

AMANDA JENNINGS
reports on significant
debuts and world
premieres

Among the legacy of great works that Frederick Ashton left us, *Sylvia* is not the most perfect, but there are redeeming features (including a cracking score by Delibes), so it has deservedly regained its place in the repertoire since its 'rediscovery' in 2004, having been thought lost for several decades. It is one of those ballets that gets better as it goes along, culminating in a feast of Ashtonian splendour at the wedding celebrations in Act III. Chatting to neighbouring critics at the Metropolitan Opera House, I learned that it is an American Ballet Theatre audience favourite, and at this performance the additional, very attractive draw was Xander Parish's ABT debut as a guest artist in the role of Aminta.

Sylvia contains some quite fiendish choreography that often produces scuffling in the corps de ballet as they struggle to keep up. ABT's corps fell victim at the beginning of Act I, with some lacklustre work from the men and anomalies of musicality among the women, together with moments of 'bunching' when a few dancers failed to cover the ground quickly enough to preserve the



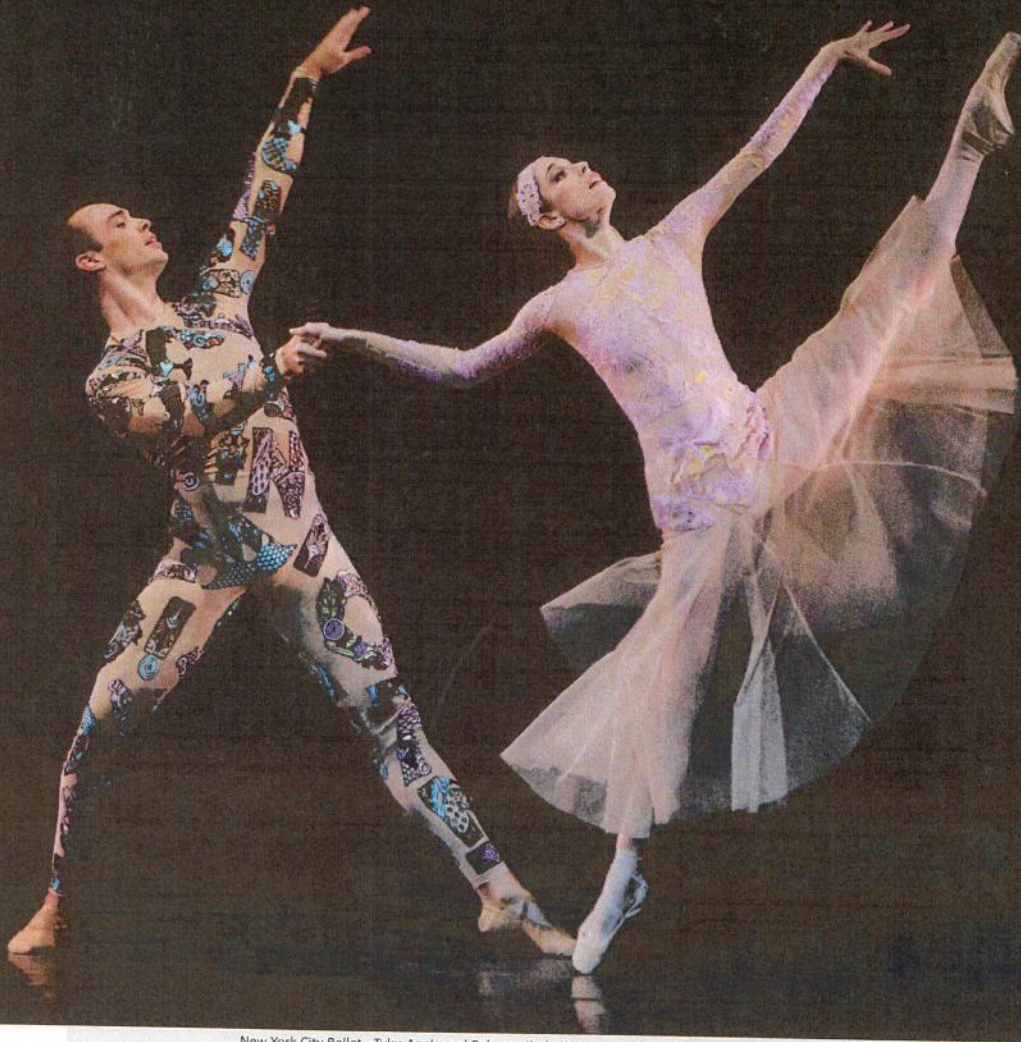
American Ballet Theatre - Xander Parish and Isabella Boylston in Ashton's *Sylvia*. Photo: Rosalie O'Connor

patterns and groupings. However, once Sylvia and her hunt attendants arrived on the scene things began to improve, and the performance went from strength to strength, the attendants dancing very well with many a beautifully arched foot on display. The air of commitment and enthusiasm that American dancers are so adept at creating was palpable in the auditorium.

Isabella Boylston, ABT's youngest principal, started off relatively quietly in Act I but came into her own in Act II, where Sylvia is the captive of the hunter Orion. Emerging from a cave in a seductive bejewelled dress, Boylston made a stunning impact and proceeded to dance up a storm as she plied Orion with alcohol and lured him into the stupor that facilitates the arrival of Eros to escort her to Aminta. In Act III she was able to show the full strength of her technique; a fearless turner with a prodigious jump, she threw in many impressive balances for good measure. She breezed charmingly through the demanding pizzicato solo.

There was further attractive work in minor roles, especially from Skylar Brandt and Arron Scott as a pair of cute goats, but the performance belonged to Parish, the archetypal danseur noble whose good looks, long, elegant lines and attentive partnering style make him ideal in the role of Aminta. His musical dancing never falters in its attention to the classical requirements of perfect placement, controlled turns and admirably smooth partnering skills, and he pulls off the audience-pleasing tricks and spectacular jumps without losing elegance of line or nobility of carriage. The audience applauded spontaneously several times during his solos, and many people stood at the end, amidst loud cheers and bravos. I hope we can see him guesting more widely in Europe soon.

Sylvia (this time Maria Kochetkova, replacing an injured Gillian Murphy) and her hunt attendants opened the annual ABT gala at the Met a few days later, followed by a short extract from the Act II Vision Scene from *The Sleeping Beauty*



New York City Ballet - Tyler Angle and Rebecca Krohn in Justin Peck's *Belles-Lettres*. Photo: Paul Kolnik

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and the ribbon pas de deux from Act I of *La Fille mal gardée*. For many in the Gala audience, the main attraction was the appearance of Alessandra Ferri dancing the Pie Jesu solo from Kenneth MacMillan's *Requiem*; this was Ferri's return 'home', as Kevin McKenzie described it in his introduction, so the audience was, naturally, eager to welcome back a beloved dancer. By comparison with Ferri's performances in *Woolf Works* last year with the Royal Ballet, I thought she seemed subdued, but that may have been partly due to the nature of the solo: beautiful as it is when danced in the full ballet, its impact is lessened as a stand-alone piece.

Closing the first act was the world premiere of Alexei Ratmansky's *Serenade After Plato's Symposium*, to Leonard Bernstein's five-movement violin concerto of the same name, in earthy-toned, flowing designs by Jerome Kaplan. An abstract exploration of the concept of Love as presented in the seven dialogues of the Symposium, this is a ballet that will run and run; a superbly well-crafted piece full of delicious steps and phrases, it shows the seven men off to their individual advantage. Herman Cornejo's charisma and technical flair sat well against the calm, unquestionable air of authority exuded by Marcelo Gomes; Calvin Royal danced a beautiful

solo absorbed in his own internal emotions and thoughts; James Whiteside was handsome and noble, while Daniil Simkin whizzed around the stage showing off his sparkling technique and warm humour. A new ballet that companies worldwide should fight to acquire.

Ratmansky must surely be one of the most versatile choreographers working today; every ballet he creates shows new vision, ranging from the staunchly traditional to the daringly avant-garde. His *Firebird*, which constituted the second half of ABT's gala, is a wonder: magical, strange, very different from the Fokine original, but mesmerising in its own right. Set in a forest of twisted, gnarly trees which emit smoke and glow red at the branch tips (by Simon Palukh), it is a visual feast of colour, with Ivan in white, the Enchanted Maidens in luminous green, Firebird cohort in vibrant red and Kaschei in a stunning Joker-style outfit with tailcoat and green Mohican hairstyle (costumes by Galina Solovyeva). In this version, Kaschei's spell makes the maidens quirky, cranky, zany creatures, great fun and rewarding to perform as they have a lot of dancing. Their transformation at the end, removing the green wigs and dresses to reveal sleek ivory slip dresses and pale blonde wigs, is stunning to look at, as is the opening up of

the forest trees to reveal ivory-clad young men, now freed from their own enchantment. Choreographically it's a gem; steps inspired by the glorious Stravinsky score are perfectly chosen to express character and narrative. Gomes made an ideal Ivan, and Cory Stearns as Kaschei demonstrated strong acting skills, revelling in the glorious evil of the part. As the Principal Maiden, Stella Abrera shone; delightfully dotty but with an impressive technique, she held the attention throughout. American darling Misty Copeland as the Firebird showed an athletic physique with a beautiful, flexible back and arms; her acting, too, was strong, but she does not have the phenomenal jump and technique of the role's creator, Natalia Osipova, as indeed, who does?

Over at the Koch theatre, New York City Ballet presented an interesting quadruple bill, opening with Justin Peck's *Belles Lettres*. Set to music by César Franck, this lovely piece is filled with beautiful, imaginative choreography, stunningly danced by the nine-strong cast. It was a real pleasure to see that unique, dramatically expressive and open City Ballet style living on; had Balanchine been watching, he would have smiled. In a solo role, weaving his way in and out of four couples, Anthony Huxley's fierce technical capabilities made a strong impact. Costumed by fashion designer Mary Katrantzou, the ladies wear beautiful embroidered dresses with net skirts, but the men's unitards with heavy abstract printed patterns are quite hideous.

Nicolas Blanc, ballet master and coach with the Joffrey Ballet, has created *Mothership*, a piece for four young couples. Simply costumed in maroon or navy blue leotards, and set to the music of Mason Bates (punchy and percussive with jazz influences) this piece exudes youthful exuberance and the dancing was, again, impressive and stylish; it was hard to believe three of this cast are only apprentices. The School of American Ballet is clearly doing a terrific job.

I had high hopes for Christopher Wheeldon's *American Rhapsody*, even though his music choice of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* seemed brave to say the least: this richly textured, luscious piece with its swoops and falls, twists and turns, is notoriously difficult to choreograph. As so often, Wheeldon's craftsmanship is intelligent, musical, attractive and engrossing, but overall the piece had the air of missed opportunity. Janie Taylor's costumes are a problem: the corps de ballet are appropriately dressed in blue, but the cut of the girls' dresses, with high crew necklines, is horrible, and the two principal couples are dressed in emerald green and

bright red respectively - why? Why not use more shades of blue? The men's costumes seem deliberately designed to be unflattering, with cutaway waistcoat-style tops with elbow-length sleeves, and the women have fussy swags around the hips. The backdrop, a swirl of starburst around an orange sun against a blue background, has nothing

Amar Ramasar and Unity Phelan as the red couple were outstanding, both elegant with long lines and bags of charisma.

remotely American-looking about it. This archetypally American score and Wheeldon's inventive architectural tableaux deserve better. Robert Fairchild and Tiler Peck, in green, were, unusually for them, unimpressive, but Amar Ramasar and Unity Phelan as the red couple were outstanding, both elegant with long lines and bags of charisma.

What's not to love about Ratmansky's *DSCH*? Shostakovich's gorgeously moving *Piano Concerto No. 2* is matched by lovely choreography and given a superb performance by the dancers. Sara Mearns and Brittany Pollack, the first lyrical and strong, the second fleet-footed and witty, epitomised this wonderful company's style. Ballet in New York is clearly on fine form.

New York City Ballet - Tiler Peck, Unity Phelan and Amar Ramasar in Christophony Wheeldon's *American Rhapsody*. Photo: Paul Kolnik

