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DANCE

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A Modest Proposal for Waking Up the Classics

AFRESH wind seemed to have swept away the cobwebs when the curtain rose on Anthony Dowell's 1994 production of "The Sleeping Beauty." The designer Maria Bjornson had replaced the usual well-behaved geometry of palatial arches, pillars and stairs with a boisterous fantasy of distorted perspectives that made pillars tilt, arches spring into whorls and a huge banquet table pour out like widening lava. The effect was not unlike one's first reading of a Harry Potter novel and the re-experiencing of the unfettered flight of childhood dreams — of endless possibilities — that the books unleashed.

True, the viewer had been tumbled into something akin to Alice's rabbit hole only to discover on landing that one was back in the world of 19th-century ballet conceits that too often look deadeningly hollow today. Time, space and the sense of familiar place had been fractured and nearly abolished. But the promise of Ms. Bjornson's designs remained unfulfilled. The choreography and manners of another era did live again, intact, with something like the vigor of 20th-century pure movement and style.

The lure of reinterpreting ballet classics is strong. The latest choreographer to retool the wheel is Garry Stewart, the 39-year-old artistic director of the Australian Dance

to portray a character as choreographers do to tell a story. And so the challenge, with 19th-century ballets, is to make the classics live for audiences of another time.

Surprisingly enough, a start in the right direction might be to apply to the performing of the classics today the rules formulated in 1914 by Michel Fokine for making a serious art of what he saw as a hidebound form, replete with full-evening narratives like "Swan Lake," "The Sleeping Beauty" and "The Nutcracker." Some of Fokine's rules have surprising relevance, among them his calls for a sense of style appropriate to each ballet, for mime to be more than empty hand gestures and for expressive rather than decorative groupings of dancers on the stage.

Rhine Valley peasants became Creole folk in Dance Theater of Harlem's 1984 production of "Giselle." Mark Morris and Donald Byrd went further in their hip modernizations of "The Nutcracker," as did Sylvie Guillem in her new "Giselle," performed by La Scala Ballet in New York last summer, a staging that turned the icy, man-hating Wilis into exasperated spinsters.

Another approach to renewing a classic is to reinvent it thoroughly, turning the ballet inside out to comment on itself and the genre. But that task requires great knowledge, imagination and sensitivity to tone.

Otherwise, the new production simply takes the old as a point of departure.

In "Birdbrain," Mr. Stewart dresses his dancers in white T-shirts printed with text and gray pants, colors seen in uniforms worn by British and Australian schoolchildren. "We take the English public school as a metaphor for the institution of classical ballet," Mr. Stewart said. It is clear, however, that the fun he pokes at this, in his words, "pre-eminent ballet of the classical canon" is affectionate.

Mr. Stewart follows in the footsteps of another cheeky English reinventor. Matthew Bourne's "Swan Lake" turned the story into a sly commentary on modern-day London society and custom, picking up on the original's undercurrent of sad gay anomie. (As Freud might have said, a prized birthday crossbow is never just a crossbow.)

Mr. Bourne's Broadway production traced a narrative that is ingeniously parallel to the original libretto, modernizing and turning up the volume in this tale of a lonely high-born lad in late 20th century London. Mr. Bourne went even further when he turned the sylph and her doomed human lover into a dope fiend and a drunk in "La Sylphide" and set "Cinderella" in bombed-out London in World War II.

There is yet another way of approaching

Continued on Page 22

How can the old ballets be brought to life for today's viewers? Make wider use of the exciting new visual technology.

Theater of Adelaide. In "Birdbrain," to be performed by the troupe on Tuesday through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, Mr. Stewart jettisons the traditional choreography and music in favor of a mix of break-dance, capoeira and ballet and techno music, coming up with what he describes as a "post-structuralist reading of 'Swan Lake.'"

What is the pull? The classics are infinitely renewable and in the public domain. They can also be the aesthetic equivalent of comfort food. Yet when invested with a life of their own, with the kind of faith and commitment that colored Soviet ballet performing in the mid-20th century, the classics do approach the pure vitality of dance.

That ideal is probably too much to ask, however, of choreographers and performers living in so different a time. George Balanchine — a man who once grumbled that all you needed to do to sell a ballet was to call it "Swan Lake" — set in motion a way of thinking about classical dancing that led to the shouldering aside of explicitly narrative ballets. Movement could convey all the necessary information in a dance.

Today, performers seem to find it as hard



Rahav Segev

Scott Heron and Cathy Weis performing in Ms. Weis's "Bad Spot Hurts Like Mad" at the Kitchen in Manhattan in January.

A Proposal for Waking Up the Classics

Continued From Page 8

the reinvention of the classics. It is one that would require the unlikely matching of imaginative technological skills and an extraordinary depth of knowledge and affection for dance in general and for the classics.

Merce Cunningham's "Biped" suggested new ways to reinterpret classics, though it was not itself one. A true collaboration, it would have been unrecognizable without the contributions of the digital artists Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar, who worked with Mr. Cunningham last year on this monumental work.

The dazzling visuals were of equal importance to the choreography, at times forming a towering cathedral-like enclosure for dancers, at other times washing the stage with free-floating digitized motion that rooted the dancers even more firmly and made them more poignantly human. Such technologies are a largely unexplored area in mainstream dance.

Using them wisely, it might be possible to bring a contemporary relevance to the work that would remain true to its intent and style while getting at the heart of dance itself. Here's a proposal, predicated, of course, on an infinitely expanding budget and limitless time unknown even to state-supported troupes: an extravagantly multimedia production of "Swan Lake" with Christopher Wheeldon's restaging of the Petipa-Ivanov choreographic model, set to the Tchaikovsky score. Of equal weight would be a shifting, luminous filmic set as fluid and impalpable as music, designed by Cathy Weis, a longtime experimentalist video and dance creator with a gift for the merging of the two media.

Inspired by the layers of receding trapezoidal rooms through which two characters move in Ms. Weis's recent "A Bad Spot Hurts Like Mad," the second and fourth acts would unfold in vast expanses of tangled forest and darkly shimmering lake, placid one moment and turbulent the next. Legions of swans would populate that landscape, live dancers indistinguishable from filmed images. The effect would approximate

Film and video offer

enormous potential

for reinventing

ballet classics.

Solor's opium dream in "La Bayadère."

For more intimate dramatic moments — I leave the first and third-act castle scenes to Ms. Weis's profligate imagination — a single filmed figure would echo, merge or interact or be juxtaposed with a single live figure appearing to wander, too, through the film. If that could be done to such magical and quietly intense emotional effect in Beverly Blossom's "Poem for the Theater No. 6," a 1963 collaboration with the filmmaker Mario Jorrin, then it can be done now.

The duality is already inherent in "Swan Lake," as the corps swans "simultaneously present themselves," in Mr. Stewart's words, "as an animal, a creature, and also speak of the internal emotional state of Odette, her thoughts personified." It is suggested in the sense that Odette, the maiden turned swan by the magician Rothbart, is the pure and loving twin of the evily seductive Odile, who has been spiritually as well as physically ensnared by Rothbart.

Film and video, which Mr. Stewart uses as a set and a text element in "Birdbrain," are certainly not new to dance but too often they remain a separate element, never becoming more than ornamentation, emphasis or showing off. Film and dance, both intensely visual, make wordless metaphorical leaps in time and space and into the internal lives of characters.

Film can be as simultaneously literal and metaphorical as dance in telling or hinting at a story, in a setting sufficiently sumptuous or daringly unadorned for the most and least traditional of ballets. With film and video, dance can reinvent its stories propelled by a shared and recognizably contemporary purity of movement, on the canvases of the screen or monitor and the stage. □

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