

MARK FRANKO

Post-Pandemic Dance Fervor and the Dramatic Turn



Photo: Maria Kowroski and Amar Ramasar in *Agon*. Photo: Paul Kolnik.
Courtesy of NYCB.

EVER SINCE LAST September, the return to a normal performance schedule at New York City Ballet has brought with it a fervor visible not only in a renewed energy, resolve, and an evident joy in dancing after a trying pause, but also palpable in the intensity of feelings dancers display on stage.¹ Perhaps for this reason my attention has been drawn primarily to the performers themselves. Principal dancer Russell Janzen wrote a moving piece in *The New York Times* last year

about his return to “in person” rehearsal. He concluded:

These moments of connection are possible only in the context of a dance. This unspoken recognition of each other and of our shared passion is something my colleagues and I find repeatedly in the intimacy and physical proximity of a danced, onstage world. And it is these relationships, and the closeness forged onstage and in movement, that have been impossible on our video screens and in our socially distanced dancing.²

Live communication between performers is the basis, for Janzen, of the entire art and the intensity of live connection can also be felt keenly by the audience. Indeed, it can change the meaning of works for that audience.

In an early season performance (Sept. 28) of Jerome Robbins’s *Glass Pieces* (1983), I noticed just such unspoken recognition and shared passion: attention to detail was shared between performers as a common project that was nonetheless imbued with vibrant individuality. *Glass Pieces* took on a more dramatic meaning, making me think about the relation of the individual to the social totality. Did the work become more expressive of its original intent? Or did the meaning change in relation to the intensity of the performance? Whatever the case may be, expression is always at work, even in the most formalist movement constructions.³

A sea change is taking place at New York City Ballet in a transition towards drama—an unpopular term in Balanchine ideology, but nonetheless a human necessity and a historical reality. This essay starts with some observations about the emphasis on first-person experience and the dancer’s agency on stage and concludes with a discussion of two principal dancers—Megan Fairchild and Joseph Gordon—who seem to have thought through this phenomenon for themselves and explicitly bring it to bear on their respective interpretive methods. Seen in the context of this season, the effect is to harness the awareness of contact as Janzen evoked it, along with the affective quality of movement, its capacity for touching an audience.

In Maria Kowroski’s final performances last fall, one highlight was her partnership with Amar Ramasar in Balanchine’s *Agon* (1957). Ramasar is scheduled for his own farewell performance this spring. There were moments on October 14th when the intensity of the Pas de Deux of Part II challenged one’s ability to assimilate what one was seeing. On the dancers’ part, there was almost an overreading of the

work: the duet bore witness to an over-saturation of meaning, which made me hyperaware of the interpreters. Too much was at stake. While Kowroski appeared somewhat insecure in the sections leading up to the famous duet, once she got there, we saw her iron resolve. She carried the history of this work with her onto the stage while also staking out an occasion to taste it again, making her performance a summation of earlier interpretation. The will to re-experience the duet in this kaleidoscopic way, as an enactment situated between memory and the present, saturated the choreography with connotations of meaning and ranges of emotion. The particulars of this dance in this moment—the partnership ending, the incipient retirements, and the ebullience found in finally dancing live again—perhaps overloaded the event with affect. In addition, Ramasar’s own actions, when he held Kowroski’s ankle to secure her balance and then suddenly withdrew his hands to halo the ankle worshipfully, could be read in relation to the #MeToo accusations that in recent years have targeted him. Kowroski’s embrace of her partner during curtain calls, a tribute to him and their work together, felt like a publicly unveiled political intervention.

Rubies, instead of being shown as the second act of Balanchine’s *Jewels*, was programmed as a stand-alone work as is done in European ballet companies. In the casts I saw, there seemed to be a dichotomy of interpretations. Tiler Peck and Anthony Huxley (Feb. 2) accentuated the idea of brilliance inherent in the sparkle and glitter of the oversized gems looming overhead, but, despite their own substantial technical brilliance, this approach overplays what is already evident—theater people call it “playing the set.” Megan Fairchild partnered by Gonzalo Garcia (Jan. 28) performed *Rubies* not as glitter but instead as darkly fascinating points of light. Despite the jazzy nuances of the score, leading to the assumption that *Rubies* is a flippant Americanism sandwiched between the French (*Emeralds*) and the Russian (*Diamonds*) conceptions of ballet, I was engaged by Fairchild’s seriousness, brought into relief by Garcia’s jocular smile. Fairchild used one of the few lifts in the duet—one that most often passes virtually unnoticed—as a moment of release from the duet’s unrelenting pace. She reclined sideways in the air in a moment of exultation. This moment, an inner revelation where memory and reflection play a role, was brief but arresting. With it, Fairchild re-set the duet on a different course, lending it a renewed dramatic momentum. On different evenings, Emily Kikta

and Mira Nadon in the soloist's role as counterpoint to the duet supported the sense that *Rubies* is not a lightweight ballet. Fairchild (also partnered by Garcia on Feb. 12) used a similar strategy in Balanchine's *Sonatine* (1975), which is set to Ravel's eponymous music, when she changed the dynamic and expectations of the duet more than halfway through, by altering her movement quality unexpectedly from flow to momentary hesitation. This signaled a transition as if to a new beginning. In this way, a dramatic arc was conferred upon the choreography.

Joseph Gordon has turned into a finely tuned dramatic dancer over these two seasons and across three ballets: *Opus 19/ The Dreamer, La Valse*, and *Swan Lake*. Gordon's dramatic quality emerged while partnering Sterling Hyltin (Sept. 29) in Jerome Robbins's *Opus 19/The Dreamer* (1979), a twenty-three-minute ballet for fourteen dancers to Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major. *Opus 19/The Dreamer* is an intermittent or estranged duet between a man who seems to be living inside his own dream and a woman who eludes him. In this ballet, Robbins has contrived to make choreographic space first melt away, only to be mysteriously reconfigured. At one such moment in the dissolving spatial relationships, Gordon lifts his arm and gestures with a reach that fails to grasp. It is a gesture encapsulating everything taking place on stage—a sense of loss, pain, and a disorienting shifting of the stage itself (a feeling conveyed through lighting and choreography). There was nothing histrionic about this gesture: it was eloquent and embodied the poetic atmosphere of the ballet. In her review of the 1979 premiere Anna Kisselgoff wrote: "Mr. Robbins has not created a psychological ballet in the conventional sense. To be dramatic without disclosing what there is to be dramatic about is no small accomplishment."⁴ Gordon's understanding of the piece and his ability to bring out its poetic qualities was faithful to the work's origins. He made me see, as Kisselgoff had pointed out, that drama without a literal subject can have poetic impact.

Balanchine's *La Valse* (1951) calls for a more conventional acting ability. Choreographed to Ravel's *Danses nobles et sentimentales*, the ballet is a poetic meditation on the waltz in relation to historical catastrophe. The turn-of-the-century idea of the waltz taking on the qualities of decadence and decline harks back to the time of the musical composition of *Danses nobles et sentimentales* in 1910. At its premiere in 1951, it was already thought atypical of Balanchine's aesthetic because of its narrative line. At its premiere dance critic John Martin wrote:

“[Balanchine] is not one to work on any kind of subjective expressiveness; he is essentially anti-romantic.” Yet, he went on to say: “[H]e builds not only a strong mood, but also a line that is really dramatic for all that it is not literal or specific.”⁵ Gordon’s performance with Sterling Hyltin (Oct. 14) adhered to the dramatic line yet departed from it in the scene of their initial encounter, where his interpretation of the movement became more subjective than conventionally narrative, thus suggesting the phantasmagoria to come. Here was indeed the “subjective expressiveness” that Martin found lacking in Balanchine. As well, Andrew Veyette was excellent as the dark lover, because he removed that role from melodrama.

The development of an expressive style was further nuanced by Gordon in his debut as Siegfried (Feb. 14) in Balanchine’s one-act *Swan Lake* (1964). While this condensed version of the classic is choreographically inventive, it is an abbreviation of the larger work. Nonetheless, the original second act, which furnishes Balanchine’s choreographic material, does contain the core of the central relationship between Odile and Siegfried and is thus reliant on Ivanov’s story telling in the extended pas de deux. Although known to be “pure dance” in the nineteenth-century tradition, it is the most mimetic of the works under discussion here. Gordon’s subtle play of facial expression throughout the pas de deux suggested Jean-Georges Noverre’s ideas on action in pantomime ballet of the eighteenth century: “Action, in relation to dancing, is the art of transferring our sentiments and passions to the souls of the spectators . . .”⁶ With Noverre, we can think of action as a direct transfer of emotion. Gordon’s subtle flickering of two to three emotions in the blink of an eye suggest what Noverre had in mind. He produces gestures that are pulverized into micro-gestures, both complex and fleeting. These gestures themselves draw one into the relationship. They have emotional power and bear the fruit of eighteenth-century attempts to enact dance’s ability to communicate directly with the spectator. This is a direct, in-person action that is not mediated by story and/or character. The dancer is communicating through an embodiment that fulfills Noverre’s never-before witnessed ideas. And somehow Gordon finds a way to pull this off without relying on all the pitfalls of mime.

Why is this happening now? Why is it important? Clearly, COVID has something to do with it. The isolation during the pandemic that has now given rise to dance fervor has thus produced a positive

outcome, one which may be applied to the specific threat of fascism. Thinking back to the pending catastrophe overtaking the waltz before World War I, as evoked in *La Valse*, one must ask, Why was Balanchine drawn to the relation of dance to disaster early in the Cold War era? As we face the return of genocide in Europe today, we seem to be returning to the World War II era, a memory that was still quite alive in the early 1950s, when he created *La Valse*.

To be moved by performance as experienced in direct communication from person to person in a shared public space is surely significant in the face of fascism's rise worldwide. As we see the most classical tragic gestures imaginable on our daily news, reporters must remind us to bear witness to what we see. From within, fascism itself has no tragic dimension—and once we become engulfed in it, we do not either.⁷ Only the preservation of the tragic dimension of experience, as we live it in the present, can resist fascism. To experience a depth of feeling in public space today thus has an anti-fascist political force. Even in the most formalized choreographic contexts, the social force of gesture is possible, and this force can be rearticulated, even at the precipice of world tragedy. Dance is a practice—a corporeal, theatrical, and spectatorial practice—wherein the agency of production and reception is shared through live contact, “a closeness forged on stage and in movement.”

Notes

¹This essay covers the Fall 2021 and Winter 2022 seasons.

²Russell Janzen, “Only Connect: Yearning for the Intimacy of a Danced, Onstage World,” in *The New York Times* (May 5, 2021): <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/arts/dance/russell-janzen-duo-concertant.html>

³Mark Franko, “The Politics of Expression,” in *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. ix-xiv.

⁴Anna Kisselgoff, “The Ballet: Baryshnikov in Premiere of ‘Opus 19,’” in *The New York Times* (June 16, 1979), p. 10.

⁵John Martin, “The Dance: ‘Valse,’” in *The New York Times* (February 25, 1951), n.p. Dance clippings file for *La Valse*, MGZR, Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁶Jean-Georges Noverre, *Letters on Dancing and Ballets*, translated by Cyril W. Beaumont (New York: Dance Horizons, 1966), p. 99.

⁷See my *The Fascist Turn in the Dance of Serge Lifar: French Interwar Ballet and the German Occupation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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