

PRESS REVIEW

LA STRAVAGANZA

ANGELIN PRELJOČAJ

CRÉATION 1997



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PAVILLON NOIR

DANCE REVIEW

Serving Up Metaphors To Ponder And Digest

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

With his customary intelligence and daring, the French choreographer Angelin Preljocaj has given the New York City Ballet something strange to see and think about. Mind and matter work hand in hand.

"La Stravaganza," the striking Preljocaj ballet that had a gala premiere on Thursday night in the Diamond Project, the company's new-choreography series, may have ended too violently for a black-tie dinner event. Not everyone likes to plunge into appetizers on the New York State Theater promenade with an image of abduction (possibly rape) imprinted on the eye.

Yet if "La Stravaganza" has a shocker of a dramatic finale, the ballet, set to Vivaldi, also has an alternating luminous and dark beauty. Electrifying virtuosity, exceedingly well rendered with high-voltage speed, is set against weighted gesture and athletic blocks of bravura. Eventually, the choreography is transformed into an archetypal tale about ancient hatreds. But on another level, it is largely about two kinds of movement, expanded into metaphor.

This contrast is couched in vivid formal terms. The first part of the ballet introduces six dancers who could be called classical. The women, Emily Coates, Stacey Calvert and Rachel Rutherford, are not in toe shoes but in soft ballet slippers. Dressed in short brown or gray dresses, they look as contemporary as their partners in street clothes, Alexander Ritter, Sébastien Marcovici and Christopher Wheeldon. The overall idiom uses recognizable ballet steps, albeit combined in anything but an academic style.

Abruptly, the stage is invaded by a second group that seems to have stepped out of an Old Master Dutch painting (Mr. Preljocaj has said in interviews that he was inspired by Vermeer). Samantha Allen, Kathleen Tracey, Melissa Walter, Tom Gold, Alexandre Izillaev and Benjamin Millepied are more square-cut here in their movement. There is mime (threading a needle) from the women and occasional athleticism from the men. Deceptively looking like modern dance, their choreography also has a ballet base.

That these two units are in opposition is obvious. Many a scenario springs to mind, and as is common in Mr. Preljocaj's pieces, fantasy and reality become an instant blur. The first group had been seen against a black backdrop, but when it rose, the "Dutch" group stepped out against the landscape of a red sky that van Gogh might recognize.

The Dutch, in stylized period costume, represent the Old World while the first group of young people represents the New. When the two units mesh, the image suggests that if stylistic differences can be resolved, so can differences among people.

Ms. Coates and Mr. Millepied are the Romeo and Juliet of "La Stravaganza" and nothing in their caressing, tender duet suggests what follows. To give it away would be to spoil the ending for those who have not seen the ballet. Suffice it to say that Ms. Coates then returns from her hell, like a Eurydice seeking Mr. Ritter as her Orpheus.

He, for his part, is seen in a repeat of the



Paul Kolnik/New York City Ballet

Benjamin Millepied and Emily Coates in Angelin Preljocaj's "Stravaganza."

very first image that opened the ballet: a figure with his back to us, straining to break free but restrained by his two pairs of friends. Now the image is understood as a flashback. We know that the friends are trying to control Ms. Coates's inconsolable partner. Here, as in the beginning, she again emerges from the darkness and walks toward the group.

But in this new context, it is clear that she is also shunned by those with their backs to her. The metaphor opens up: Is she the archetype of the women raped in Bosnia? Or does civilization (the Old World) corrupt natural man (the dancers in flesh tones)? None of these ideas are new. But it is how Mr. Preljocaj expresses them that is fresh. A young person in the audience saw the Dutch as pilgrims (who set sail from the

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Netherlands) meeting up with the American Indians. However you see it, the point resonates. Humanity still has a distance to go.

To regard "La Stravaganza" as just a ballet with a message is insufficient. It has an artistic wholeness that rings true, and that is why the choreography, hand in glove with its basic "idea," is fascinating to watch. Mr. Preljocaj has understood the speed and energy of the City Ballet and used these qualities. The dancers in turn respond with astonishing versatility to a kind of phrasing that is new to them.

Here, as never before, it is clear how much Mr. Preljocaj owes to one of his American teachers, Viola Farber. Like Ms. Farber, one of Merce Cunningham's first partners, he opts for a collage of movements

and steps, often quirky and straight limbed, that are a degree removed from Mr. Cunningham's purity.

Collage also influences his view of music, though less persuasively. The classical group dances mainly to Vivaldi: "La Stravaganza" uses the composer's Concerto No. 8 of the same name and excerpts from the "Dixit Dominus" and "Laudate pueri Dominum." The other music is electronic, by Robert Normandeau, Ake Parmerud, Evelyn Focarra and Serge Morand. All the music, incidentally, was heard on tape. Maya Schweizer did the scenery and the costumes were by Hervé Pierre.

As he showed in "Le Parc" with the Paris Opera Ballet last summer at the Metropolitan Opera House, Mr. Preljocaj knows what a major ballet company is about. He has not disdained to use the 20th-century classicism of its dancers: they have challenged him as well.



Judith Mackrell

New York City Ballet

Over the past decade, Angelin Preljocaj has been shooting up ballet's A-list of choreographers, being one of that rare breed of modern dance-makers able to retain their integrity even while making classical dancers look good. So it came as no surprise that New York City Ballet commissioned a work from him in 1997, despite the possibility that Preljocaj's dark narrative streak might have sat uncomfortably within the company's own more reticent, formal style.

The first section of *La Stravaganza* (given its UK premiere in NYCB's third and final Edinburgh programme) actually looks like a piece you'd expect someone else to make for this company, with three couples in abstract modern dress making decorously edgy responses to music by Vivaldi. Yet after five minutes, a drastic fissure opens up in the stage and, out of a sudden darkness, three more couples - dressed in an approximation of 18th-century costume - are sucked reluctantly and strangely into the dance: ghosts from Vivaldi's era.

This could be a coy little drama about dancers meeting across time. But actually Preljocaj makes us think about what it means for modern artists to perform to music from another age. Although he doesn't do anything as simple as divide the cast into baroque and modern styles, there is a different kind of formality and weight to the steps of the "historic" dancers, which makes them remote and slightly threatening. The dance is haunted by all that we cannot know or accommodate from another culture, and it makes us hear the music in subtly different ways.

It also offers an imaginative challenge to the dancers, which none of the other three ballets in this programme provides. Ulysses Dove's *Angels In Red* is a strenuously glossy quartet set to Richard Einhorn's music for electronic violin. The work's extreme manoeuvres seem designed to seduce its dancers into displays of gymnastic narcissism. It said much for the intelligence and experience of Peter Boal on Saturday that he was able to divert this advert for the body beautiful into a play of such compellingly calibrated lines and dynamics.

NYCB's senior dancers generally tend to outshine the younger ones in both personality and style, and it was extremely hard to imagine *Chiaroscuro*, Lynne Taylor-Corbett's earnest little piece, making any sense without the avid, physical tenderness of Jock Soto's central performance. However, in Peter Martins' *Jeu de Cartes*, the young ballerina Miranda Weese easily trumped the self-consciously jokey virtuosity of the three male players in dancing that was lush and powerful, with a sardonic pungency that belied her youth.

by *Gunild Pak Symes*
Copenhagen, Royal Danish Theatre



© Henrik Stenberg

An evening of contrast and juxtaposition was what the Royal Danish Ballet served up at the grand 18th century Old Stage in Copenhagen with *Extravaganza*, a concert of three contemporary dance works by three international choreographers: Yuan Yuan Wang of China, Anna Laerkesen of Denmark and Angelin Preljocaj of France. While the company of talented dancers maintains a high standard of technique and artistry, the programming of this concert caved in upon itself in terms of quality and sophistication, saved only by the brilliant choreography of Preljocaj, which ended the long evening.

Indeed, the whole evening would have been lost, if not for the exceptional performance of the Royal Danish Ballet dancers in the final work brilliantly crafted by Preljocaj, *La Stravaganza*, originally created for the New York City Ballet in 1997 and remains more than worthy of critical acclaim today. Inspired by the historical immigration of Europeans to America, the choreography juxtaposes two groups of dancers, one in period costumes by Hervé Pierre reminiscent of the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer's portraits of 17th century Holland, the other in current day garb. While the group representing modern times danced with classical verve and gusto to the Baroque master works of Vivaldi, the Vermeer-clad ensemble performed haunting abstracted and surreal movements to organic electronic scores by Evelyn Ficarra, Robert Normandeau and Serge Morand, which were full of strange insect-like sounds, haunting drones and unpredictable percussive

World and New World, entrenched social classes and free individuals was portrayed with intelligence, theatrical ingenuity, organic and musically sensitive use of choreographic devices and seamless transitions that could only be crafted by a master. Even though sharpness was confused with military-like precision and anonymity by some dancers, it was still a strong execution of a vast amount of difficult movement vocabulary with a lot of intricate arm work, levels and directional changes. Stunning performances and technical acuity came from every single dancer in the work, but a woman of the Vermeer group, Sascha Haugland, and two men stood out, Sebastian Kloborg and Christopher Rickert, who performed a kinetically compelling and challenging duet with a combustible intensity.