The New York Times

Dance

Review: New York City Ballet Gives a Dance Form a Makeover

By ALASTAIR MACAULAYOCT. 1, 2015

Brittany Pollack and Taylor Stanley of New York City Ballet in the world premiere of "New Blood" at the Fall Gala at the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center.
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

The failure rate in ballet choreography is always high. So who would have predicted that all four world premieres (by four choreographers, two of them locally unknown) at New York City Ballet's fall gala on Wednesday would all be works of real merit, each well worth seeing at least a second time? And yet so it proved. The ballets are by Robert Binet ("The Blue of Distance"), Justin Peck ("New Blood"), Troy Schumacher ("Common Ground") and Myles Thatcher ("Polaris"): They all expand ballet's frontiers.

Inevitably, there are problems, shortcomings, unevennesses. This was a fashion gala, with every ballet featuring outfits by prestigious couturiers, but — though most of the outfits are striking, and several are fun — only "Polaris," the musically weakest of the four, is actually helped by its apparel. Other objections could reasonably be raised about the choreography of all four premieres. Yet the fresh modernity and artistic seriousness with which these choreographers address gender, steps, time, music,

structure and stage geometries matter more. Familiar formulas are avoided. It would be good to see more new dances — and without fashion attached — by these four young men.

Tiler Peck and New York City Ballet dancers in Myles Thatcher's "Polaris," with music by William Walton, costumes designed by Zuhair Murad and lighting by Mark Stanley. By NEW YORK CITY BALLET on October 1, 2015.

It's striking that they've all chosen (independently, I'm told) to use unequal numbers of women and men. No safe sexual symmetries here. And no safe spatial symmetries either. All four include off-center patterns, same-sex partnering, unlikely couplings; and in all four there are steps, shapes, contours that, certainly on first viewing, take us happily by surprise. (The program ends, by contrast, with Peter Martins's "Thou Swell." High among its disappointments is that it's predictable: four lead women, with attendant male swains, and four perky female chorines and their perky male sidekicks.)

Mr. Peck's "New Blood" (14 minutes), set to Steve Reich's "Variations for Vibes, Piano and Strings," confirms that this choreographer is not just commandingly gifted but also possessed of exceptional compositional virtuosity. The brilliant group patterns of the opening and the central section of successive duets in which A dances with B, next B with C, and so on, almost as if regardless of gender, are remarkable feats. The steps are always a pleasure, especially in their mastery of off-balance legwork; the cast (seven men, six women) is excellent.

Yet I have more reservations about this work than any of the others, and perhaps these are connected to the slickness, even showiness, of its organizational skill. The other three works give us real stage worlds, but the realm of "New Blood" feels merely like a maze or a game. Some of its antics — the repeated gestures that imitate cardiopulmonary resuscitation in an early section — feel gimmicky.

While the costumes and makeup by Humberto Leon (of Opening Ceremony and Kenzo) are similarly entertaining in their inventive structures and color schemes, they add a note of revenant-chic ghoulishness. Rhythmically, Mr. Peck is marvelously attentive to Mr. Reich's music (Mr. Reich joined the cast at curtain calls), and yet that sequence of duets bounces off the surface of these musical variations rather than leading us into them.

Harrison Ball, center, and fellow members of New York City Ballet in the premiere of "The Blue of Distance." Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

The two choreographic newcomers to New York are Mr. Thatcher (who has emerged as a choreographer at San Francisco Ballet, where he is a dancer, and has been mentored by Alexei Ratmansky), and Mr. Binet (he's choreographic associate to the National Ballet of Canada; the choreographers he has shadowed include John Neumeier and Wayne McGregor). Although Mr. Thatcher's "Polaris" finds plenty of variety in his score, the "Allegramente" movement of William Walton's Piano Quartet in D minor, he doesn't show us what appeals to him in it.

Still, this 13-minute dance is a skilled and attractive octet (five men, three women), attractively costumed by Zuhair Murad. Its drama lies in how Tiler Peck (who is not related to Justin and is the only dancer not dressed in blue) veers between detachment and inclusion in the patterns created by the other seven.

The evening's oddest item is Mr. Binet's "The Blue of Distance," set to two beautifully imaginative pieces of Ravel piano music, "Oiseaux Tristes" and "Une Barque sur l'Océan." The choreography (14 minutes) includes several kinds of physical awkwardness; in some passages, it's also hard to feel how the movement is connected to the music. But these aspects belong to something larger and stranger, a changing landscape (three women, four men) where stillness, slowness and speed are often combined in two or more simultaneous activities, deepening the music's spell.

Though Sara Mearns, Sterling Hyltin and Rebecca Krohn each have arresting moments, the standout role is the one for young Harrison Ball, often memorably airborne. Hanako Maeda (of Adeam) gives the women costumes (different deep-blue bodices with puffball white skirts) that distract from the stage world, whereas the uniform high-necked blue of the men's outfits adds to its mystery.

The bright energy and constant musicality of Mr. Schumacher's "Common Ground" are unalloyed pleasures. This dance is set to a highly attractive commissioned score (18 minutes) by Ellis Ludwig-Leone, with orchestral sonorities that change wonderfully as the piece proceeds. The dancers catch energy from the music; jumps abound, in particular a recurrent pivoting jump (jeté fouetté) catches the heart in its accentuations.

Amar Ramasar, left, with Ashley Laracey in "Common Ground."
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Mr. Schumacher often choreographs as if showing us a chemical experiment. How can it work to have the stage shared by the tall Teresa Reichlen and the short Anthony Huxley? He asks that question twice, and the answer feels like nothing we've seen before at City Ballet. The two coincide in simultaneous but quite dissimilar solos, and the climate in which they coexist, peacefully but with powerful energy, feels marvelously large.

A pas de deux for Ashley Laracey and Amar Ramasar abounds in give-and-take; the extended line of Ms. Laracey's leg in arabesque penchée makes a piercing effect. Exits, entrances and peripheral space are all freshly used. The only moment in which "Common Ground" seems unnecessarily conventional is when Mr. Huxley makes an entrance immediately after others have left the stage; it feels as if Mr. Schumacher, like someone alarmed by pauses in conversation, were afraid of empty stage space. It would look yet better without the flamboyant costumes by Marta Marques and Paulo Almeida of Marques'Almeida, but I enjoy greatly their radical variations of hem and sleeve and superbly bold color combinations.

These four creations all occur before the intermission, and they all feel too short. The evening's second half is the too long "Thou Swell," which suffers from Don Sebesky's nasty arrangements of popular songs by Richard Rodgers. Though it's far more admirably danced than it was seven years ago, Mr. Martins's choreography abounds in clichés, so that all the stage relationships look synthetic: repro-romance. New costumes have been supplied here, too — by Peter Copping, of Oscar de la Renta — with the four dance divas wearing dresses that clash horridly. Poor Ms. Hyltin here has the evening's most appalling number: It looks like a dish cloth wraparound, topped and tailed by bright emerald tassels and matching emerald point shoes.

Amid a program where all the dancing is excellent, I single out one soloist: Taylor Stanley, who has supporting roles in "Polaris" and "New Blood." Dancing in new choreography, Mr. Stanley becomes the freest person in the company. He's rapturously individual.