

The New Criterion

Dance

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Blossom time at ABT

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On the American Ballet Theater, the New York City Ballet & Veronika Part.

There is a fundamental difference between American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet. Actually, there are a number of fundamental differences between ABT, launched in 1940, and NYCB, which took root in 1948 after many short-lived flowerings. These differences have been much explored through the decades: ABT's big, old, storybook ballets versus NYCB's swift and often experimental short stories; ABT's glittering necklace of international styles versus NYCB's pure pull from its own School of American Ballet; ABT's eclectic approach, ballets from everywhere, versus NYCB's auteur approach, George Balanchine's eye as everything. What strikes me this season, however, is a very particular difference. At ABT a fall is a sign of weakness, while at NYCB it's accepted as a measure of strength.

Dancers can fall—or falter—in many ways. They can slip on a too-slick floor. They can lose their center in a pirouette. For women, pointe work offers a whole other range of mishaps, including catches, sticks, skids, and turned ankles. A solo variation or a pas de deux requires dancers to be on, on, and on—a series of mind-body surges in a zone of synaptic transport, everything coming together at once, at once, at once. Think of Roger Federer on the tennis court, those leaps and vectors, angles and twirls—until his opponent misses. The elegance of impulse, the kinetic intuition, the body's deeply schooled responses, a wisdom of the reflexes. This is dancing. Still, in tennis there is no shame in missing, though miss too often and you lose. In ballet, you must not miss. The dancer is creating a picture in a window. He or she is an element in the poetic weather of the piece. A trip or catch or fall reads as a smudge on the surface of the dance. That is, if you see the dance as an object, as ABT tends to do.

Balanchine did not see ballets as objects, material shaped and stamped, hard and fast. He did not see dancing as a game to be won. And so he valued falls. “He was interested in process, in becoming,” Bernard Taper writes in *Balanchine*, “more than in perfection. For him perfection, as a state of achievement, was admirable—but then what? His interest was in dancers who tried to go beyond themselves or who were willing to try what was asked of them, even if they had doubts and even if it went counter to their image of themselves. Balanchine's appreciation for risk-taking was one of the reasons Suzanne Farrell's dancing so pleased him. She never danced a role exactly the same way twice.”

This spring season at ABT we witnessed a rather fascinating development. Female talent was declaring itself all through the ranks, flowering at the soloist level, shining in the corps. Certainly the loosening stranglehold at the top of the roster had something to do with this. The aging Julie Kent was on maternity leave. Xiomara Reyes was injured. Nina Ananiashvili was retiring (endlessly

it seemed, with a slew of farewell performances, one for every ballet, that made you want to sing, “So long, farewell, *auf Wiedersehen*, GOODBYE ALREADY”). When young dancers see space opening above them, they stretch—they lunge—to fill it. But this year they saw something else, as well. The soloist Veronika Part—of all the women at ABT, the one most committed to process, to “becoming”—was finally promoted to principal dancer.

You have to hand it to artistic director Kevin McKenzie. Against all pressure and in-house politics, he has allowed Part her process within the ABT structure of better-safe-than-sorry. Indeed, her process has become part of the pleasure of watching her work. This is why if you only see her first performance in a role you haven’t really seen her, and it’s probably why she remained a soloist for so long. ABT is not a process-oriented company and it does not have a process-oriented audience (as Balanchine taught his audience at NYCB to be). ABT wants ship-shape, don’t-rock-the-boat first tries. If the bottom line precludes adequate stage rehearsal for every ballet (and it does), well, don’t do more and wobble, do less and do it perfectly. One can see the logic in this. It’s a classic managerial mindset, from widgets to what-have-you. Contrary to what one might think, most businesses—the arts included—*don’t* encourage imagination, because it’s too time-consuming, too hard to control.

But ballet isn’t about logic. The terms are mutually exclusive. It isn’t logical to stand in first position, heels together and toes headed east and west. It isn’t logical to balance on one leg and lift the other up behind you, parallel to the floor, and to temper this pose endlessly until it is an arabesque, the poetic equivalent of reach and flight—a transubstantiation. Young dancers understand the mystery of the arabesque instinctively, wordlessly. The attainment of an arabesque worth looking at is an achievement, a grail. Too many dancers, however, see this achievement as an end when it is actually only a beginning. It is here that another kind of logic takes over—artistic fire, creative genius—the need to do something with that arabesque, to drink from the chalice.

Arabesques belong to adagio’s realm. We see them, of course, in allegro work—in classical dance we see arabesques everywhere. But the workroom in which they are shaped and hammered, the furnace in which they are fired: adagio. And adagio, don’t let anyone tell you differently, is existential. The word is derived from the Italian *adagio*, meaning “at leisure,” though it is anything but. Adagio is the equivalent of mountain climbing without the mountains. It is a slow-flowing linear landscape of narrow paths and high passes, a holistic sensitivity that hears the shudder under the snow blanket, the avalanche conceived, feels the ageless moon burning behind aubergine clouds. Dancers practice adage at the barre, where they all look brilliant. It’s when you let go and move to the center of the studio that you touch the void. Adagio combinations of *développé* and promenade, long balances and steep *penchées*, reveal every technical limitation, every step yet uncorrected or unmastered. You can glitter in allegro even with fluffs, but not in adagio, which is naked.

New York has never been a port of call for the adagio dancer. Manhattan is built on speed. The leap through the subway’s closing doors. Heads twisting toward the power at the party. Manhattan is Sidney Falco (for falcon) and Eve Harrington (for Bite into the Big Apple). Manhattan is allegro, which is social, loquacious, quick-witted; full of drive and aggression, ambition and exultation (much like the press room at the Met). Allegro will gloat. And it lends itself to fetish—fast, sharp, whippy, and repeatable bytes (or bites). Nailed it! Stuck it! Killed! Crass euphemisms speak to a triumph in allegro (and in the lobby, I’ve heard critics saying just such things into their cell phones). Adagio doesn’t know this language. Adagio is outside, other—a dawning knowledge, an isolating damnation. She—adagio is a she, no matter how slowly a man might move—is on intimate terms with eternity, so there’s huge room for wandering, for getting lost and never being found (a New Yorker’s nightmare). The adagio dancer keeps another kind of time. She is something akin to lute music or countertenors, to sewing by hand or bird-watching in autumn, when spring song gives way to silent flight, winter in the breast. Adagio is a sensibility, a refinement, that many dancers and many balletomanes no longer understand. Yet it is the soul of this art form.

Which brings us back to Veronika Part. She began the 2009 spring season at the Metropolitan Opera House by returning to Balanchine's *Mozartiana*, a role she first danced with the company in 2004. At that time, her take on the ballet was voluptuous and scrupulous, the role shaped like a classical aria with dramatic high notes and dangerous plunges. Because Part is ever-evolving and unpredictable, I expected this season's interpretations to show growth, though in what direction was anyone's guess. Part's first *Mozartiana* of the season, however, was very strange. It was undressed. She was dancing on her usual large scale and with a much lighter touch than five years ago. But she was pulling from a very small and often insecure base—pointe work that was uncertain, sometimes pinched. Part, at five-feet-eight, is tall for ballet, and because she has such long feet, pointe gets her up quite high. In this peculiar performance, her upper body seemed a long way from her feet, which made things precarious. There was an interesting quiet in the theater, as if the audience wasn't sure what it was seeing, and an intense, tightrope quiet onstage as Part assayed the formidable challenges of this ballet. *Mozartiana* was Balanchine's last masterpiece, a creation that seems to float between this world and the next, a sort of transom. In fact, Balanchine floated this ballet between allegro and adagio, which is one of its difficulties. He made the role for Suzanne Farrell, a dancer who was fully at home, and arguably most at home, in this odd in-between realm. It was an Olympian perch from which she could unleash effects without having to inhabit them.

Part inhabits her dancing, more than any other ABT ballerina of recent memory, because she is an adagio dancer. So while Part's first *Mozartiana* contained isolated beauties—pirouettes in attitude that brimmed like Saturn's rings; *développés* like magic wands—these were moated by silence, the atmosphere charged with too much of the nothingness in which this ballet traffics, and Part herself simultaneously too much there, too concentrated, and *not* there, because she had not found herself, her footing, in the ballet. Her second attempt three nights later? Transcendent. Possessed of everything the first night lacked: a bright sure-footedness, an impetuous off-centeredness in the big moves, and a girlish playfulness new to Part, as if flirting with the void. In the next day's matinee, her third performance was equally superb, but spontaneous in a different way, more imperious, with more sass and snap. What's amazing, in retrospect, is not the difference between Part's first performance and the two that followed, but the similarities in terms of texture, the intimate fit—present but not sensually achieved in the first performance—between small pieces of rhetoric and large bolts of it, between steps kept pointillist beneath the pelvis, delicate play under the shade of her tutu, and steps thrown suddenly, hugely to the heavens. This ballerina is teasing the Great Beyond, dancing in a vault of Rococo clouds and Russian Orthodox heights. We must feel these barometric, volumetric pressures buoyant in the ballet, the sense of event in her every reach and dive. In Part's first performance she was still in the process of finding these pressures, still opening space amidst them—an adagio imperative.

Wise colleagues had various thoughts about that first *Mozartiana*. One spoke of his fascination with the way Part was refitting the role to herself, how the performance showed the invention required to take *Mozartiana*'s in-betweenness—allegro slowed down like melting clockwork, legato feathered in flickers and trills—and recalibrate it for an adagio technique. It was a portrait of the artist working out a problem. Another, the Russian dancer Vadim Strukov, who like Part hails from the Mariinsky, placed this performance higher than the later triumphal two, and loved it not least for its sensation of *trepetno*, an almost untranslatable Russian word that is a combination of “tremulous, tentative, testing” —and in usage suggests “a fluttering or trembling heart.”

“There was a whole cosmos of ideas in that first performance,” Strukov explains, “and she was struggling with ideas, not with her body. The metaphysical essence of this ballet demands going into a trance of searching, and she was in this trance. It was genius at work, a rare privilege to see.”

And really, those zig-zag paths Balanchine laid out in *Mozartiana*'s *Thème et Variations* do seem to ride some energized ley line or spiritual fault line, emptiness all around. One of the reasons I so

admire Part's dancing is *because* she touches this emptiness. You feel it vast and close. She breathes it, tests it, sometimes pales before it, and then she blooms in it. She shows us that ballet is not a sport rewarded with scores, not an object you polish into impunity, not a fetish so self-contained and impermeable that no one has to care too much. Through the purity of her classical style, the size and clarity of the shapes she makes, and the integrity to see her artistic choices all the way to the end, whether she's all the way there or not, Part brings us back to ballet's basics, to the first things one loved about this illogical, all-or-nothing art: a pirouette, a passé, an arabesque. The ravishing, laughing largesse of those second and third *Mozartianas* was pure Lilac Fairy, alive and autonomous, her earthly duties done for the day. But that first *Mozartiana*—so vulnerable, nothing but muscle and mettle—was an “errand into the maze,” Part searching for the spell. This searching, after all, is what ballet is about.

Coming off her complicated success in *Mozartiana*, Part went right into *On the Dnieper*, a world premiere by ABT Artist in Residence Alexei Ratmansky. I can't say I loved her in it. *Dnieper* is frigid, dressed in cool grays and ice pinks. It's a narrative work that refuses to narrate, a concert version of Yuri Grigorovich's danced-through epics, wherein mime, gesture, and human-scaled pacing were cut so that everyone could dance, dance, dance. Now it's in double-time. Even Ratmansky's champions, fans who previously ignored the form-content problems of his Euro-derivative, abstract expressionist romps, couldn't ignore the problems here. Yet, given some tonal control and human warmth, Ratmansky might have made something wonderful, something worthy of Simon Pastukh's set designs, which had the savant poetry of Robert Wilson. Part, as the spurned but forgiving girlfriend, was too warm for the ballet, too much like just-risen bread, and in a way too big in her emotion (though one did see the Giselle she might be, nascent in the breaching, cascading phrases Ratmansky made for her). In the second cast, Hee Seo was too small. This old-fashioned role doesn't fit anyone. The only dancer who came off, who really burned in the ballet, was David Hallberg as an earnest peasant, also spurned. He's cold to the touch on a good day, and his freezing focus was laser-like, haunting. He went blue with heartbreak.

Part's *La Sylphide* was a delight. Adorably coquettish, historically refined, you could feel the gaslights warming her wings. Though the ABT repertory has yet to reveal it, Part is a natural comedienne and in Act One a bit of the screwball came through. When she stood on that high-backed chair and looked to James over her shoulder, she was Carole Lombard suppressing giggles. And the pleased expression she framed over the footlights was pure Constance Bennett, dreaming of love. Part, let's be frank, is a big sylph—sometimes too big, it seemed, for Desmond Heeley's manor-house of mullioned windows and beamed ceilings. Which made her all the more wonderful, this selfish, selfless apparition in wings and pearls, bursting the seams of the real world. Part's mime was of a scale and clarity we almost never see anymore, and her death scene was Gish by Griffiths, innocent and morbid. “He should have picked up her wings,” Strukov said of Cory Stearns, her James, “to save forever.”

The footwork of *La Sylphide*—that bouncing-ball *petite batterie*—prepared Part for her single *Swan Lake* (no ballerina at ABT got more than one). It was a performance that crowned the season, an Odette-Odile that some of the 'manes thought the best they'd ever seen. I've been watching Part in *Swan Lake* since 2002, and she's never danced it the same way twice. For this reason alone, the cognoscenti compare Part to Farrell, who retired in 1989. Then again, both women are tall and beautiful. Both are artistically committed in a way that can annoy those around them. And both have overbites. (In Farrell's day, young dancers tried to imitate this overbite, sensing that Balanchine valued it, and maybe he did, maybe there's a monograph to be written about ballet and the overbite). But where Farrell was crisp and airy and elemental, Yeats's “long-legged fly upon the stream,” Part is creamy and curvy, with more heat, and a touch of original sin. She is far more classically correct than Farrell ever was, but less sanguine about bobbles and misses. Farrell was like the bubble in a level—complete equanimity no matter which way she tipped, and she tipped and tilted a lot (lest we

forget, Farrell was an acquired taste, and some of her greatest admirers acquired her late). In this *Swan Lake*, Part was the master of her universe—footwork on fire; balances blazing; pirouettes as tight as young tulips; legs like Blake's calipers; those *grands ronds de jambes en l'air* having a latitudinal arc and swell, stroking right through waves off-axis. And while most ballerinas locate Odette in a wing-like port de bras, this Swan Queen lived in Part's long spine, which she used like a swan's neck, alarm and ardency sweeping up from the tailbone in majestic curves and lashings.

Part was dancing with Roberto Bolle, the Italian hunk who modeled in *Vogue* last year. Bolle is as big on personal beauty as he is short on imagination. He often looks lost onstage, unsure of where to go emotionally (Narcissus without his pool) and sometimes choreographically (jet-set star that he is, he's probably forgotten what production he's in). Bolle's handsome face does not make up for the dead spots: he could use a season at The Actor's Studio. But he's a clean technician, a good partner, and tall. Ballerinas love him because he takes care of them, and he certainly took care of Part. Her technical liberation in this performance was stunning, and her black swan Odile was scary, colder than last year's rendering, which was lush in black velvet, like Verdi's Violetta, softly sexual. Here Part was something feral, nocturnal, an apparition all too eager to eat Siegfried alive.

So Part roared, despite powerful forces set against her, and younger dancers not only took notice, they took faith. The breadth, the torque, the *more* that we saw in the full-bodied attack and phrasing of ABT's younger women—an adagio resonance and depth—was unusual in a company that has for some time produced full-frontal, rectilinear workmanship. Kristi Boone in Paul Taylor's *Airs* was consummate, her assumption of the Taylor technique so complete she revealed a secret, a link I'd never noticed before: this woman is the female counterpart of the male lead in *Aureole*, carving a cathedral out of air, a solitary space cocooned in slow curves. Like Atlas's daughter, Boone held and lifted *Airs*, bearing the dance—its world—in her arms. Simone Messmer had a season. She gave us feather-quill flamboyance in James Kudelka's *Désir*, and was "C'est moi" as Myrtha in a matinee *Giselle*. Messmer's persona is strong. You feel her ambition burning, but it is channeled technically with a coloratura's attention to detail. As Myrtha, she was a frosty ball of bitterness, her lip-curling line inviolate—Myrtha by way of Medea! And she too was wonderful in *Airs*, though not as looming as Boone, not quite as sustained. Isabella Boylston declared herself this season, robust and plummy with gleaming top notes, while Leann Underwood came on quietly, exquisitely, a bit of a Cinderella hanging back by the hearth, then out of nowhere, a fever breaking in *Giselle*, a dream wraith as Zulma.

The false note of the season was struck by Natalia Osipova, a guest artist from the Bolshoi Ballet who dropped in for one *Giselle* and two *La Sylphides*. Guest artists have always been a constant at ABT, and there are upsides to these visits (excitement, expanded stylistic horizons) and downsides (hysteria, stylistic disconnects). I did not see Osipova in the gala performances that won acclaim for her last year here in New York. After seeing her this spring, I'm still wondering what all the fuss is about. There's no question that her phenomenal ballon—the light, springing height she achieves in jumping moves like *assemblée*, *sissonne*, *jeté*—is a special gift. In a ballet like *Giselle*—where, in Act One, the heroine has a bounding spirit, and, in Act Two, she is weightless—such height and lightness go a long way. But ballet is not a trampoline. While the ABT audience and some of the press were thoroughly wowed by Osipova's aerodynamics, for me, she frequently bounced right out of the art form. If you were looking for a singing arabesque, a nuance in the shaping of phrases, you looked in vain.

Despite the rush of publicity, Osipova is still an unfinished dancer. She has a sickled right foot. She has scrunchy pointes that have very little power of articulation. More troubling is the lack of expression in her upper body. Though only twenty-three, Osipova has an old face. Please understand, offstage she looks twenty-three. But onstage, so little imaginative energy is resonant in the poitrine, the port de bras, that there's a lack of affect up there. Her dancing is un-crowned.

Perhaps this is why she had to pull faces to show us what Giselle was feeling, and why her mad scene was so disjointed it began to feel static, tedious, mindless in all the wrong ways. I must add, too, that she brought her Bolshoi bag of tricks to the role: bent-legged arabesques that tip the toe up higher; normally straight-legged *assemblés* that she pulls into pas de chat, knees bent under her skirt to give an illusion of greater height. This is fine at the Bolshoi, where everyone does it, but it seemed unfair to ABT's other Giselles, who were doing the steps without tricks. As in all athletic endeavors, tricks at some point become cheats.

How different, the debut *Giselle* of ABT soloist Maria Riccetto. No tricks, no cheats, simply the honesty and integrity this young classicist has shown us from the start. It was a debut on tenterhooks, Riccetto clearly nervous in Act One, the air taut around her. It's good to see nerves from time to time, good for the audience to experience palpably how much these roles matter to a dancer who is in the process of becoming. By the end of Act One, Riccetto had deepened. She gave her audience the most coherent mad scene I've seen in many years—a spider's skein of memories, a web that cannot hold. Act Two, again, contained some tentative, even terrified moments (Giselle's first solos as a Wili are high-wire acts), but Riccetto let herself depend on David Hallberg, her Albrecht, who was touchingly attuned to her needs. This listening between them, their tenuous complicity, opened the stage to a tenderness from another time and place. I won't forget the pin-drop quiet and concentration of their *grands assemblés*, lifting like long sighs, and those silent, synchronized landings in plié, like kisses. "So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been," wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay in the poem "Dirge Without Music," "Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned/ With lilies and with laurel they go ..."

Laura Jacobs's most recent novel is *The Bird Catcher* (St. Martin's Press).

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