

Summer 2018

# Ballet Review



**Ballet Review 46.2  
Summer 2018**

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ballet slippers, 1842.



- 4 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 7 Jacob's Pillow – Jay Rogoff
- 8 Bali – Karen Greenspan
- 13 New York – Pia Catton
- 14 Toronto – Gary Smith
- 16 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 18 Hamburg – Vincent Le Baron
- 19 Washington, D.C. – John Morrone
- 20 Brooklyn – Karen Greenspan
- 22 Chicago – Joseph Houseal
- 23 New York – Hubert Goldschmidt
- 24 Medellín – Dawn Lille
- 26 Washington, D.C. – Lisa Traiger
- 27 New York – Susanna Sloat
- 28 Milan – Vincent Le Baron
- 30 Berkeley – Rachel Howard
- 31 New York – Susanna Sloat
- 33 Miami – Michael Langlois
- 34 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 36 Paris – Vincent Le Baron
- Joseph Houseal
- 38 A Conversation with Ashley Wheater  
Karen Greenspan
- 46 Three Israeli Choreographers  
Rachel Howard
- 52 A Conversation with Sasha De Sola
- 59 Sly Words Ogre  
Gary Smith
- 62 A Conversation with  
Adhonay Soares da Silva  
Michael Langlois
- 66 A Conversation with Robert La Fosse  
Karen Greenspan
- 75 Drive East  
Michael Popkin
- 80 A Conversation with Ashley Laracey  
Joseph Houseal
- 95 Neumeier's *Orphée et Eurydice*
- 98 Circus as Dance  
Photographs by Costas  
Hubert Goldschmidt
- 100 Marie Taglioni
- 125 London Reporter – Clement Crisp
- 127 Music on Disc – George Dorris

the High Brahmin's unsubtle and unwelcome advances, her romance with Askerov's Solor had an air of fatigue, not helped by his flapping arm gestures or the few occasions when a look of misgiving momentarily clouded his face. *I'm compelled to wed my lover's rival? Oh well, I'll go quietly.* Askerov possesses a megawatt smile as big as New York City Ballet's Joaquin De Luz, but was unable to keep it in check; he couldn't help but inappropriately beam it out at the audience throughout his pas de deux with Gamzatti (Nadezhda Batoeva) in the betrothal celebration.

Given that the Mariinsky's version of *Bayadère*, as do other Russian productions, pads the betrothal act by offering spectacle in the form of an exceedingly silly parrot dance; a water vessel dance (with the rather charming Svetlana Ivanova balancing the pot on her head); the hilarious, straight-out-of-Bollywood, Indian drum dance; and the justly famous Golden Idol variation accompanied by an unfortunate ensemble of blackamoors, it takes a lot to wrench the drama back into the foreground. (It must be mentioned, however, that with an eye toward minimizing the political incorrectness of the blackamoors, the children were no longer in blackface; the arms and legs of their costumes were brown but suggested not skin color but fabric. A canny design revision! Still, while they prance about, one wants to heap praise on Makarova for eliminating them and streamlining the Idol's dance, presented at the start of her version's reconstructed final act.)

And take back the drama Tereshkina and Kim did in their bravura performance. From Kim's first entrance, leaping with hotwired speed onto the stage in the temple garden, he established a high-water mark for any Solor. He provided a more electric partner for Tereshkina than the last time I saw her dance *Bayadère* (opposite the boyish, elegant Vladimir Shklyarov, with ABT in 2014) and his daredevil style ratcheted up the doomed romance accordingly. Kim is well-muscled but wiry; at first glance you hardly expect him to transmit the speed and kinetic energy he clearly

holds in reserve (an ability he shares with another fine Asian dancer, Tetsuya Kumakawa, who danced with the Royal Ballet in the 1990s and was a stupendous Golden Idol and, later, Solor). When he claps his hands to summon his lover, he's impatient and imperious. She joins him, and the atmosphere is so fervently romantic in their first pas de deux (spied upon by the jealous High Brahmin) that even the customary feather in Solor's headdress seems to swell with love.

The depth of commitment in Tereshkina's temple dancer has deepened over the years. With an exquisitely pliable back and arms as flexible and importunate as Odette's, her Nikia has the devotional quality of a true tragedienne. Among ballerinas who in recent years have danced the role memorably, she ranks alongside Diana Vishneva and Veronika Part.

Mention must be made of a superb character artist, Soslan Kulaev, who portrayed the High Brahmin at all performances in the run. Towering over the temple dancer, he cut a frighteningly imposing figure. And what of the Shades? All thirty-two of them, their arabesques penchées so flawlessly formed: bliss.

## Brooklyn, NY

Karen Greenspan

Jen Shyu is a master of language – spoken, sung, composed, played, and danced. When I interviewed her about *Nine Doors*, her recent solo work presented by World Music Institute in association with Asia Society at National Sawdust, a venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, I told her, “You’re kind of scary.” I was referring to her understated, but overwhelming, genius. In *Nine Doors* she speaks and sings in eight languages, plays seven instruments, and dances in an astounding flow of organic expression moving from the exquisite, refined movements of Javanese court dance to an earthy, ribald storytelling performance.

Shyu was born and raised in Peoria, Illinois, to a Taiwanese father and East Timorese mother. With her slight and youthful build, you

wouldn't guess she is almost forty. As a second-generation Asian American, she spent her younger years trying to fit in to a mainly Caucasian landscape. She studied ballet and piano from early years as a child and was competing in international piano competitions by the age of twelve. She entered Stanford as a theater major, switched to music, and discovered the world of jazz. This led to travel and experimentation with new instruments, forms of music, languages, and dance modes, which has led her to explore her own cultural roots and identities.

She performs *Nine Doors* gracefully wrapped in a colorful red and pink sarong topped with an elegant, strapless, black bodice and opens dancing a sacred Javanese court dance called *Bedhaya Pangkur Tunggal*. Having spent nearly two years in Java on a Fulbright grant studying traditional singing and dancing, Shyu performs the dance's subtle shifts of weight and inclination of the torso quite naturally as she sings the sweet strains of poetry (in Indonesian) that accompany the dance. She dreamily manipulates the loose ends of her crimson dance sash in a myriad of sensuous patterns – lifting, pulling, stroking, flicking, and casting away. The other hand forms flowing gestures imbued with the silky quality of the fabric.

Interrupted mid-phrase by a ringing phone on the other side of the stage, she answers it. With the receiver to her ear and her back to the audience, she receives the news (the audience hears over the speaker system what she ostensibly hears over the phone). Her friend, Sri Joko Raharjo, a Javanese shadow puppetry master, has been suddenly killed in a car crash, along with his wife and infant son. The only survivor of the accident is Joko's six-year-old daughter, Nala.

Shyu drops the phone in shock, moves back across the stage, and takes up a Japanese *biwa* (lute) to express her anger and loss through an ancient samurai song. She kneels on the floor holding the mandolin-shaped instrument upright, angrily striking and plucking the strings as she chants the fierce-sounding lyrics and melody.

In the work, Shyu moves through nine doors, or expressions, conceived as a ritual map of feminine wisdom using mythical guides – an offering – for the orphaned child of her friend, Joko. The doors also provide a path for her own grieving process and give voice to her lament.

She sits down on the bench at the grand piano with a *gayageum*, a twelve-string Korean zither, on her lap and plucks a Javanese melody. Eventually she slides her hands up to the piano keys and plays a jazz arrangement (yes, she is also a trained, performing, jazz musician) to which she croons lyrics written by Joko and then adds a verse of her own, imagining Nala's memories of her family and the fateful night on that dark road.

Shyu transcends all cultural and expressive boundaries as she takes Korean pansori storytelling traditions and forges them to her will in her rendition of *Ati Batik*, a story from the Wehali Kingdom of Timor. She straps the large white *soribuk* drum ringed with metal studs around her waist and paces around the stage using drumming rhythms and melodies from Korea and East Timor as she chants in English the feminist myth of *Ati Batik* – the seventh child of parents who had six sons before her.

In the tale, *Ati Batik* is called upon to travel afar to save her older brothers who have gambled away their fortune and freedom to a foreign king. She sails to their rescue and wins their freedom by competing with the king in several contests of skill, wit, and cleverness. Shyu's agility and humor in her combination of wordplay,



Photo: Steven Schreiber

Jen Shyu.

narration, conversation, song, body movement, as well as vocalized and played sound effects is exhilarating.

In another fusion of storytelling traditions, she relates the Korean myth of the heroine Baridegi accompanying herself on a small Timorese gong. Midway through this feminist tale, Shyu has worked her way over to the piano, which she plays percussively while standing, singing in the Tetum Terik language of East Timor. She sits down and segues into playing jazz piano accompaniment for her Korean East Coast shaman singing. Then, retrieving the gong, she paces the stage once more and finishes the tale of how the abandoned daughter Baridegi works nine long years to acquire holy water to cure the ill and aged father who had cast her away in her infancy. She wraps up the story chanting in Korean, “Thus was born the first shaman, mother of all the great shaman souls.” In a surprise dramatic reprise, she returns to the conclusion of the earlier Ati Batik story, going into physical and vocal convulsions, shrieking, “A woman tricked a man and he did not know it.”

Shyu creeps over to the phone receiver still left on the floor, picks it up to listen, and then hangs it up. The stage goes dark and Shyu lifts the long gayageum on her shoulder and carries it like a corpse in a funeral procession. She sings “Contemplation,” a poem by Edward Cheng that uses images from nature to reflect on how “life has no boundaries, when every place can be home.” This is a perfect credo for Shyu, a master of languages, who can find home in so many different forms of expression. She intones the jazz interpretation as she plucks a few spare chords on the gayageum, reducing the lyrics to a simple repetition of “life” and “home.” In her ending gift of wisdom, she reaffirms in a final rasp – “life.”

## Chicago

Joseph Houseal

Edward Villella hosted the fiftieth anniversary of the reopening of Chicago’s magnificent Auditorium Theatre on November 12, 2017,

with a program titled, “A Golden Celebration of Dance,” featuring dancers from the New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Parsons Dance, Ballet West, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, and the Joffrey Ballet. Two dancers from Suzanne Farrell Ballet also performed, as did dancers from San Francisco Ballet, Vienna State Ballet, Washington Ballet, and MOMIX.

Film from fifty years ago, at the celebratory performance for the reopening of the Auditorium Theatre after twenty-eight years of disuse, showed Villella and Farrell dancing Balanchine’s *Tarantella*. The lights changed. Taking the stage, Megan Fairchild and Daniel Ulbricht of City Ballet danced *Tarantella* with confidence and levity for what was the most elevated and well-performed piece of the evening.

Other gems were perfect for the event: Ian Spring performing David Parson’s extraordinary signature piece, *Caught* – something I have not seen in years – which holds up wonderfully in the era of high tech, for the sheer performative finesse of it.

Liudmila Konovalova from the Vienna State Ballet performed *The Dying Swan*, otherwise known as *The Swan*, with Fokine’s immortal and economical choreography, and taught the crowd what ballet is about. Then she died. Such a perfect solo.

Koto Ishihara of the San Francisco Ballet and the soaring wonder that is Washington Ballet’s Brooklyn Mack, both hot off the competition circuit, brought down the house with an electrifying performance of Vaganova’s *Diana and Acton Pas de Deux*. There was a time, decades past, when ballet was generally more exciting than it is today. These two reminded us just how thrilling and exhilarating it can be. Mack promises the godlike and delivers it with relish. Expect even more great things from him.

On the other hand, some of the performances were simply bad. Suzanne Farrell Ballet’s dancers in Balanchine’s *Meditation* looked like some regional-recital participants. The