

# The New Criterion

## Dance

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### Brute blood: Tudor at ABT

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On the centennial celebration of Antony Tudor at the ABT.

I first saw Antony Tudor's ballet of 1942, *Pillar of Fire*, on television. It was aired in 1973—a “Dance in America” broadcast of American Ballet Theatre—and Sallie Wilson danced the lead role of Hagar, a young woman who makes a rash move and feels the full force of her town, her family, her body, and her conscience descend. I watched it in Arlington Heights, Illinois, with my younger sisters. We were cultured kids, no question. But in the 1970s, everyone, to a certain extent, was cultured. For instance, Monday nights in Chicago and its suburbs were devoted to the movies of Ingmar Bergman, shown in a televised series introduced by the *Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert. Because my sisters and I had piano lessons on Monday nights, plinking away in turn, each of us missed a half hour of each movie. But what a brew, the shades-of-gray women of Bergman—daughters, virgins, spinsters, wives—and the Old World explorations of Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann. I wonder if those Monday nights didn't set us up for Tudor and Schoenberg? Because *Pillar of Fire* drove me and my sisters—sheltered suburban girls—off the family-room couch and into movement.

It was the arabesque. Hagar's tormented arabesques. Arms down by her side or swept back to bare her chest; chin up, as if in a vise; her pointes like drill bits. And the jetés too, straitjacketed from the shoulder, arms low, drive coming from the pelvis. We were four virgins in a room—thrilled. We were trying out that arabesque, that jeté—transported. Obviously, or rather, instinctively, we knew that the ballet was about sex. When those slatterns in red skirts emerge from the ramshackle house across the way—an almost cubist construction—the Primitive is afoot. But we also knew it was about more than sex. Hagar was reaching for something, reaching from within the golden mean of classical good manners, good taste, good girl. Desire, class, ideals, desperation, deflowering, dirt, and love—all intersected in those strange, tense arabesques.

They're not unlike the arabesques of Odette, the enchanted princess of *Swan Lake*. Her chest too is bared, sacrificial. Her arms too are swept back. But the timbre is quite other. As is the weight, and the plumb. Tudor was doing something magnificently different in *Pillar of Fire*. Where Odette's arabesques are curvaceous flowerings—an expression of the sublime in sublimation—Hagar's rigid arabesque fights sublimation. Where Odette is held spellbound in classical forms, Hagar pulls at her collar, tugs at her skirt, fitting uncomfortably in classicism, wrestling with it, trying to shed it like a too tight dress. In Tudor, you feel the complications of the psyche, the size of its desires, have inflamed or swollen the silhouette, overweighting the classical technique. The dancers must torque and twist to fit themselves to the world, to jigsaw their emotions into space. As Agnes de Mille wrote, “Between Fokine and Tudor stand Proust and Freud as well as Graham, the Ballet Jooss, and Mary Wigman.”

Indeed, one can see in *Pillar of Fire* a modern-dress update of *Swan Lake*. The white swan Odette, commonly accepted as a paragon of purity, has always struck me as fallen in some sense, seduced, or if not actually seduced, then marked for seduction; her counterpart is Odile, the black swan, who works as a symmetrical plot device but also sends a ripple of id through the ballet, a through-a-glass-darkly suggestion of Odette. Tudor's heroine is not caught in a metaphor, but in the mores of her time, in the hemmed-in choices for women of her class. Hagar is nineteen, Tudor has said. She is too young to be, as so many critics now cluck, "sexually repressed." Rather, she is desperate for a life that seems to be receding by the minute. And she is hormonally hungry for love. It's a volatile combination. "Hagar, like Hagar in the Bible, was a lost soul," Tudor explained in 1986. "She thought she had lost a life of sexuality—and sexuality helps a lot of people out of their problems."

Arnold Schoenberg's music, of course, the extraordinary *Verklärte Nacht* ("Transfigured Night"), provides a powerful foundation and fin de siècle subtext for Tudor's story. It is, in fact, the musical rendering of a quite similar story, taken from Richard Dehmel's poem of 1895, *Weib und Welt* ("Woman and World"). In this poem, a woman, pregnant by the husband she never loved, has finally found a man she can love; as she walks with him in the moonlight, she sorrowfully wishes the child were his; he says it will be, his love for her will transfigure the child. In Tudor's ballet, there are hints that Hagar has become pregnant from her one-night stand with The Young Man from the House Opposite. We can read this (or not) in the way she begins crossing a hand to the opposite hip, shielding her belly. There is also a fall to the floor that pulls upward in a spasm of the gut—a superb crouched Graham contraction.

Information filters into the ballet on many levels—technical, Biblical, musical, textual. And pictorial. American Ballet Theatre's current sets and costumes by Robert Perdziola, based on ideas in Jo Mielziner's originals, couldn't be better. There's the straight, stern house of Hagar's family, downstage left—a house that has seen better finances and higher expectations. There's the licentious house downstage right, its windows transparent, revealing languorous couplings inside. And there's the Edwardian dress—so particular, so precise as to age and class, and each character placed somewhere on the continuum between the Lovers in Innocence and the Lovers in Experience. Hagar's younger sister rides that continuum, flirting in both directions; she's especially coquettish with the gentleman Friend that Hagar loves from afar and who will love her in return. The Eldest Sister has stepped off the continuum. Frozen in spinsterhood, she tacks a path of sharp angles, clear-cut decisions.

Since that television broadcast in 1973, I would guess I've seen *Pillar* about twenty times. With every viewing I'm struck by details I never noticed before. And increasingly, I'm amazed by the poetics of construction. For example, how Tudor handles the corps—with delicacy, with sensuality, working the dancers in unison, so they read as a lyric refrain, and knowing when to release them from formality into reality, thus changing our perspective on Hagar's story, releasing it from a subjective telling to an objective one, from a fantasy pressured by her subconscious to a sudden *crime de coeur*. There is really no moment in our dance theater like the ghostly slide of Hagar's house across the stage, sweeping away the physical aspect of the town, and leaving the three sisters center stage in darkness, posed in a sepia-toned studio portrait. But, even here, they are not static. The three, as one, subtly gyre forward and around—as if the turn of the century is turning them.

I think it's important to recall that this incomparable ballet was not some spontaneous bit of luck, thrown onstage with only three-to-five weeks in the studio—which is how most ballets get made today. De Mille tells us that "Nora Kaye was rehearsed for a year, exploring with the choreographer every possible psychological overtone." She goes on to state:

The fluttering of her eyelids, the smoothing of her dress, the pause and turn of head, the

drawing in of breath, were as firmly set and as inviolate as a series of sixty-four pirouettes.

And unquestionably more interesting than sixty-four pirouettes.

Tudor was not easy to work with, and he's not easy to dance. As de Mille made clear, every line and angle, and even the breaths, are sacrosanct. "Like a painting," Melissa Hayden told me, describing the exactitude of each choreographic stroke. Tudor made this same point quite early in his career, at the end of *Jardin aux Lilas* ("Lilac Garden"), his masterpiece of 1936. A garden party has ended and as the curtain comes down a heartbroken young man, Her Lover, stands alone center stage, his back to the audience. When the curtain comes back up, he is repositioned within a big picture: The entire cast is onstage, arranged as if for a painting or photograph, the party framed for posterity, all pain absorbed into lines in space—into art. The curtain rings down again, as if to say, There is no leeway for those who want to exaggerate or embellish. Even in the 1950s, dancers found Tudor's strict line difficult, irritating. "In a certain way," Tanaquil Le Clercq once said, "it seems anti-ballet." This feeling of being tamped down, reined in, runs counter to ballet's open-ended and ethereal reaches.

Tamped down, however, doesn't mean pinched or small. Tudor wanted energy to brim and burst against the boundaries—glowing, bristling, breathing. Because the dancers can't always use their arms for momentum, for balance, they must be alive in the torso, well pulled-up so they can press up, pulse up, without preparation. "Center-of-the-body consciousness is a primary necessity that far outweighs the mechanics of high kicks," Tudor was known to say. "An unmalleable spine with automated legs and flappy wrists can only produce the non-genuine." The abdominal power and spinal flexibility necessary for Tudor is akin to that necessary for Martha Graham. Certainly Tudor and Graham were soulmates in their search for the genuine, and in believing, as she said, "The body does not lie." For both, human truth was a chthonic phenomenon. We aspire, yes, but we are one with the dust. Tudor was born and raised in the East End of London, the son of a butcher, and, for some time in young adulthood, he was a clerk at the butcher's. He knew about bodies.

Last year marked the centennial of Tudor's birth in 1908. As is now the norm with centennials, the celebration not only saw an uptick of Tudor ballets on the bill, it brought out issues surrounding these ballets. How well is the work being coached? How well danced? How is the Antony Tudor Ballet Trust executing its responsibility? And are we seeing enough Tudor? American Ballet Theatre's two-week season at New York's City Center this past October turned out to be a crucible for these questions. For it was ABT that invited Tudor to America in 1939, to set three of his early works on the company, and it was on ABT that Tudor continued to create ballets. Until his death in 1987, and despite long stretches when he was working or teaching at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet or the Juilliard School, Tudor was an eminence and a presence at ABT.

So are we seeing enough Tudor from the company that calls him its conscience? We are not. I have no quarrel with the centennial repertory at City Center. In two weeks, ABT put three major ballets before the public, as well as the bedroom pas de deux from Tudor's long unseen *Romeo and Juliet*, his mordant *Judgment of Paris* (*Of Human Bondage* meets *Apollo*), and a charming work done for Juilliard students, *Continuo*, which is set to Pachelbel's Canon in D and is a chapbook on the art of choreography, brimming with verities of construction. It is Tudor's slim presence in the repertory during years that aren't centennials that bothers me. This choreographer was with ABT from its very beginning. His vision colored the company's horizon. "Like god," is how he wanted the dancers to treat him, and he was definitely an Old Testament father—strict, scary, hypercritical, sometimes cruel—but for a reason. His ballets pulled from tangled places, and pushed dancers into vulnerabilities usually stylized or sanitized or abstracted by classicism. Tudor is the inheritance of every ABT dancer, from principals to corps.

Of the Tudor Trust, led by Sally Brayley Bliss, I hesitate to speak, because here aesthetics cross into

legalities and livelihoods. As to stipulations about how a Tudor work is set, it seems that his will is being interpreted too loosely. One feels a path-of-least-resistance approach—very un-Tudor—to who coaches what and to the level of result deemed acceptable. These particular issues wouldn't keep nagging if the ballets had been persuasively and powerfully danced at City Center. But mostly, they weren't. In fact, on the evening of the Tudor Gala, a series of short films was shown—interviews with those who knew Tudor and worked with him. In one of these films, ABT's artistic director Kevin McKenzie singled out the principal dancer Julie Kent as (I paraphrase) the company's foremost interpreter of Tudor. This was astonishing, given that Kent never was and is not now an important Tudor dancer. Whether McKenzie's assertion was made in deference to Kent's position of seniority, or was a form of company politics, or is a sincerely held belief doesn't matter in the end. What matters is that Kent was put in the leads of *Pillar of Fire*, *Jardin aux Lilas*, and *The Leaves Are Fading*—three roles in which she failed Tudor, and failed as an example of what principal dancing must be.

How did she fail? Well, for those in the audience who expected Kent to be pretty, ballerina-y, her cheekbones hollow in the moonlight, she did not fail. Kent has a following much like Nina Ananiashvili's, fans who love her for the less and less she does so precious (Nina, at least, is charming). For those in the more-is-more camp, this kind of dancing is a tedious endgame. I understand that older ballerinas do not want to leave the stage, but there comes a point when the answer must be "no."

In *The Leaves Are Fading*, Tudor's Proustian evocation of young love, Kent could hardly sustain a phrase from beginning to end. She was mugging, substituting coy looks for upper-body consciousness, and muffing the tricky combinations that were built on the quixotic Gelsey Kirkland, unforgettable in this ballet. Even Kent's partner, Marcelo Gomes, looked stilted, all balled up while hauling her around. To be fair to Kent, Xiomara Reyes, the second cast lead, was awful too—cringe-makingly cute and totally miscast with those bland legs and that deadening lack of musical continuity (camouflaged, or so she thought, by Kitri-esque moues of ecstasy aimed at no one in particular). One waited for Tudor to rumble up like the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* and drag her down to Hell.

"Tudor required his students to sing the music," reports Elizabeth Sawyer, Tudor's accompanist, in Judith Chazin-Bennahum's critical biography *The Ballets of Antony Tudor*. "That would open the chest and the throat and would help them to learn the flow of a phrase." Does anyone ask ABT dancers to sing the music? (In a recent *Dance Magazine* interview, Lise Houlton recalls performances with Kevin McKenzie in which they "used to sing, sometimes in harmony.") When Kirkland danced *The Leaves Are Fading*, it was like singing—like a soprano in silvery coloratura, reverie unspooling in sound. Kirkland looked boneless, transported by thought alone, her line narrowing and swelling with the music's invisible corridors. Amanda McKerrow was mercurial too, though with less dynamic flash—more of a slipping between shadows.

And *Leaves*, finally, is not simply Eros in dappled greens and pinks. The shadows in the lighting have meaning, and the endless variety of horizontal lifts—women borne or bound upward in air, rocking, floating, flying—are an escalating epiphanal imagery: girls on swings at elated heights, arrows hitting their mark, lightning bolts, birds' nests, the last leaf jagged on a branch. *Leaves* is a haunting sort of lullaby, a late-in-life cradling of memories, the laying to rest, perhaps, of love's intensities. Does ABT truly mean to tell us that we must now expect less from a lead in *Leaves*? Both Kent and Reyes were outdanced by soloists and members of the corps. Even so, all through the ranks there were too many unmalleable spines and automated legs.

On to *Jardin aux Lilas*. This used to be a ballet Kent wore like one of her own dresses, she looked so right in it. If she brought more energy to her performance, she might still look right in the role of young Caroline. Older dancers can look marvelously young onstage. But Kent's performance looked

“marked”—the dancer’s term for doing it halfway to conserve energy. She drifted about, stricken like Giselle at the start of the Mad Scene, acting the ballet rather than dancing it. Which is something Tudor wouldn’t countenance. He wanted passionate movement—“the shape of the muscles progressing through space, the feeling of the air around them”—and he wanted it “cold-blooded.” A contradiction in terms, yes, but yet another form of the *contraposto* he brought to classicism. Think Yeats: his “brute blood of the air.”

Finally, there was Kent’s *Pillar of Fire*. The lack of core power, of continuity fusing through a phrase, was such that if my sisters and I had seen this performance we’d have stayed on the couch (we might still be there). Again, Kent substituted acting for dancing. This time she was Juliet ... sitting on a stoop.

My focus on Kent may strike some readers as harsh. But the casting of these ballets goes to the heart of their survival. It’s not something Tudor ever took lightly. If Kent had been limited to just one lead, one could let it pass. *But three*. The *Swan Lakes*, the *Giselles*, these classics can take all kinds of hits because they’re performed so often—and there’s always the corps. But the work of Tudor, like that of Frederick Ashton, is not performed so often. When it *is* programmed, it requires a unique and arduous preparation. If the performance is bad, people won’t walk away saying, I’d like to see that done better—they just won’t come back.

Michelle Wiles was given one shot at *Pillar*. Back in 2004, she gave some promising performances of Hagar, showing signs of dramatic depth. She was moving beyond the brittle allegro bytes that are her stock in trade, and beginning to use her body expressively, lengthening the line, pulling breath—and life—into her ribcage. This season she regressed. And not just in Tudor, where in both *Leaves* and *Pillar* she looked stiff and stop-start, with no give, no nothing, in the upper body. Wiles was allowed to dance to her worst instincts (or ... is it possible she was encouraged in this?!), presenting us with a *Theme and Variations* that looked crazed, so hyperactive was her attack. *Theme* is a glittering little castle of a ballet, complete with traps and moats and maces—dancers agree it can be technical torture. But it’s still delicate, still a little world, and the ballerina, its queen, should still have complete calm and some *élan*. In *Ballo della Regina*, Wiles turned in a solid performance that hit all the marks with a smile. It was a perfect example of why hitting all the marks with a smile isn’t enough.

The breakaway performance belonged to Gillian Murphy. She last danced Hagar in New York in 2004 and looked lost in the role, uncertain of her character, cowering and subdued. Despite her technical strength, Murphy couldn’t get the dance across the footlights. I didn’t see her first Hagar of this run, but I saw her second, the night of the gala. How different this time around—different the moment the curtain rose, the way she sat on those steps, glowing strangely, her head up now, unafraid to look the ballet in the eye. The glow was visceral, enhanced by Murphy’s red-gold hair and pale skin. She seemed to be concentrating on stillness, on not waking the whip-tailed emotions inside. But they will wake.

I have not described Hagars from the past, performances I recall as persuasive. In any generation, the dancer must be cast, coached, and rehearsed (and rehearsed) to make the “genuine” possible. During intermissions, however, I asked colleagues if they had a favorite Hagar? The answers, surprisingly, were the same. It was not the great Nora Kaye, who owned the role for so long and laced it with neurosis, or even Sallie Wilson, definitive in her lived-in intimacy with the ballet, her burning-candle commitment. It was the Royal Ballet’s Lynn Seymour, her single guest appearance with ABT in 1976. In rehearsal, it didn’t go well. Seymour had knee trouble and wouldn’t do certain moves—the drop to both knees, for instance, when she stumbles ravished from the House Opposite. Seymour’s wonky behavior infuriated Tudor, so much that he walked out of the studio. Yet in performance, Seymour threw herself to the floor, knees bedamned. With her lashing line, she swept through the ballet with a whole new view. The critics I spoke to loved her for her vulnerability, her

rebellion, for not looking stranded but stripped naked. One in particular loved the fearlessness she brought to Hagar. This was a woman, he said, who needed to act, to make a move. Sex was a means, not an end.

Murphy, too, came to the role with a roar. She did not hold back. She drove into those shorn arabesques, which suit her own full-breasted, high-sitting line. She went for every difficulty, and fell off the first of the corkscrew rises from the ground, pointes crossed. It didn't matter—it never does when someone is really dancing. As she danced, a peculiar phenomenon took over, that sensation of an artist getting stronger the longer they're out there: They've slipped into a space prepared for but never quite entered.

“It has its own dramatic life,” the ABT conductor David LaMarche said of *Pillar of Fire*, in an interview with *Ballet Review* (Fall 2007).

You start on a path, and more than with any other ballet, once you are committed to it, you can't draw back. You get something going to the music and you can't abandon it mid-performance. In that sense, perhaps the dancer may have to submit herself to something greater.

Commitment as submission as deliverance—this is a spiritual continuum with kinetic contours. Murphy, unmoored, was reaching with her spine, banking off her momentums. Her pirouettes and pivots began to look lathed. There was so much rounding volume in those big wheeling moves *en tournant* I couldn't help thinking of the Barbara Morgan photographs of Martha Graham in *Letter to the World*, her 1940 dance about Emily Dickinson. There is an affinity, Hagar and Emily, though I never saw it before: “My Reason — Life —/ I had not had—.” This performance of *Pillar* turned narrative into organic form, Murphy's Hagar feeling the centrifugal pulls of her community, its codes, but opening instead to orbs and spheres in space—wombs and chambers, her beating heart and his. It was a long time coming, this triumph, and Murphy earned her ovation.

Other dancers who prevailed in the Tudor repertory? Sarah Lane as the Youngest Sister in *Pillar* looked wonderful, the best dancing I've seen from her—fully articulated and free, with a curving buoyancy. She must now bring this level of engagement to standard classical fare, where she is stolid. Maria Bystrova stood out in the second cast of *Leaves* and brought a touch of the wicked to the Eldest Sister in *Pillar*. In *Jardin aux Lilas*, Kristi Boone as An Episode in His Past—the mistress who is losing her lover to his arranged marriage with Caroline—danced with vibrancy, though less feather and more silk wouldn't hurt. And Veronika Part. Last spring at the Met she was unsurpassed in three principal roles: Lilac Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty*, Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake*, and Nikiya in *La Bayadère*. Unaccountably—“bizarrelly” may be the better word—this star continues to be held at soloist status, even as the palpable poetic focus and intelligence she brings to every role places her in a constellation all her own. At City Center, Part appeared in three Tudor ballets and was stunning in each, beginning with *Leaves*.

Actually, her performance in *Leaves* last year forecast a Tudor dancer in the making. The singing line that comes from a Kirov training is a built-in advantage; though Part may have been born with hers—its melody and amplitude were unique even at the Kirov. Meanwhile, her upper-body flexibility, a refinement that allows for minute calibrations, is exactly what Tudor wanted (to see that torso in Jiri Kylian's *Overgrown Path*, scything drama out of air, was to think, She's a Graham dancer too!). The tempestuous solo Part dances in *Leaves*, the same solo Michelle Wiles dances, is not an easy fit for either of these tall women. It's blown about, full of expansive *développés* and lunges within tightly graded measures that skim. Part's a big willow in this glade, and yet she lifts and yields with fresh sensitivity. She makes this solo a Fauvist counterpart to the Impressionist transparency of her *Les Sylphides* a few seasons back. (As a sylph, Part has no peer.)

Dancing the Eldest Sister in *Pillar*, Part came on with impenetrable quiet—she’s a Pillar of Ice. It was a wow of a performance, robust and restrained, projected from a fixed gaze under half-closed lids. There was a moment, however, when a shaft of light, of feeling, escaped from those eyes—a light in the ballet where I’d never seen it before. The Eldest Sister has been protective of Hagar, watchful, then wrathful, disgusted, despairing—but in this moment, reaching toward Hagar, Part flooded the movement with something new. For a split second we saw a plea, a drowning reach, a look that said, “*I wish I’d done as you have.*” There are infinities in these ballets, for the finding.

On the last day of the season, at the matinee, the company finally presented a compelling *Jardin aux Lilas*. It was the fifth *Jardin* of the run, the second performance by the second cast. Part was mesmerizing as An Episode in His Past, a role she danced with marcelled sensuality—in voracious waves and disturbing ripples—and with a dark beauty that made one think not only of Anna Karenina, but of Vronsky’s high-strung, satin-skinned mare Frou-Frou: “Vronsky tried in vain to calm her with his voice and hand.” Unlike young Caroline, this is a woman who’s been bedded, whose whole body is alive and knows what it’s going to miss. It was a huge performance with a fine edge of ferocity—the character replete; danced not acted—and another triumph in Tudor, to set beside Murphy’s.

In the first performance of this cast, Melissa Thomas as Caroline wasn’t ready; she looked underscaled next to Part. By the matinee she was more sure, and her soft youth and bloom were touching. The whole cast at this point—Thomas Forster as Her Lover, Vitali Krauchenka as The Man She Must Marry—was caught in the spell, the web, of the ballet, what John Martin called a “tearful little tale,” its story told in stolen moments—a glance, a reach, a whisper, a kiss—all leading to the last moment. It is a ballet that can be set next to Edith Wharton’s masterpiece, that steel trap under snow, *The Age of Innocence*. Turn to the penultimate chapter, the farewell dinner party for Ellen Olenska. “And so the evening swept on, running and running like a senseless river that did not know how to stop.” And then it does stop. She is saying good-bye. And all that’s left are the lilacs.

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

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