A most curious offering was *Pho*, a staged wedding tradition to mourning lamentations. (Yes, you read correctly!) Historically, the chanting and dancing of *Pho* was part of palace mourning rituals performed at the death of royal family members. In Tari Aceh’s staged presentation to a solemn female chant, a male and female (groom and bride) entered and sat on two chairs placed in the center of the stage. Six women formed a circle around the seated couple, performing a rhythmic dance that included stepping, bending, gesturing, stamping, and finger clicking.

A dancer wearing a more substantial turban-like headdress, representing the bride’s mother or grandmother, entered with what looked like a baby doll in her arms. She danced around the wedding couple, moving in the opposite direction from the outer circle of dancing women. It then became apparent that

she was not carrying a doll – but rather, a beaded shawl (resembling a baby blanket) that she placed over the bride’s shoulders and a dipper (reminiscent of a baby’s head) that she used to sprinkle water over the groom and bride.

The couple stood and then knelt before the older woman who sat down in the bride’s chair. The bride enacted a lengthy, sorrowful crying sequence during which the older woman physically tried to console and soothe her. I was baffled by this dramatic episode, and I questioned Ari Palawi, the founder of the group and lecturer at Syiah Kuala University, about it. He explained that the parting of a daughter from her mother on her wedding day is a wrenching and tearful affair in Acehnese culture.

The 200-year-old dance, *Ratoh Duek*, was visually quite similar to the earlier sitting dance, however, the words to the song are of a secular nature. A notable feature of the dance, executed by the single row of seven kneeling dancers, was the patterning of alternating members bowing forward, stretching torsos and arms upward clasping neighbors’ hands, and then sitting down while leaning backwards – creating the illusion of three rows – with their overlapping movements. This movement motif references the motion of waves – so integral to the landscape of this nation of islands.

The quickening rhythmic thumping of the floor, chest, hands, and thighs along with the chanted melody and frenzied body and head movements seemed to induce a state of ecstasy. I got a taste of how it feels to perform this very precisely synchronized dance as we were taught sections of it during the next day’s workshop. The movement, executed in close, shoulder-to-shoulder, line formation, and with speedy, unison action, is its own lesson in moving together as a cohesive group and reflects the Acehnese tightly knit, group-oriented society.

Following intermission, the dancers re-

turned dressed in long black wraparound skirts; long-sleeved tops with embroidered embellishment; and headdresses with three green feathers emerging from their point. Ap-



Photo: Elsa Ruiz, Asia Society

Piyasan Raya.

peating quite tribal in this attire, they performed the *Guel* and *Bines* dances from the highland regions of Aceh. The two dance traditions were performed as one continuous piece.

The *Guel* is a standing dance performed to the beat of the *rapa’i* and sung accompaniment. Standing in place with feet together, each dancer clasping her own hands together in front of her waist, the dancers performed a distinctive double shoulder shrug to the drummed beat as they leaned their torsos from side to side. The choreography was inspired by a popular legend about a white elephant that was given to a princess by the Acehnese sultan. The dance’s pulsating arm and hand gestures performed as the dancers stand in place, squat down to a kneeling position, and return to standing, are supposed to represent the elephant’s trunk.

The *Bines* dance was not as distinct as the *Guel*, but made cheery use of typical folk dance steps and formations, varied patterns of group

pat-a-cake, and rhythmic finger snapping to call-and-response singing.

The final dance, *Seudati Inong*, was performed in bright gold satin skirts and jackets tied with silver belts. Aside from the strong solo singing of Cut Febriyanti, the dancers provided their own accompaniment with finger snapping and body percussion for this standing dance. The dancers moved in and out of the usual circle and line formations to eventually assume the pattern of a square within a square. This particular floor pattern reflects an Acehnese architectural design.

While standing in these formations, the dancers performed movement sequences to silence, “hitting” poses with the dynamics of a drill team or martial arts practitioners. Toward the end, the singer sped up the tempo prompting the dancers to speedily skip in formations around the stage while clapping and yipping with raw and exuberant energy.

It is worth noting that *Seudati Inong* historically existed in separate female and male forms, but there is a current push to strengthen Acehnese dance culture by evolving female forms of formerly male dances.

As I participated in the movement workshop, the lovely Acehnese dancer next to me nudged my arm into the correct position to slap her adjoining hand in the rapid-fire body percussion sequence we were learning. I thought to myself: There is absolutely nothing that brings disparate people together in a deeply human interaction like learning and performing each other's dances. It's a revelatory way to discover a different culture. It's too bad we never learned the traditional dances honed on our own nation's soil.

Hong Kong

Kevin Ng

I spoke with Sergei Filin during the Bolshoi's tour here in April 2015, before the company announced that it would not be renewing his contract as its ballet director.

Kevin Ng: This Hong Kong repertory is more interesting than the Grigorovich programs

presented during your recent New York trip. *Jewels* was acquired during your directorship, while Ratmansky's *The Flames of Paris* is a reminder of his years as director.

Sergei Filin: The programs for each overseas tour aren't the choice of the Bolshoi, but the impresario's instead. So we shouldn't be accused of choosing the wrong programs. But I believe that Grigorovich's works are not bad and shouldn't be criticized. Even though the Bolshoi's repertory is at present very diverse, Grigorovich's ballets are always very popular, and the tickets sell out easily.

Ng: The most recent premiere was *Hamlet*, directed by Britain's Declan Donnellan and choreographed by Radu Poklitaru.

Filin: The audience greeted it with a warm welcome; the critics were more reserved. But the production was loved by the dancers and the production team. I think it's a good work.

Ng: Jean-Christophe Maillot's *The Taming of the Shrew* was another premiere.

Filin: Yes, it was the final premiere of last season. I believe it's one of the best ballets of recent years. The most wonderful part is the choreography. Maillot didn't just transfer an existing production onto us. It is a new work created especially for the Bolshoi, a most original production.

Ng: What other premieres are planned?

Filin: We cannot officially say yet. They will be announced eventually at a press conference. But I can tell you now that we will work with Alexei Ratmansky, Nacho Duato, and Lightfoot and Léon. And one more piece from Kylián. The final work of the season will be a full-length ballet by a young Russian choreographer. I can't name him yet.

Ng: Will the Ratmansky be new?

Filin: No, it won't be a new work.

Ng: Is it true that the Bolshoi repertory has become more Russian and less Western?

Filin: This season my objective is to give freedom and creativity to Russian choreographers. Hence this new *Hamlet*. Another piece will be *A Hero of Our Time*, based on the novel by the Russian author Mikhail Lermontov. The choreographer is Yuri Possokhov.