



Flash Review 1, 9-24: Mood Swinging with ABT NYC Dancers Continue to Lift the Spirit

By Aimée Ts'ao

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BERKELEY -- Before September 11, 2001, for the past thirty-some years, one of my personal dance heroes has been Rebecca Wright. In the late 1960s, I was a student at the Joffrey school and Wright was in the company (she subsequently joined ABT). Wright danced an entire season with the Joffrey Ballet immediately after her fiance had been killed in a fire. Not only did she see the season through, but she danced better than I had ever seen her do before. My young impressionable mind could only take this to mean that dancing had the ultimate power to heal. After all, I felt that I never would have survived adolescence without dance in my life, and here was proof that it provided the same catharsis and restoration for someone else. Now after reading Allyson Green's Flash Review, "ABT to the Rescue" and having gone to see the company myself this past weekend at Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall, I feel that we are lucky to have more heroes. Not usually a very sentimental person, I went to the Cal Performances presentation wondering if I would feel the same way as Allyson did, but any doubts were instantly dispelled by the mere act of sitting in the audience and being open to what the dancers were giving. That first night I left the theater feeling so much better than when I went in.

This also brings up the question of the role of the critic. At times such as this, post-9/11, I feel that dance criticism is not particularly high on anyone's list. What is the point of splitting hairs, or gushing indiscriminately? What can I possibly say that really matters? In the end, what matters is that we are all fortunate to have the opportunity to see live dance performances. More than twenty years ago I toured the western United States with a pick-up company performing one-night stands of "Giselle" in tumbleweed towns and small cities. Never mind the very uneven level of technique of the corps de ballet or the lack of mature artistry of the lead dancers, what I will always remember is how welcome we were and how appreciative the audiences were, choosing to relate to the emotional and theatrical content of our performance instead of being critical. One man even said that we touched him more in person than he had felt watching Baryshnikov on television. It's about the immediacy of human connection without the interference or mediation of technology. That said, I will try to honor the generosity of the dancers for continuing their tour far from home by matching their spirit.

Thursday night, the second performance of the mixed bill, differed from the one in San Diego that was previously reviewed. The evening opened with Paul Taylor's "Black Tuesday." Though I thought the whole cast danced well, I fell in love with Stella Abrera's dancing in "The Boulevard of Broken Dreams" as she moves with such natural eloquence. Ethan Stiefel was also excellent in "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" Mark Morris's "Gong" was restored to the program, having been replaced the previous week by Clark Tippet's "Bruch Violin Concerto No. 1" when the conductor was trapped in New York by the airport closures. Again, the level of dancing was high, with Angel Corella executing a solo with such attack and precision that I couldn't wait to see him the following night as Albrecht in "Giselle." Though "Jabula" by Natalie Weir is not my favorite type of piece, the rapport between the dancers and with the audience propelled it beyond its choreographic limitations. Stella Abrera and Herman Cornejo both left me wanting to see them a lot more. Little did I know that I would in the next two days.

My main assigned task was to compare two casts of "Giselle" (written by Vernoy de Saiint-Georges, Theophile Gautier, and Jean Coralli, and choreographed in 1841 by Coralli and Jules Perrot to Adolphe Adam's score). I attended the performances of Friday evening and Saturday afternoon. (See Alicia Mosier's take on ABT's version of this classic in its May performance at the Metropolitan.)

I think of the roles of Giselle and Albrecht, with Hilarion and Myrtha, as being portraits framed by the production and the abilities of the corps de ballet. As with a painting, the frame can enhance the principals' interpretation or it can detract from the illusion they are trying to create. For these performances I had to ignore the frame as best I could, though most of what I thought was wrong could be fixed quite easily enough with precise coaching in showing the difference between the carriage and mannerisms of the aristocracy and the peasants. It's a case of EVERYONE on stage understanding and becoming the characters they are playing.

Julie Kent, as Giselle, both sweeps me away and draws me in to examine every detail of her interpretation. Her portrayal in the first act is a complex and layered, and while some would argue that it doesn't really suit a peasant girl, I resist the stereotyping of the lower classes as being simple and welcome her characterization. Her Giselle is both in love with Albrecht and in love with being in love. Physically Kent appears frail, yet you see her strength of will in her desire to dance and defy her mother's pleas for her not to exert herself, or in her insistence to Hilarion that she doesn't love him in return. She is hesitant to trust Albrecht's declaration of commitment (two fingers raised on a fully extended arm) and pulls his hand down. Finally, this complexity is necessary as the groundwork for her mad scene. If she is too simple, then she would not die merely of a broken heart, but Kent is truly demented in the aftermath of Albrecht's betrayal and consequently needs to have established herself as a multi-dimensional person in order to validate her breakdown. The moment she crouches on the ground and relives the plucking of the daisy petals, she rocks her body forward and back, as mental patients often do, growing more frantic with each imaginary petal. She goes so far into her own

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grief and madness that she is no longer in this world, literally and figuratively.

Kent's second act is absolutely stunning. She moves with such lightness that she seems a true ghost, not a woman playing a spirit. And her slight emotional distance from Albrecht defines her love as being pure, as a love born out of forgiveness and acknowledgment of his realization that he truly loved her in life. She is dead and can no longer love him as a woman. But as a spirit she can try to protect him from the other spirits, the Wilis.

I am not sure that pairing Kent's Giselle with Angel Corella's Albrecht works entirely. Technically and musically they danced beautifully together. But Corella's Count is one of simplicity and naivete. He really doesn't understand the tragedy he has created. It's as if two different artists painted the two faces that appear in the same frame. But Corella's interpretation is valid and it suits him. His solos were superlative, with soaring elevation, crisp batterie, and beautiful pirouettes and tours en l'air with the requisite dramatic collapses to the floor.

Saturday afternoon I was back for round two. With Paloma Herrera and Ethan Stiefel as the lovers, I found that the tables were turned and Giselle was being played as a simple girl and Albrecht now the more complex character. Herrera doesn't seem entirely comfortable in the role and she and Stiefel have differing opinions about the music. But Stiefel's dancing is brilliant. Two diagonals of brises like I have never seen before and all the rest seamless perfection. I would love to see him paired up with Kent as the gestalt of the two intricate interpretations might make for some very interesting chemistry on stage.

Two other highlights were Herman Cornejo in the Peasant Pas de Deux on Friday and Stella Abrera as Myrtha on Saturday. Cornejo performed double cabrioles opening about a foot and a half between the two beats! Not to mention that everything else he did was flawless. Abrera has the ability to be both chilling and lyrical at the same time. Often Myrtha is danced in a cold mechanical way to represent authority, but Abrera managed to find her power in being aloof, merciless and beautiful.