



**Flash Review 1, 4-16: Façades**  
**The Other Centennial: San Francisco Ballet Fetes Ashton**

By Aimée Ts'ao  
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SAN FRANCISCO -- While many people are aware that this is the 100th anniversary of George Balanchine's birth, in the United States it is less acknowledged that it is also Frederick Ashton's. In England, it could easily be the other way around. Directly comparing these two choreographic masters is like comparing pirouettes and grand jetes, but what is interesting to note is their similarities. Ashton, like Balanchine, was an immigrant to the country where he produced most of his work. Born in Guayaquil, Ecuador on September 17, 1904, Ashton spent most of his childhood in Lima, Peru, only moving to England at the age of 15 to attend school, where he was teased because of his Spanish accent. It is often said that it takes an outsider to truly see and produce an artistic distillation of a national character or essence. Balanchine, a Russian trained at the Maryinsky Theater, is often considered the quintessential American choreographer. And Ashton, the Anglo-Peruvian, is thought of as being the ultimate English one.

Though Ashton and Balanchine were not friends, their lives crossed on numerous occasions and they had more than once choreographed ballets to the same music. The Royal Ballet danced Balanchine's works and Ashton choreographed two pieces for New York City Ballet. Because he lacked the prestigious ballet and musical training of Balanchine, Ashton, always suffering from an inferiority complex vis-a-vis his rival, worshiped the Russian, who apparently had but grudging respect for him in return. Each accused the other of being rude, but who really knows how they felt under the surface or if these attitudes were in part motivated by jealousy.

San Francisco Ballet, after presenting [two programs](#) of Balanchine, is now running almost an entire one dedicated to Ashton works, presenting "Monotones I and II," "Thais Pas de Deux" and "Symphonic Variations," with Kenneth MacMillan's "Elite Syncopations" closing the evening.

In thinking about the selection of these specific ballets out of Ashton's enormous body of work (seen Tuesday at the War Memorial Opera House), I wondered how much the financial factor influenced the choices of which works to re-stage. Both "Monotones I and II" and "Symphonic Variations" require six dancers, in simple costumes, and the "Thais" only two. How wonderful it would have been to see his

["La Fille mal gardee."](#) "Two Pigeons" or even early works like "Facade" or "A Wedding Bouquet" (on the bill for this summer's Lincoln Center [Ashton festival](#)), but, of course, the expense might have been prohibitive. I'm not complaining, just wishfully musing on other possibilities. Seeing ballets in radically different styles would have been an eye-opener for those less familiar with the English choreographer's work, as it would be useful to offer a broader Balanchine range in the SFB repertory, as I [commented](#) last season. (I lived in London for two years in the early 1970s and went to the Royal Ballet as often as I, a starving dance student, could afford. The Joffrey Ballet also brought its Ashton collection here on tour in the 1970s and '80s.)

As the introductory Satie music gently drifts upward from the orchestra pit Tuesday, the air itself relaxes and breathes more calmly. The curtain rises for "Monotones I" on a dark stage with three dancers, in pale greenish yellow costumes. They begin first with simple steps in unison and gradually begin to head in different directions, or explore variations on the themes. The choreography is so formal and structured that there is no place to hide the slightest misstep. The dancers, Nicole Starbuck, Ruben Martin and Rachel Viselli, seem acutely aware of that and move somewhat stiffly. As they gain confidence that they are actually doing fine, they relax and move with more freedom. The "Trois Gnessiennes," originally for piano and later orchestrated by John Lanchbery, creates an atmosphere of timeless mystery. This elusiveness is reinforced by the costumes, designed by Ashton, which hint at both ancient exotic and extra-terrestrial.

"Monotones II," to "Trois Gymnopédies," in Debussy and Roland-Manuel's orchestration and like 'I' staged by Lynn Wallis, is the ballet that carries us beyond the known galaxies and into that deep space which folds back on itself, leaving us both far away from ourselves and contemplating our innermost consciousness. Not only has Ashton made exquisite sequences of steps, but Muriel Maffre, Brett Bauer and Moises Martin move together with such rapport and attention to nuance that they transcend being human. We all exist in a moment of suspended reality as they pull us into the unworldly place they define.

I am a little apprehensive about the "Thais Pas de Deux," after seeing the Dance Theatre of Harlem give a very indifferent performance of it a few months ago, in a production reviewed earlier [here](#) by Gus Solomons jr. The DTH dancers lacked the necessary fluidity and weightlessness; even the veil was of fabric too stiff to waft or drape properly. Created for Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell, at first it received mixed reviews, though Marie Rambert, Ashton's mentor, considered it to be one of his masterpieces.

The "Meditation" from Massenet's opera "Thais" is the serenely romantic musical canvas on which Ashton paints this dreamlike encounter between a man and his vision of a woman. Staged for SFB by Dowell, the choreography looks deceptively simple, but to create the illusion of effortless grace in very difficult lifts can be daunting. Yuan Yuan Tan and Pierre-Francois Vilanoba do an excellent job on the technical level. I wish only for more quiet passion, and lingering desire.

"Symphonic Variations," staged here by Wendy Ellis Somes, is one of the masterpieces of the 20th century. To Cesar Franck's music of the same name, with costumes and set by Sophie Fedorovitch, Ashton choreographed a work of truly profound simplicity. As the curtain rises the audience applauds the white and green (in the shade of a leaf unfurling in the spring) backdrop intersected by sweeping concentric black curves. The six dancers are poised, ready to begin. The three women wear short white draped tunics and glittering headpieces, while the men are dressed in white tights and shirts that bare one shoulder and have black accenting strips.

For the next half an hour not one dancer exits the stage and whatever steps each dancer executes, they must stay in harmony with all the other dancers. The star of this ballet is the ensemble. A perfect cast is a rare find and here we have one in Vanessa Zahorian, Julie Diana, Tina LeBlanc, Joan Boada, Damian Smith, and Nicholas Blanc. They maintain the balance between the various solos, duets, trios and group passages, not losing their individuality but avoiding letting it interfere with creating a unifying ambience. Often the steps and floor patterns reveal the genesis for some of the material that Ashton later used in the 'Monotones.' Not that he repeated himself, but it shows his work evolved in a logical progression.

The SFB dancers deserve the chance to dance this brilliant choreographer's work more frequently so that the style comes to feel natural for them, in the same way that they are at home in the Balanchine repertoire. This program repeats tonight and Saturday night at 8 p.m., and at 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.