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Classic Sin: Ballet, Sex, and Dancing Outside the Canon



Valerie Robin and Fabrice Calmels in Gerald Arpino's *Light Rain*.
Photograph by and courtesy of Herbert Migdoll.

WHAT MAKES A BALLET a classic? Is it earning a permanent place in the history books, or is it being worthy of the Herculean investment of hours in the studio, the tireless work of the dancers and coaches, the resources, media and marketing machine required to bring it to life, or both? Who decides, and more importantly, what goes into that calculus? Today the re-evaluation of the Western theatrical dance canon continues as ballet and modern dance are challenged in the academy.[1] In concert dance, these questions are a matter of survival: the performed repertory consists mostly of "classics" and "new work," and everything else tends to disappear. So, the question of what makes a dance a classic, i.e., *a dance worth remembering*, either by restaging or through written discourse, takes on a bigger significance.[2]

Two works by the founders of the Joffrey Ballet, Robert Joffrey's *Astarte* (1967) and Gerald Arpino's *Light Rain* (1981), provide a lens for exploring the question of what qualifies as a "classic," while also

addressing ideas about shifting cultural definitions of violence, taste, and timelessness. A closer look at these works may complicate our ideas of what dances should survive, be studied, and/or be performed. These ballets exist outside of conventional ballet's classic/canonic paradigm, in part because of their sexually explicit, "anti-balletic" underpinnings.[3] First as a dancer, and now in my work as a répétiteur for the Gerald Arpino Foundation, and as a co-founder and director of New York Dance Project, I continually wrestle with these questions. Which dances to teach, pass on, and present to the public is not a trivial matter for our art form.

Each of these ballets has a different sort of existence today: *Astarte* is in the dance history books, and *Light Rain* lives onstage. One is for the most part critically respected, while the other tends to be dismissed. But there is another reason I propose that these ballets have significance beyond their roles in ballet history and performance: they provide an essential bridge from foundational "classical ballet" training (the particular methodology or school is irrelevant) to understanding and mastering key elements of the current, multi-genre contemporary dance world. In other words, these ballets persist, whether as classics or "in the canon" or not, based on their unique pedagogical value, for both dancers and audiences.

Ballet canonicity has been largely determined by success in institutional promotion and financing, coupled with plentiful support from the critical establishment. For example, Royal Ballet founder Ninette de Valois's astute creation of a "ballet tradition" in the 1930s (with the help of Arnold Haskell's writing)[4] and George Balanchine's unassailable status (protected by Lincoln Kirstein, the Balanchine Trust, and the New York City Ballet) continue to survive and thrive through uninterrupted institutional support and critical writing. These two main drivers of ballet survival (the institution and critical attention) create a somewhat narrow discourse that keeps a firm grip on what gets performed, and therefore have an outsized influence on the creative direction of ballet today.

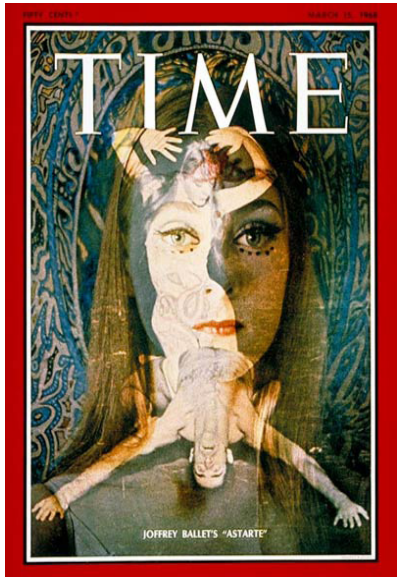
Both Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino always operated somewhat outside the ballet mainstream; although recognized for their vision, that included reconstructions of important historical works of dance, they also continually upended norms and expectations in ballet through commissions, programming, and their own choreography. The lack of financial stability and inconsistent critical support always seemed to

put the survival of the Joffrey Ballet in question. Both *Astarte* and *Light Rain* flouted the critically favored, neoclassical, apolitical ballet aesthetics of their time, while shaping the transgressive, youthful, risky, and enduringly popular image of the Joffrey Ballet during its New York years (1956-1995). Both ballets are considered important works of a subcategory (Joffrey Ballet repertory, choreographed by the founders), yet both are known mostly by a subset of insiders. And only *Light Rain* is still performed with any regularity, and not usually by the Joffrey Ballet.[5] Are these ballets classics? Where do they fit in, if at all?

These works, then and now, challenge our ideas about pleasure, taste, and basic "balletic values." Both ballets also embody a kind of violence—one explicit, the other more questionable—that has been largely overlooked or misunderstood. They contain within their conception and choreography something akin to what Roland Barthes called jouissance—a mixture of pleasure and dismay which keeps us on edge. By staging an aestheticized, frank sexuality in a largely conservative art form, these works continue to make (contested) claims as twentieth-century ballet classics, simultaneously unstable and assured. Both ballets broke ground through their blend of ballet and modern, use of popular music, creative lighting and, in the case of Astarte, the use of film. Both works captured the zeitgeist of their time, and in spite of defying balletic convention in form, structure, content, and manners, both have survived their moment of creation for close to a half-century, but in very different ways.

Robert Joffrey's *Astarte* premiered in 1967, at the height of the hippie era of sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Joffrey choreographed a seduction between the fertility goddess Astarte, a young woman in a painted, body-hugging unitard with henna tattoos, and an unwitting male "audience member," who climbs onto the stage in a trance and strips down to his underwear before dancing with her. In a slow, startling power struggle, signified through extreme balletic extensions and bold, risky partnering mingled with modern movement, Joffrey remade the ballet pas de deux, with clear references to popular culture, sex, and downtown dance experiments. A film montage of the dancers is projected above, strobe lights flash, and a rock band improvises freely from the pit. During a violent and climactic moment (described as rape by original *Astarte* dancer Trinette Singleton)[6] the man straddles the goddess, pulls her head back and forces an orgasmic kiss, as

he touches the forbidden lotus tattoo on her forehead. The mixture of desire, violation, anger, and acquiescence stunned audiences and critics alike. *Astarte* embodied the radical culture of its time, and was continually performed for the next decade, as well as featured on the cover of *Time* and *Life* magazines shortly after the premiere.



Time Magazine cover, March 15, 1968
Cover design and courtesy of Herbert Migdoll

While some critics described the work as "mind-blowing," others complained about its popular appeal, but no one seemed to object to the violence between Astarte and her partner—perhaps because she does vanquish him in the end, as he staggers out the backstage door. Joffrey transposed into the present one of ballet's oldest tropes: a supernatural female creature powerfully asserting her autonomy, struggling with attraction and domination by a mortal man. The moment of rape is unambiguous and crosses an unprecedented line in ballet. The audience reaction on opening night started in complete silence for what seemed an eternity, until it erupted into loud, riotous approval.[7] *Astarte*'s intentional provocations, the clash of "high and low," and the avant-garde scenic and sonic elements earned it an important place in ballet history, yet today revivals of *Astarte* are rare.

It took twenty-seven years for the Joffrey Ballet to produce *Astarte*

again, after the last revival in 1976. An expensive undertaking, the 2002 restaging was met with the appropriate deference from critics and a somewhat lukewarm reception from audiences. The music and the multimedia elements felt dated, and the intrigue and ambiguity of its sexual tension was different: the slow pace and the violence of watching a woman forcibly restrained was more disturbing. The culture had changed, and so had we: but even in 2002, to my knowledge, no critic addressed the violence, something that in ballet (onstage and off) has only more recently become part of the discourse.[8] Nevertheless, when I teach young dancers about the history and choreography of *Astarte* today, they are invariably shocked, surprised, engaged, and curious, and their idea of what ballet was, is, and can be, is forever altered.



When Gerald Arpino's *Light Rain* premiered in 1981, sex, drugs and rock and roll had given way to disco, jazz hands, and New Age spirituality in both the ballet and popular culture. *Light Rain* surprised and beguiled audiences with its exotic sound, nightclub lighting, and its racy opening image: a tight cluster of seemingly naked bodies pressed up against each other. While the audience gasped and raved, contemporary critics leaned in the opposite direction: Anna Kisselgoff called it "pure hard-core corn" and predicted it would not last.[9] Yet forty years later, *Light Rain* is still in active repertory, and in our increasingly sexualized culture, the dancers' gyrations and the relatively gentle manipulations of *Light Rain*'s central pas de deux appear to offer just the right amount of suggestion.

What has happened? In *Light Rain*, pleasure supersedes pain, and unlike *Astarte*, it has retained the capacity to seem new. A less explicitly narrative conception gives *Light Rain* a more contemporary feel, and although the music, costumes, and jazz moves are of an era, the tongue-in-cheek delivery and fierce dancing makes both watching and dancing *Light Rain* fun. The pas de deux, at once a series of geometric abstractions and sexual intimations with the woman's consensual participation evident, does not evoke the violence of *Astarte*, even as it flirts with crossing a line. Manipulations that may raise eyebrows can also be read as assertions of female empowerment. Simply put, our culture has changed again, and the aesthetic pleasures of *Light Rain*—its sensuality, over-extensions and flexions of the body, its unbridled

energy—are still transgressive in terms of ballet but continue to be acceptable, and memorable, to dancers, audiences, and even some reluctant critics.[10]

Moreover, when students and professional dancers alike learn the choreography of *Light Rain*, they are often disarmed (and sometimes confused) by its clever mix of ballet technique and contemporary attitude. *Light Rain* pushes dancers to use their technical skills in a new way, with a freedom of execution and a lack of pretention that feels very different from the restrictive, formal parameters required of classical ballet. The two ensemble sections celebrate individuality, confidence, sex appeal, and a liberating freedom of movement across genres, with an exuberance that contrasts with the intimacy of the pas. Ballet dancers enjoy dancing something as their contemporary selves within a ballet technical framework, and their transformation when tackling this choreography in turn informs how they approach more classical roles. It teaches them to *dance more freely* within the confines of ballet technique. Audiences invariably walk away energized after watching *Light Rain*; whether they loved it or are concerned for the future of ballet, there is suddenly a new way of relating to an art form that often feels staid and inaccessible, stuck in an ossified past.

Both of these ballets require an important leap for the performers and audiences: letting go of classical ballet "manners" and accepting sexuality as subject matter, something that American critics continue to resist in ballet. However, *Astarte* has remained steeped in the time of its creation, and our relationship to it and its violence has changed. Decades later, Robert Joffrey's "double achievement of embodying the spirit of the age and putting a rarefied art on the pop cultural map" proved difficult to duplicate. Astarte lives on, as it should, recognized as a ground-breaking classic, but perhaps in a "seemingly unrecoverable moment as dance."[11]

On the other hand, *Light Rain* is a ballet that has retained the capacity to feel new, and serves as a bridge between the strict, demanding, and often narrow training ballet dancers very willingly endure from a young age, and their savvy, contemporary selves. Audiences still overwhelmingly enjoy *Light Rain*, and it lives on in repertory, one of Arpino's most in-demand ballets, outside the canon but always new and alive onstage—a classic all its own.

Please click here to watch video clips of Astarte and Light Rain.

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Notes

[1]See for example, Takiyah Nur Amin, "Beyond Hierarchy: Reimagining African Diaspora Dance in Higher Education Curricula," *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 15-26.

[2]For this essay, I define ballet "classics" as a handful of nineteenth-century ballets (mostly after Petipa) as well as certain works by George Balanchine and a few others, found in many ballet companies' active repertories. As the core of the repertory, they might also be considered "canonical," in the sense of essential, but the canon is not static or limited to actively performed works.

[3]Several other twentieth-century choreographers created ballets with sexually explicit scenes or themes, including Maurice Béjart, Kenneth Macmillan, Vaslav Nijinsky, Jerome Robbins, and Antony Tudor—all men with strong institutional ties that helped them survive the negative criticism.

[4]See Beth Genné, "Creating a Canon, Creating the 'Classics' in Twentieth-Century British Ballet," *Dance Research* 18 (2000): 132-162.

[5]Some of the companies and schools that have recently performed *Light Rain* include Ballet West, Butler Ballet, Colorado Ballet, Dimensions Dance Theatre of Miami, Fort Wayne Ballet, Nevada Ballet Theater, Saint Louis Ballet, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York Dance Project.

[6]Trinette Singleton in discussion with the author during interviews conducted via Zoom for the Dance Oral History Project of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, August and September 2020, forthcoming at https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/.

[7]Ibid.

[8]See for example, Siobhan Burke, "No More Gang Rape Scenes in Ballets, Please," *New York Times* (September 17, 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/arts/dance/no-more-gang-rape-scenes-in-ballets-please.html.

[9]Kisselgoff noted, "[Gerald Arpino] has a perfect gift for catching the trend of the moment, the passing fad, the changing moral code. He is, in this genre, a total popularizer. As such, he is presumably aware that many of his ballets simply cannot and do not last." Anna Kisselgoff, "Joffrey Ballet: 'Light Rain' Arpino at His Slickest," *New York Times* (Nov. 6, 1981, C10).

[10]Wendy Perron described feeling a guilty pleasure while watching Light Rain at the Youth America Grand Prix gala in 2014. See "Flashy or Trashy? Light Rain." https://wendyperron.com/flashy-or-trashy-light-rain/.

[11]Sid Smith, "Dawning of New Age of 'Astarte,'" *Chicago Tribune* (14 April 2002). https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2002-04-14-0204140473-story.html.