

## MINDY ALOFF

The Mark Morris Dance Company  
The Armitage Ballet  
Peter Martins

During the 1980s we've witnessed a change in the way dancers treat the past: Where they used to dismiss or exploit its ideas, they now pay homage to its facts. The homage takes various forms; most obvious are the reconstructions and revivals that have tried for accuracy in detail as well as in general atmosphere. Among them are four imposing works by George Balanchine (*Gounod Symphony*, *Divertimento*, *Concierto de Mozart* and *Symphonie Concertante*); a fair amount of early Graham, including two persuasive monuments to her 1930s company of women (*Heretic* and *Celebration*); and the Joffrey Ballet's 1987 reconstruction of the legendary Nijinsky-Roerich *Rite of Spring*, which ran only for eight or nine performances in 1913 before Diaghilev dropped it from the Ballets Russes.

But modern retrieval systems can fetch up work even more ephemeral. In 1982, New York City saw reconstructions of one-time-only experiments from the 1960s by affiliates of the Judson Dance

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Theatre, for whom survival was once equivalent to revolutionary failure. Jerome Robbins is currently reconstructing his own choreography for Broadway musicals, and last fall the Alvin Ailey company presented a program of Katherine Dunham's 1930s and 1940s revue pieces. The two highly influential anthology shows produced by Claudio Segovia and Héctor Orezoli, *Tango Argentino* and *Flamenco Puro*, attempted to preserve actual dance techniques as well as dramatize their motivating emotions—even as the tango palaces of Buenos Aires are emptying out and the Andalusian caves becoming increasingly commercialized. Over and over we learn that the theater relates to society, but perversely. As the impetus for a dance grows weak in the field, its action is more robustly translated to the stage. In the case of certain ancient styles whose native practitioners are themselves endangered (like the Tibetans) or whose distinctive supporting cultures are rapidly merging into larger ones (the dances of southern India and parts of Africa), scholarship is actually replacing spontaneous performance.

We're seeing another, deeper response to history, too: the incorporation of its imagery into contemporary choreography. To some extent, this is what dance has always done. Theatrical dancing progresses according to how one choreographer reinterprets (or creatively misunderstands) his or her predecessors: Bournonville reinvented Vestris, Balanchine reinvented Petipa, Nijinska reinvented Nijinsky, Taylor reinvented Graham. In the words of Stravinsky, "The artist imposes a culture upon himself and ends by imposing it upon others." That is the dynamic of tradition. The choreographers of the 1980s are perhaps the most scholarly that dancing has ever produced, with a bewildering wealth of documentation available to them—including, of course, videotape. They are the first generation of choreographers who can look back on a *literature* of dancing, in the way that writers can look back on printed texts. And yet, the effect seems to be that their vision is more narrow, their horizons lower, their perspectives more eccentric than those of the predecessors they venerate.

We may be losing the capacity for the fullest kind of classic expression in choreography. In saying this, I intend a distinction between the technique of classic ballet—a codified vocabulary and system of training—and the principles

of classicism in the making of art. For both, the ultimate model is the art of Hellenistic Greece, in which the human figure is portrayed as an agent of health, strength and especially beauty, even in moments of extreme testing. Classic ballet, whose principles have been refracted through the aesthetics of the Renaissance, also emphasizes the aerial qualities of motion (or the upward accent implicit in walking) and that quality we call "line," the Euclidean geometry embedded in turned-out positions. Classic dance expression, however, is not a matter of how the dancer looks but of how he or she behaves: It is a dramatic and musical issue rather than a purely visual one. Its characteristics are a calm center (both physical and psychological), a directness of perspective and tone, an orientation outside the self toward the world and a continual effort to engage wildly opposing forces in some sort of balance. The pas de deux dramatizes this balancing act most quickly and clearly, although a great individual like Graham or Duncan can sometimes build the balancing effect into a solo, or a work for star pitted against chorus, as the ancients could build it into the play of forces within a single stone figure or among the overlapping forms on a frieze.

These are by no means the only principles in art, nor do they constitute a formula for masterpieces; much of the dancing I value has been devised by artists for whom the word "classic" has no particular significance, or a negative one. The loss I mean is circumscribed; dancing is a human impulse and will survive all sorts of stylistic transmutation. But there is a particular effect that young choreographers seem unable to attain on a proscenium stage. "In ballet, the clumsy becomes graceful," Balanchine wrote. "The hesitant, inarticulate thought is expressed in direct, eloquent gesture, and nothing appears impossible; love can triumph over everything. In many great ballets, love does." Astaire and Rogers are classic in this light; so are the figures of Merce Cunningham's *Septet*, of Graham's *Appalachian Spring*, of Paul Taylor's *Roses*, of Twyla Tharp's *Nine Sinatra Songs*. And then, a curious vacancy.

To learn how the next generation of choreographers compares, consider the work of Mark Morris, Karole Armitage and Peter Martins. All are in or just out of their 30s. All are prolific, highly visible both in the United States and abroad and controversial among dance critics.

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All profess an abiding allegiance to Balanchine, to technical discipline, to the refinements of decor as well as choreography. All embrace popular music, including rock or rock-influenced scores. All are smart, articulate and knowledgeable about many kinds of dancing. Perhaps most important, all are, or were, inimitable virtuosos; they understand their field from the inside out.

Mark Morris, the one with roots most firmly in modern and folk dancing, actually comes closest to making classic images as Winckelmann or Lessing would have defined them, looking back to the Greece of Sophocles and the *Laocoön*. A devotee of Baroque music, Morris is also the most learnedly musical of the choreographers, and he has absorbed the punctuated measure, sculptural cadences and gestural force of the opera in that period, whether he is setting Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* or Yoko Ono's *Dogtown*.

The more you enjoy sophisticated relationships between movement and music, the more likely you are to be attracted to Morris's work. His understanding of dance history is also embracing. In the dances he made for himself and his company in the Seattle Opera's recent, modernized production of Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, one could find teasing references to Balanchine's *Chaconne* (which uses the same music) and to Isadora Duncan, who, like Morris, performed the "Dance of the Furies" as a solo.

Indeed, if you want to get a sense of Morris's own effect as a performer, look at the photographs of Duncan among Greek antiquities—the amazing early one of her poised mid-motion on half-toe in an outdoor theater, or those that Steichen took of her and her Isadorables at the Parthenon during the 1920s. Morris has the same long body and big presence, the same expressive neck, open face and voluble hands.

What he does not have is the unveiled rapport with an audience; his is a much more ironic sensibility. And his refusal to cast emotions into the terms of male-female partnerships we associate with classic dancing limits his popular appeal. (His labile equations of gender, including roles for which men and women can be equally cast, coupled with his teasing irony, give some dance-goers the idea that he's trying to fool them.) I believe that Morris, the youngest of the group discussed here, has the greatest potential for making popular—and classic—dancing. At the moment, however, we are about to lose him to the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, which has offered him and his company residency, support and a theater for six months of every year. The company will still have New York seasons, but will mature overseas.

Karole Armitage represents a bridge between ballet and some kinds of modern dance; her background includes experience dancing Balanchine with the Geneva Ballet and a number of years as a prominent member of Merce Cunningham's company. But the balletic elements in Cunningham's work are strong—verticality, turnout, emphasis on aerial movements and allegro footwork—and so one thinks of Armitage as purveying a balletic look, especially now that she's choreographing for ballet-trained dancers, with a stress on point technique and partnering. Armitage is the only one of the three artists mentioned here who seems to start from the premise of wanting the dancers to register as beautiful or noble. She is also the only one consistently to incorporate literary and pictorial themes into her work and to appropriate poses from Balanchine ballets—notably those of the late 1950s and early 1960s. She alone enjoys a truly cross-over audience: During her Brooklyn Academy of Music season this past fall, one saw School of American Ballet patrons and rock superstars crisscrossing the lobby.

Exquisitely costumed by Christian Lacroix and David Salle, the attractive, well-rehearsed dancers gave the eye plenty to take in; and the complex, even esoteric dance structures—with their sallies through Renaissance history and beatnik style in the case of one work and through Balanchine's beatnik-era ballet in another—gave the mind plenty to think about. With remarkable self-knowledge, Armitage cast herself in op-

position to younger colleagues as a high-bred eccentric; her deadpan wit served to throw their youthful facility into relief. The contrast between styles was the subject of both *The Tarnished Angels* and *The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler*. Her influences matter much. In keeping with Cunningham's practice of detached collaboration, as well as with the organization of Salle's paintings, the observer is asked to work rather hard at making connections.

And yet, although Armitage's dances seem to present the conditions for classic art, they don't coalesce into directness of tone or intensity of image. One reason might be the unusually brief choreographic units in which she works. She tends not to sustain a dance long enough for the observer to internalize it; by the time you've taken in the stage picture and general mood, she's on to another setup. Even when she keeps a couple together for a while, as in *The Watteau Duets*, they are constantly switching shoes, or costumes, or dance vocabularies; their intimacy is never exactly presented, it's a quality to be deduced. Armitage's classicism is a function of implication, not construction. It finally makes for lively ideas but not for sustained dance.

Peter Martins, the co-ballet master and chief of the New York City Ballet, as the most traditionally classic background of these artists. Trained in the school of the Royal Danish Ballet, he came to prominence at the City Ballet under Balanchine, where he enjoyed success not only as a soloist—the definitive Apollo of his generation—but also as a great partner, notably to Suzanne Farrell. In childhood, Martins was an accomplished practitioner of ballroom dancing, and the virtuosity of partnering in his work is remarkably developed: At times, it looks as if his essential subject is the frontier between partnering and not partnering. How little support can he man offer and still offer support? How much can the ballerina handicap herself and still be a ballerina? (At one point in *Ecstatic Orange*, Heather Watts is brought by Jock Soto to a climactic triss while she "binds" her arms behind her, trapping her feet so that she supports herself on her kneecaps as his forefinger balances her under the chin.) With this line of inquiry, Martins develops a strain implicit in the Balanchine of *Agon*, and it's impossible not to admire

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When silence enters and past times are recollected as though a lens had caught beloved images restored to a brilliant sharpness they may or may not have had when first perceived, their look of timelessness down lanes behind an ornate iron gate slightly ajar; when such images of moments of former happiness come back, of people and places, the ease and oneness between them, a walk, arm in arm, across a bridge, among trees dimly lit by lamplight the tentative urgings of desire: the longing these arouse in us is not so much for what actually happened as for the promise they held, the sweet anticipation as they occurred. Years had to have taught us that of our ardent wishes little has become real; of the beloved visage, although appearing before us, there has been no lasting possession. Ultimately, the perfection of which we receive glimmering impressions around houses, canals, faces looking up at our approaching shadows, exists, continues in its impenetrable realm, its own glory of constant presence, for us out of reach except that we perceive, except that we may feel it. Reminded of moments charged with its promise we continue to look longingly toward the gate to forgetfulness where at last we shall be at home, absorbed in the quiet splendor of its wholeness.

Arthur Gregor



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the delicacies of physical engineering he discovers.

Indeed, as far as certain fundamentals are concerned—the pinpointing of a dancer's balance, the maintenance of an allegro pulse in adagio time, the grisaille effects of continuous adjustments in placement—Martins is almost unbeatable. But his artistic authority wavers; he doesn't organize his discoveries in ways that project expressive images from the action. He doesn't seem to think in terms of analogies. And so, his dances provide excitement but no drama, calm but no balance, port de bras and steps but no gestures. The performers pass easily from one dance incident to the next; they coast through time. But the incidents don't cohere into a momentum, a poetic (i.e., connective) urgency. *Ecstatic Orange* and *Calcium Light Night*, the two most successful of Martins's ballets, sustain what dance tension they possess by stringing out jokes or puns on technique rather than through analyzing and reaccenting a set of limited choreographic materials—Balanchine's method and Morris's and Armitage's aspiration. In some ways, Martins, the de facto heir of the master, is the farthest from him temperamentally.

Can faithfulness to the letter of history estrange an artist from its spirit? We are living in a time when literature itself is no longer a common heritage. Critics of American education lament that our children don't read more books or hold more information in common; George Steiner suggests that we no longer share an irreducible Biblical culture. Yet ten years ago, dancers and audiences were less literate and happier. As we look toward the next century, we'll be watching with more than academic interest to see if a thorough knowledge of *Serenade* makes classic expression more likely, or less.

In March, the Mark Morris Dance Company will be in Ames, Iowa; Madison, Wisconsin; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Lincoln, Nebraska; the Bronx, New York; and Princeton, New Jersey. In April, they will be at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. They will perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on May 17–22. The Armitage Ballet plays the Joyce Theater in New York City, May 24–June 5. Choreography by Peter Martins will be featured in the New York City Ballet's spring season at the New York State Theater, April 26–June 26.

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