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DANCE | TH ST IN CULTUR 2015

The Best Dance of 2015



By ALASTAIR MACAULAY, GIA KOURLAS, BRIAN SEIBERT and SIOBHAN BURKE DEC. 9, 2015

Dance took off in a number of unexpected directions this year. The dance critics of The New York Times — Alastair Macaulay, Gia Kourlas, Brian Seibert and Siobhan Burke — look back at some of the biggest surprises.

Alastair Macaulay

Bournonville Alive A single week in January brought the surprise that the choreography of August Bournonville (1805-79) was alive in the dancing of the Royal Danish Ballet at the Joyce, while the choreography of Marius Petipa (1818-1910) and Lev Ivanov (1834-1901) for the 1895 “Swan Lake” was dead in the dancing of the Mariinsky Ballet. (Another welcome Bournonville surprise was America’s first-ever production of the 1842 three-act “Napoli” with Ballet Arizona: excellent.)

Justin Peck’s “Rodeo” The most marvelous new ballet of the year — one of the best of the 21st century to date — had its premiere on Feb. 4 at New York City Ballet. That work, Justin Peck’s “Rodeo: Four Dance Episodes,” was the first and finest of City Ballet’s six 2015 premieres, by Mr. Peck and four other choreographers. One surprise, considerably against the law of averages, is that all six were worth watching. Another is that five showed same-sex and opposite-sex partnering coexisting naturally. The “Rodeo” adagio for five men is a quiet marvel; I hope it proves a classic.

Cunningham Here, Cunningham There All year long, it was happily startling to

find how much choreography by Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) was on view, and in good shape. I saw it at New York Live Arts (New York Theater Ballet in “Cross Currents,” February), at the Joyce Theater (“Event” by the Compagnie CNDC Angers in March and “RainForest” with the Stephen Petronio Company in April), at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater (Juilliard Dance in “Biped” in March), at the new Whitney Museum (“Crises” as part of the opening Conlon Nancarrow season in June), and at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, which showed his long-lost 1957 solo “Changeling” both in a newly found 1958 film with Cunningham dancing it and in live performance by Silas Riener.

Tchaikovsky News The year brought two big revelations about the standard Tchaikovsky ballets. In Alexei Ratmansky’s new production for American Ballet Theater, “The Sleeping Beauty” proves significantly different from the “Sleeping Beauty” we’ve known; and, amazingly, the company’s dancers follow Mr. Ratmansky into a detailed period style without high extensions and with faster musicality. And the Russian scholar Sergei Konaev and other Tchaikovsky experts revealed a rehearsal score for the original 1877 “Swan Lake,” explaining at last many mysteries about the classic’s first production.

Tales of Powell and Pressburger The re-release of the often wacky, often excessive, Powell-Pressburger “The Tales of Hoffmann” in March included the astonishments of Moira Shearer’s finest dancing on screen and Frederick Ashton’s brilliant supporting performance.

Classical Bodies At the British Museum, the exhibition “Defining Beauty: The Body in Ancient Greek Art” (March-July) brought multifaceted revelations of the ancient Greeks’ views of the human physique.

Ballroom Shock Since I detest most of what ballroom dancing has become, especially on television, one surprise was that “America’s Ballroom Challenge” (PBS, April) was at all good. Another was that I lost my heart to Artem Plakhotnyi and Inna Berlizyeva.

Small-Screen Plisetskaya When the Bolshoi prima ballerina Maya Plisetskaya died in May, the trove of YouTube films of her proved far more fun than all those innumerable Dying Swans led us to expect.

Les Twins “The most famous dancers on the planet!” said the announcement — whereupon it turned out that I had never heard of them. The place was the Apollo Theater in Harlem; the date was Oct. 16; the event was “Breakin’ Convention,” a festival of hip-hop dance theater; and the dancers who arrived onstage were the knockout French fraternal duo Les Twins.

Tango Teaming Two exemplars of Argentine tango, Gabriel Missé and Guillermina

Quiroga, danced spectacularly together for the first time anywhere in New York on Nov. 21. The results live on YouTube. More, please.

Gia Kourlas

Dance on TV Thanks to Stephen Colbert, dance has a new spotlight. Since taking over “The Late Show,” Mr. Colbert has hosted choreographers like Michelle Dorrance and Christopher Wheeldon. What’s better is that he doesn’t just show how they move, he lets them talk. Other stellar TV moments? Sia’s duet with Mina Nishimura on “Saturday Night Live” and a zippy dance by Mikhail Baryshnikov, playing a version of himself on HBO’s “Doll & Em” as the director of a theater at which the main characters present a new work. Moving stiffly on a platform, Doll and Em are seized by nerves. The camera pans to the wings, where an encouraging Mr. Baryshnikov — delightfully spry, hips shaking — shows exactly how to get into the groove.

The Misty Effect Misty Copeland is ballet’s new Billy Elliot. (But she needs to fix those fouettés.) As American Ballet Theater’s first African-American female principal, she has transformed audiences. The Metropolitan Opera House looks a bit more like the rest of the world, a real breakthrough.

Tearing Down Devotion In her latest dance, shown at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in September, the choreographer Sarah Michelson brutally bid farewell to her popular “Devotion” series by dropping a bomb otherwise known as “tournamento.” Following the format of a sporting event, in which intermission felt more like halftime, “tournamento” has four dancers competing by performing austere, tough movement phrases as Ms. Michelson screeched, “Let’s play!” The experiment — to get to the essence of dance by extracting excessive emotion — signals a new beginning.

Elegance Revisited The thought of a contemporary ballet can cause trepidation, but Mark Morris’s “After You” for American Ballet Theater honored both the art form and its dancers. Subtle and refined, “After You” is a modern ballet worth saving.

Changing Times The diversity initiatives at the School of American Ballet, which are now expanding nationally, are starting to transform the makeup of the institution, evident at both its annual workshop shows and at New York City Ballet, its parent company. Most important, merit rules.

Brian Seibert

‘La Bayadere’ meets ‘Aida’ The Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the city’s most majestically imposing sites. By all rights, it should dwarf and overshadow two dancers. But in January, Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy of India’s Nrityagram Dance Ensemble more than held their own. Surrounded by the rigid lines of the temple, the sensuous curves of their Odissi dancing and their great artistry were even more ravishing than usual.

Nice Curves With its small stage and odd shape, the Guggenheim Museum’s theater isn’t exactly dance-friendly. But in February, Pam Tanowitz’s “Broken Story (wherein there is no ecstasy)” wittily turned the place’s every architectural idiosyncrasy into a compositional advantage. The dance was partly about brokenness — fractured narrative, romantic fulfillment thwarted. The way Ms. Tanowitz channeled her eccentricity into the theater’s circles turned smiles to tears.

Big Subject Protests in Ferguson, Mo., inspired several dance works this year. The largest came in March with “FLEXN,” in which Peter Sellars’s poor direction allowed the artistry of street dancers to get lost in the vast Park Avenue Armory. A much more successful treatment could be found in the tiny theater of University Settlement by two artists I did not know: André M. Zachery and LaMont Hamilton. Their “Dapline!” had faults but also more disciplined power.

Genius Hooper A tap dancer won a MacArthur genius grant! The art form seldom gets the respect it deserves, so the September announcement came as a shock. Which tap dancer had won, though, was much less of one. Recently, Michelle Dorrance has emerged as a true original, deeply versed in tradition yet making it her own. Her appearance on “The Late Show With Stephen Colbert” showed TV viewers her effervescent talent and sincere humility. Her commissioned piece for the Fall for Dance Festival was a big thrill with one disappointment: not enough of her.

Limón Lives The two-week Jose Limón International Dance Festival at the Joyce Theater in October had several flaws, yet accomplished the essential thing: revealing the enduring power of mid-20th-century work that would otherwise be easy to write off as hopelessly out of date.

Siobhan Burke

Dances With Gadgets The artist Michelle Ellsworth churns out surprises, from coin-operated choreography to implausible science experiments. New York was treated to her smart, singular zaniness twice this year, at the American Realness festival in January and at the Chocolate Factory in November. If you missed those live shows, check out their online counterparts, created with just as much care.

Learning Curve Though eager to present dance, museum curators haven't always been attuned to what dancers need, like floors conducive to jumping (unlike, say, concrete). So it was heartening to see sprung floors installed at spaces like the Museum of Modern Art for Yvonne Rainer's new work in July; the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston for its current Black Mountain College exhibition; and the Whitney Museum of American Art in its new theater. Here's to healthy joints.

The Art of Suspension Yasuko Yokoshi's "Zero One," at Danspace Project in September, offered many quiet revelations, including a film of the Japanese performance artist Hangman Takuzo, who hangs himself (safely) as a daily practice. What sounds morbid proved the opposite, an affirmation of life through his closeness with death.

Ballet Breakaway While New York City Ballet remains retro in some regards — see this year's roster of exclusively white male choreographers — its dancers are taking on adventurous side projects. When Sara Mearns was given a residency at Jacob's Pillow this fall, she invited the choreographer Jodi Melnick — who works outside the ballet world on a small, subtle scale — to make something new for her and two City Ballet colleagues. So far it's just a sketch; let's hope it keeps growing.

Coda of the Year Ralph Lemon's "Scaffold Room," at the Kitchen in November, was unparalleled, not least for its unexpected ending. Just as its reckoning with American pop culture seemed to wind down, the theater doors flung open for some seriously cathartic dancing in the lobby: Paul Hamilton, Malcolm Low and Omagbitse Omagbemi getting down to Kevin Beasley's D.J. set. Is there a Bessie for best outro?

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