

DANCE

When These Dancers Collaborated, 2 Learning Curves Met as One

By GIA KOURLAS NOV. 4, 2016



The New York City Ballet principal Sara Mearns, left, and the contemporary dancer-choreographer Jodi Melnick during a rehearsal in Manhattan. Sasha Arutyunova for The New York Times

All too often, when ballet and modern dance meet, compromises are made: Dancers — and dances — turn to mush. That was exactly what [Sara Mearns](#), the New York City Ballet principal, was trying to avoid when she asked the contemporary choreographer and dancer [Jodi Melnick](#) to work with her as part of a residency at Jacob's Pillow last fall.

“It was when the whole no-woman choreography thing at City Ballet was happening,” said Ms. Mearns, referring to the company’s lack of new works by female choreographers, which has come under increased scrutiny recently. “I was like, I would love to work with a woman that’s not Susan Stroman. I’m just going to reach out to Jodi. It felt like I was really stepping off a cliff.”

Before a recent rehearsal, Ms. Mearns and Ms. Melnick discussed what led to stepping off that cliff. [Ms. Melnick](#) is dedicated to the subtlety, nuance and crystalline clarity of everyday movement, and her performances, much like Ms. Mearns’s, are mind-altering. Within Ms. Melnick’s finely honed precision, she moves like silk. Her joints are soft; every action is guided by articulation and every tilt of the head is meaningful. Ms. Mearns was fascinated.

The two had met and developed a rapport as part of a [Danspace Project platform](#) that paired City Ballet dancers and choreographers with their contemporary-dance counterparts, the uptown (ballet) and downtown (contemporary) of the dance world. But when Ms. Mearns pitched her Jacob’s Pillow idea to Ms. Melnick under the trees at Lincoln Center’s North Plaza, Ms. Melnick was resistant.

“She would just sit there in her sunglasses,” Ms. Mearns recalled, imitating Ms. Melnick’s anguished moans of “*Ahh*.” Ms. Melnick had no desire to choreograph a ballet. But Ms. Mearns eventually convinced her that the residency could be about process.

“I was like, score!” Ms. Mearns said.

For the residency, she also invited two fellow City Ballet dancers: Jared Angle, her frequent partner, and [Gretchen Smith](#), a member of the corps de ballet. And though they began the project without the expectation of creating a dance, Ms. Melnick, to her surprise, has made one. “It’s been completely joyful and intellectually stimulating,” she said. “They completely came to me 100 percent.”

The result, “[Working in Process/New Bodies](#),” is part of Works & Process at the Guggenheim, Nov. 13 and 14. The program includes dance — performed in ballet slippers and barefoot — text, live music and a moderated discussion with Claudia La Rocco, who also organized the Danspace platform where Ms. Mearns and Ms. Melnick met. (Ms. La Rocco has been a contributor to The New York Times.) For the platform, Ms. Mearns was paired with the choreographer Rashaun Mitchell, and Ms. Melnick with the City Ballet principal Sterling Hyltin. In the end, the choreographers decided to collaborate on an evening featuring all four.

At the beginning, Ms. Melnick was a bit mystified by the idea of the platform, which was created partly to bridge uptown and downtown dance: “I was like: ‘Why do we have to find the common denominator? Why do we have to mix this uptown-downtown?’ Anything that has the cool factor or the pretty factor is not the motivation to do something.”

But Ms. Melnick was intrigued by Ms. Mearns — especially her willingness to improvise a solo — and Ms. Mearns connected with Ms. Melnick’s choreographic ethos of movement for movement’s sake. Still, when they got to Jacob’s Pillow, where Ms. Melnick created improvisational exercises for the dancers, it was like starting from scratch.

“It was so much new information,” Ms. Melnick said. “I was like: ‘I’ve been where you are: You don’t get it, it seems meaningless. This is what process is, Sara. I’m asking you to think and manipulate and be on the spot and be vulnerable and not worry about how you look.’ Which is something I never thought she did, anyway.”

In the ballet world, Ms. Mearns said, “we’re not used to people saying, ‘I gave you this, now do what you want with it.’”

Ms. Melnick said that by the time the dancers were in residency at the Guggenheim in June, they could come up with 15 options to her improvisational triggers. She could also ask Mr. Angle and Ms. Smith to watch a section and figure out what wasn’t working.

“We didn’t have that in the beginning, because we were two different countries coming together,” Ms. Melnick said. “But the ideas of what’s virtuosic, I feel like we really share.”

The exposure to Ms. Melnick’s matter-of-fact simplicity — her way, as she put it, to “be in your skin and respond to the moment without putting something on top of it” — has given Mr. Angle a new assurance in his dancing. “You just have to be confident: I’m raising my arm, and it’s exactly as it should be,” he explained. “I’m not trying to reach for something. I’m moving, and that’s enough. It’s scary in a way, because you just have to be in your body.”

The experience has also changed Ms. Mearns's approach at City Ballet, notably, she said, in George Balanchine's "Diamonds," in which she steps onto the stage and walks toward her partner. "Before, I added so much onto it," she said. "I felt like I had to, because of the music, the costumes, the lights — ah! But this time, I walked out and was like, no, just be you. I had to promise myself that it would be O.K."

The learning curve has gone both ways. While Ms. Melnick is a lover of Balanchine, she never had the urge to pursue ballet herself or to choreograph for ballet dancers. Now she's considering creating a work on point. "When I see Sara dance, I'm like, that's how I would do it: just reckless abandon, incredible technique, ridiculous beauty, but unworldly beauty," she said. "Soulful, tragic. There's something really tragic about you, Sara."

Ms. Mearns laughed. "There is," she said. "I feel that."

And in choosing Ms. Melnick, she has shown that she has sophisticated taste, too. Ms. Mearns is well aware of the trend of ballerinas' stepping out of their comfort zones. "This wasn't for an external reason," she said. "It was about me. Can I be a deeper artist in some way? It was an opportunity to see what else my body could do."