

THE NEW YORKER

CULTURE DESK

ALEXEI RATMANSKY MAKES A BALLET ABOUT LOVE



By Joan Acocella, OCTOBER 23, 2016



In his production of “Serenade After Plato’s Symposium,” at American Ballet Theatre, Alexei Ratmansky manages to combine hard steps and an easy, natural look.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREA MOHIN / THE NEW YORK TIMES

If there’s one thing that you could say about Alexei Ratmansky, American Ballet Theatre’s artist in residence, and nobody would argue with you, it’s that he manages to combine hard steps and an easy, natural look. This man *loves* steps—not just movement or dance or even ballet but the steps themselves, the exact putting of one foot here and the other there. Two years ago, in preparation for mounting his revival of Marius Petipa’s 1890 “Sleeping Beauty,” Ratmansky and his wife, Tatiana Ratmanskaya—she is also his *régisseur*—spent two months in the Harvard Theatre Collection, teaching themselves to read the choreographic scripts for “Beauty” that were written down in the early years of the twentieth century in a now obsolete system called Stepanov notation. That is, Ratmansky learned to read the language of late-nineteenth-century ballet before the revisions set in. This is a little bit like reading the Rosetta Stone. “It opened a

treasury room for me,” he told Gia Kourlas, of the *Times*. “When I run out of steps, it gives me steps.” Steps, steps: he wants more steps. This can be a problem. Sometimes his choreography is too complicated, too full—clogged. But a lot of today’s ballet choreographers would do well to develop such a problem. It’s like dinner. Eating too much dinner is not a good idea, but it’s better than having no dinner.

Also, the dancers to whom he gives these complicated assignments look curiously at ease. This may be because, as they will sheepishly tell you (they are fond of him), he often rehearses them until they feel they will drop down dead. If, on a given day in the studio, they have been through a passage ten times, he still thinks it would be a nice idea to do it an eleventh time. And then a twelfth! Over-rehearsing is often blamed for wooden, lacquered, every-night-the-same performances, especially on the part of dancers in Russia, where Ratmansky was trained. (He graduated from the Bolshoi school.) But he seems to have a way of making it turn out otherwise. Maybe the dancers figure, Twelve times, thirteen times—what’s the difference? That the twelve times were yesterday, in the studio, and the thirteenth, right now, is on a stage, in front of an audience: maybe they don’t notice so much.

A relaxed, natural look is most welcome in Ratmansky’s new (or pretty new; it premiered in May) “Serenade After Plato’s Symposium,” set to Leonard Bernstein’s 1954 violin concerto of the same name, because the ballet is based on one of the most famous philosophical tracts ever written, whose subject, furthermore, is the definition of love. If there’s anything that could freeze a dancer’s bones faster, I don’t know what it is. Plus, Bernstein wrote a long program note explaining how he followed Plato’s plot, or roughly. Plato’s

“Symposium” is an after-dinner conversation among seven men, who, over wine, take turns saying what they think love is. Bernstein describes in his note how, because his opening section represents two of Plato’s speakers, they have two themes; how the second section, for the comic playwright Aristophanes, has music of “quiet charm.” In the final section, where Plato’s revered teacher, Socrates, recalls how he went to the seer Diotima of Mantinea and she told him that love was a ladder, on which one progressed from physical passion to love of beauty in the abstract, Bernstein says he endowed the music with a “greater weight” than he gave to the other sections.

Rather pleasingly, Bernstein’s biographer Humphrey Burton has said that he thinks all this is pretty much a fairy tale. Bernstein, he argues (from evidence), had written most of the concerto before he came up with the idea of tying it to Plato’s “Symposium.” Ratmansky surely knew about Burton’s doubts. He puts some of Plato’s story in the ballet anyway—he likes stories—but in contrast to what Bernstein suggested about how the musical qualities of his concerto’s different sections matched the personalities of Plato’s different speakers, the tone of the ballet is more or less even throughout. Basically, it is one of fellowship. The men are as comfortable with each other as they are with their steps. There is no hierarchy. (Or, in the cast I saw, Marcelo Gomes is a little more equal than the others, though he seems so in many ballets, not because he’s given better steps but just because he is so wonderful a dancer.) The men move in and out of each other’s dances easily. The ballet is the visual, or dance, equivalent of a good conversation, which is what Plato’s dialogue is. Sometimes a few men will stand aside and accompany the others’ dancing by clapping, like flamenco artists. You don’t often see that in a ballet. It adds to the atmosphere of conviviality.

In parts the piece has a studied quality, with steps you’ve never seen before. At one point the men arrange themselves in a “C” shape, but graduated in height. (Each man stands a little higher than the last.) Why? There are also some funny things for the hands. Now the dancers scoop the air upward; now they shake their hands downward, as if they were trying to shake something off them. But I see these moves as *jeux d’esprit*, such as people might do at a drinking party.

Only once, in the final section of the ballet, does Ratmansky do something hugely dramatic, and straight from Plato's text. He brings in the seer, Diotima. A panel in the black backdrop rises, and there, in a strip of white light, stands something we haven't seen before in this ballet, a woman—in the cast I saw, it was Devon Teuscher—who then comes forward and dances with Gomes. This is an exalted pas de deux. In their very first lift, Gomes raises Teuscher, upside down, in *passé en avant*. I won't try to explain what this looks like, but it is extremely impressive, and I think that with the other ambitious lifts that follow it, it stands for the great truths about love that Socrates, in Plato's dialogue, says Diotima told him. But what is interesting about the duet is that, no matter how fancy the steps, Ratmansky still makes them look natural. At one point, Teuscher sits on Gomes's shoulder. This is not an act of glory, like the Sugar Plum Fairy's sitting on her cavalier's shoulder in Balanchine's "Nutcracker." On the contrary, Teuscher looks quite comfortable and regular up there, as if she were a child who had been hiked up by her father to get a better look at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. So in the end, this section, however climactic, is not different from the preceding ones: it is about friendship. It also seems to me to be about classicism, the discovery of beauty not in fancy or *recherché* things but in what is most natural and human—even modest, which this ballet, for all its beauty, is. Think Venus de Milo.

Here we may be seeing a kind of answer to the question of how Ratmansky gets his dancers to look relaxed even while he is making them do amazing and complicated things. This is some emanation from *his* personality. In interviews, he comes off as a remarkably likable person: witty, sensible, goodhearted. But you don't have to read the interviews. Just look at the dancers. Calvin Royal III scrunching around for a while and then, in an instant, unfolding to his full, great height, as if he had just discovered how tall he is; Gabe Stone Shayer, in a pirouette, doing just about everything known to man, from one push-off: this may be the fruit of thirteen takes in one rehearsal, but it is also, unmistakably, due to something else as well. These people think somebody loves them.



Joan Acocella has written for The New Yorker, mostly on books and dance, since 1992, and became the magazine's dance critic in 1998. [MORE](#)