

The New Criterion

Dance

September 2008

Ratmansky

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On Alexei Ratmansky, *Rabbit and Rogue* at American Ballet Theatre, and *Jupiter Symphony* at Pennsylvania Ballet.

When Alexei Ratmansky's *Bright Stream* was presented during the Bolshoi Ballet's 2005 engagement at the Met, it was New York's first good look at his work. A full-length ballet set on a Soviet collective farm ("tractor ballet," this genre was called), *Bright Stream* possessed a first act of charming manners and a toylike scale, which was ingratiating. The ballet lost its way in Act Two, devolving into a barnyard farce, a cross-dressed switcheroo so lumbering and unfunny it trampled the charm. And it wasn't just that. In this act as well, one saw that Ratmansky had trouble focusing his more classical pas, having a penchant for dualities that split the stage, frustrating the eye—for instance, two duets danced simultaneously. And yet, *Bright Stream* received raves, as if it had answered something quite a few critics were hungry for. What that was, though, I couldn't say at the time.

Looking back on *Bright Stream*, I think of it as a modest work, a ballet that was not only less than the sum of its parts but seemed, as it drew to a perfunctory conclusion, to know it. Was the ballet's dark and unfunny history working on Ratmansky, flattening him? The original *Bright Stream* premiered in 1935, with choreography by Fyodor Lopoukhov and music by Dmitri Shostakovich. It was banned by Stalin, who no doubt saw mockery in its comic treatment of collective farms. The librettist, Adrian Piotrovsky, paid with his life. Reviewing Ratmansky's re-do, at least two critics, Don Daniels in *Ballet Review* and Judith Flanders in London's *TLS*, took their analyses beyond the steps and score and found his twee treatment of a dubious subject offensive. As Daniels wrote: "Ratmansky plays a postmodern game: he deliberately puts kitsch onstage and then assumes we will get his little joke and find it sufficient as commentary on a 'naïve' past... . Since the narrative of the ballet concerns the wonder and glory of collective farming under Communist rule, and since such policies led to millions of deaths through forced starvation across the former Soviet Union, the 'joke' has a ghastly retrospective side." Ratmansky is nothing, however, if not full of jokes.

And he is relentlessly naïve. *Russian Seasons*, his first ballet for the New York City Ballet, was premiered in 2006. The most memorable thing about it is its childlike color palette, instantly striking, each dancer dressed in their own bright hue: blood red, ultraviolet, electric blue, kelly green, orange. The costumes are peasant tunics and tights for the men and flaring sheaths for the women. The music, an original score by Leonid Desyatnikov, with sections of sung folk text, leans heavily on Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noces* (1923), which is perhaps unavoidable. And Ratmansky leans heavily on Bronislava Nijinska's choreography for *Les Noces*, throwing in for good measure a few motifs from her brother's 1913 masterpiece, *Le Sacre du printemps*—Vaslav Nijinsky's yoked postures, curled hands, and hurtling outbursts. Still, it's those naïve colors that grab, those

finger-paint primaries that make you wonder, What sort of peasants are these? Or what manner of playing at peasants? For Ratmansky's choreography is itself a synthetic stylization that looks squeezed from a tube, the ballet a series of slick pages on which he goes to town with fingers here, thumbs there, a lot of heel-toe courtesy of John Neumeier or Jiri Kylian, both of whom he's worked with, but not much sense of tone or time or place.

So let's say they're Pop Art peasants, pagans straight from MOMA, a bright stream of cartoon colors, laughing and loving. They're also Po Mo peasants, with quite a bit of business going on—the elbowing extremes and extremities of William Forsythe and Jorma Elo, the shenanigans near the wings of Trisha Brown and Twyla Tharp, not to mention ancient stage hokum like the dancer who walks along the bent knees of other dancers as if they're stepping stones. Frequently, I felt I was watching a troupe of glasnostian mimes doing a revue of Western theater since the Sixties. As the ballet comes to a barren close—“Our hands are but rakes,/ Our eyes are but pits”—the dancer Wendy Whelan reappears dressed in white. She repeatedly bows forward in a *tendu derrière*, Giselle's pose of initiation into the Wilis, her passage from earth to air. Then, like kindergarten at nap time, the other dancers lie down in a row, heads to the footlights, and the curtain descends on dead bodies.

A peasant cemetery or a mass grave? Dust to dust or more of Stalin's victims? Does the difference matter to Ratmansky? Does a choreographer have a responsibility to his or her existential statement, or, in this case, doodle? Each time I saw the ballet I felt the ending cost Ratmansky nothing. It cost Nijinska more to put her peasants in the wedding bed than for Ratmansky to put his in the ground. And yet again, raves. Pity poor Christopher Wheeldon, NYCB's resident choreographer, and, until *Russian Seasons*, the person continually projected as the man to fill George Balanchine's shoes. Ratmansky was suddenly it—the new shoe filler. (Is classical music as obsessively looking for another Stravinsky, fine art another Picasso, as ballet is for another Balanchine? This, too, is a form of childishness.)

We got a few more looks at Ratmansky when Nina Ananiashvili brought her troupe, the State Ballet of Georgia, to the Brooklyn Academy of Music last winter, complete with two of his ballets on the bill. The newest work, *Bizet Variations*, was a sweet nothing full of Ratmansky's most annoying tropes, a work not up to Jerome Robbins on his worst day, though much ado was made of the Bizet score, i.e. Ratmansky's cleverness in finding it. Such is the luck of the darling: he makes a banal ballet, but gets points for his choice of music. Was a message encoded there? A reference, perhaps, to Balanchine's use of a forgotten score by, guess who, Bizet, when choreographing his *Symphony in C*? The better Ratmansky on the bill, an early piece called *Dreams About Japan*, was a flashy riff on the formal and gestural clichés of that culture, though its opening drumming section struck me as a lift from Balanchine's *Union Jack*, the stiletto kinetics in the MacDonald of Sleet solo. But okay, young artists aren't always in control of their influences—they often need to take in order to learn to give.

The trouble with Ratmansky is that the taking is compulsive and willy nilly, so the dances look compulsive and willy nilly. One can find wit (if one must) in Ratmansky's raw fits and starts, but at this point in his development he's giving us little more than high-gloss pastiche punctuated with punchlines. Where's the voice? The quick? Except for a solo about a heron in *Dreams About Japan*, I haven't seen a single metaphor of distinction in Ratmansky's work. Nor has he shown a gift for imagery, or in lieu of that, a syntactical arc or ascent or even accumulation. There's a great deal of movement, yes, athletically energetic, strategically arranged, and always with pockets of Emptiness onstage (usually center stage). But there's no forward movement, if you know what I mean. You end in the place you began because, as a naïf of far greater sophistication once said, “There's no there there.” You can't reach into these ballets. You hang them on the fridge.

Ratmansky's latest work for NYCB, *Concerto DSCH*, premiered last spring. The score is again Shostakovich, the Piano Concerto No. 2 of 1957, and the ballet's title refers to a musical motif that

transliterated into Shostakovich's initials. So it's a reminder of a time when Soviet artists had to traffic in sly puns and codes, or else face the KGB. In fact, if the kids in *Bright Stream* decided to put on a show in a barn, this would be their ballet. It's Robbins's *Interplay* danced by Komsomols, full of pep and energy after a long day wielding hammer and sickle. It's hijinks at the potato picking. Because damned if Nijinska's tilt-headed maidens don't turn up again. All we're missing is neckerchiefs and braids. And what about those flexed-foot, pogo-stick hops and lifts? Cubist peasants or an Expressionist goosing? When some of the dancers drop to the floor to watch others dance, it's the same cozy commune that was hard to take in Robbins thirty years ago, though Ratmansky has added a belt of vodka, peppered with Deconstruction. And can this man make a ballet in which two women don't, at some point, hold hands and skip to the loo? Yes, but only when there aren't two women in the ballet.

The slow movement of *Concerto DSCH* has some pretty, floaty lifts, and also a more than passing resemblance to the slow movement of Paul Taylor's *Esplanade*, where reaching hands that don't connect suggest an isolating search for something. The movement further depends on Wendy Whelan's presence in it. The death glow of her role in *Russian Seasons* clings to her, and brings a wisp of meaning into choreography that's elliptical at best. Just as in *Seasons* she made a pointed departure, here she leaves with ghostly regret. Maybe it's political, a comment on mysterious Disappearance. Maybe it's fickle young love. Whatever—it's still cheap, these vague touches of mortality in otherwise mindless romping. And what bombastic mindless romping! We're getting a lot of facility without sensibility these days. It's fine in sport, but in ballet it's not something to wave around proudly. (Though if you're going to wave it around, NYCB's Ashley Bouder is the one to do it. Dancing the tomboy role in the ballet's hyperactive Allegro threesome, she's a shiny Tonka toy, a tractor ballet in one body, plowing through steps as if they're all the same step, revving the engine and ringing the bell.)

The strange thing is that Ratmansky's expressive means are not deepening as he adds dances to his resumé, they're thinning. It's fine if he's not into classical ballet's manicured gardens and moonlit Eros. If he's drawn to a different sort of playground or witching hour, go for it. But this airbrushed, dirt-floor utopia; this undifferentiated spin on a smiling, Slavic pastoral—it's the flip side of the Gulag. Maybe I'm missing a larger joke. But the odd abutments, space, and angles in this work, structural sleights that strike others as original, to my eye look glib and empty, not formalist but fake-out. Ratmansky is like Chauncey Gardiner in Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*. He hands non sequiturs to intellectuals, who hold them up as gems.

Across the plaza at American Ballet Theatre, Twyla Tharp returned with an MGM roar called *Rabbit and Rogue*. I've been off Tharp for some time, bothered by the cliché and sheer calculation of her 2002 Broadway show *Movin' Out*, dance narrative reduced to its lowest common denominator. I chose not to see her latest show, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, which was set to songs by Bob Dylan, and was not a success. And when ABT revived Tharp's *Baker's Dozen* at City Center last fall, I found it precious, that jazz-shoe attitudinizing, dancers all Annie Hall and la-di-da, so trippingly wiggling and squiggling in their Robert-Redford-as-Jay-Gatsby summer whites with leggings. Well, it was a moment (1979). You had to be there (I wasn't). Then again, Tharp made *Baker's Dozen* for her own little company, not ABT, which has never been an attitudinizing bunch.

Like a scary version of Alice down the rabbit hole, Tharp has been dropping into ABT since 1976, when she made *Push Comes to Shove* for the company. Her choreographic visitations have had varying results over the years, but they've always tended to hone in on the company's virtuoso men, where the energy is. With *Rabbit and Rogue*, Tharp seems to have come full circle. Just as *Push Comes to Shove* was a portrait of ABT at a particular moment in its history—the company suddenly home to the Russian defector and megatechnician Mikhail Baryshnikov, who'd come West in search of just such roles—so *Rabbit and Rogue* is a portrait of ABT now: a classical dance company

struggling to survive in a pop culture dominated by the blockbuster mentality.

Rabbit and Rogue is a blockbuster ballet. I don't think I've ever seen Tharp fill the huge Met stage the way she does here, whether there's one person up there or the whole cast of twenty-two. The Twenties and the Thirties, silents and talkies, schtick, screwball, screen sirens, and matinee idols—this is, of course, Tharp's home territory, her stomping ground, though thankfully, she's left her "stompers" (dancers in running shoes) at the door. *Rabbit and Rogue* has drive and cool and night. It's a Tharp fever dream, akin to her *Known by Heart*, a small-scale work she made for ABT in 1998, and coming from the same Kubla Khan cavern in her subconscious, imagery not forced out but floating up from the matrix, embedded in atmosphere. This is part of what's wonderful about *Rabbit and Rogue*—its light touch, so hard to do in a work of such scale and display.

That the ballet is about Tinseltown—the collective history that flickered into existence in America's movie palaces, a cinematic universal—is telegraphed even before the curtain comes up. The score was composed by Danny Elfman, a Hollywood veteran with a long list of credits, including collaboration with the director Tim Burton (who has a Grand Guignol sensibility not unlike Tharp's). I'm not usually a fan of this sort of crossover. Movie music is not structured for dancing. It tends to be repetitive and sentimental, with waves of swelling grandiosity. When it's better than that, it's moody and recessive, with no clear rhythmic pulse (unless the pulse is borrowed from Philip Glass). Elfman has come up with a twinkling, shearing, momentous score, washed in transparency by gamelan instrumentation, taking urgency from a ticking understory (the stopwatch, the sprockets), and containing one big, luxe theme he brings back here with a wink, there with a sigh, now with a Cinemascope crescendo. He's having fun painting sound with broad strokes dipped in twilight (and also Stravinsky and Bernstein and Reich). Is it great music? No. A great aural space for Tharp's dance? Yes.

The costume designer Norma Kamali dresses the dancers for the silver screen: they're in black or white, trimmed in silver or sprinkled with paillettes that shine like diamonds and remind us of the stardust glow of old movies, the mother-of-pearl gleam on marceled hair and in ingénue eyes. And if you've still missed the point, look at their pointes: not pink satin but, one more time, silver. The lighting designer Brad Field aerates the space in dust-mote shades of gray, giving us film-projector funnels, light-shaft cathedrals inside black walls, the soundstage closed, the sun shut out. It's about light from within: spot, lime, gels, cels, silver nitrate, platinum rinse, *roll 'em*.

There isn't just one star on this stage, either. The Misha days are long gone and ABT is now a company of virtuoso men. I like that Tharp split the billing and put two men at the top, *Rogue* and *Rabbit*. Who are they? On first viewing, I felt I needed to know. On second viewing, who knows and who cares? They're leading men, battling egos, one senior, one junior, each fighting for the spotlight. When a *Rag Couple* comes on, a trouping twosome sans trunk, she in a glittering net corset, vamping and bickering, we know where we are. They're doyennes of the *Majestics*, those big, beautiful stops on America's vaudeville circuits, shades of Keith-Orpheum, the houses that gave way in the late Twenties to film, when, as June Havoc once told me, "Vaudeville dropped dead in the middle of the street." Killed by celluloid. And it's not just footlights and film up there, it's cartoons—Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes, the bop on the head, the hunk to the rescue.

And Charlie Chaplin, Frankenstein, the Hulk. Tharp asks her leading men to slide effortlessly in and out of type and stereotype, to run the gamut of great entertainers, their classical carriage melting into monster silhouettes, pumped up into vain, steroidal spitting. Indeed, there's a *Matrix*-like wiring beneath the skin of this ballet, and every once in a while the men blow a fuse, go haywire. *Rabbit and Rogue* is funny, but more than that, it's fun. Tharp has left her signature hostility at the door, and brings on the dancers—solos, duets, trios, the corps, halved, quartered, coupled—with easy-going aplomb and a gorgeous eye. A line of girls in black are star-struck innocents to *Rogue*'s carnival barker. The *Rag Couple* is backed by chorines, dancers in black bikinis. And what are those

couples in black sarongs? Extras from a Hope-and-Crosby “Road” movie? Dancers emerge from vertical slits in a drop at the back, black seams in reality, as if they’re coming out of the past, or up from R.E.M. sleep, a fluttering synaptic event. And when the Gamelan Couple appears about halfway through—dressed in white and overtly classical, the woman wearing a goddess tunic belted *à la Grecque*—a white corps follows in their wake, and the ballet lifts and calms, becomes ravishing.

In so much of her work for ballet Tharp has been self-consciously academic. Or she has been self-consciously anti-classical, bullying the lexicon. In *Rabbit and Rogue* self-consciousness drops away. She handles the corps with affection and with a startling symmetry from which she draws power. It’s as if she’s given in to an ideal she feared and thus scoffed, an ideal that affords a whole new view—but demands love. Her corps patterns have an in-the-zone flow, but also space and poise, as if she doesn’t want to jostle the invention. It’s this corps that gives *Rabbit and Rogue* equilibrium, a brimming, swimming quality of flux within a matterless imaginative world. I love how the black box, Hot Box atmosphere gives way to snowcap fantasy. This is what movies before color were all about: gods and monsters, film noir and Shangri-La. When the white corps comes out in pairs, following the Gamelan Couple, refracting them and then swirling into a flurry, it’s the hookah, the Himalayas, the Kingdom of the Shades—a classical white act in an RKO cloud. It’s cigarette smoke curling into the projection light while the boss views the dailies. *Rabbit and Rogue* is Tharp’s own *Lost Horizon*. How marvelous she finally found it.

Could she have done it without dancers like these? Paloma Herrera and Maria Ricetto both had turns as the Gamelan lead, and both looked beautifully aloof, Olympian. As the woman in the Rag Couple—a tarty zoom-in—Gillian Murphy was all knees and elbows, sawdust and glitter, where Kristi Boone was slinkier, more stylized. But the real show is *Rogue*. The first cast was Ethan Stiefel, a superbly calibrated dancer. Underlying his beach-boy blond elegance is a technical infrastructure, a precision instrument that can correct itself mid-spin or while landing. Even when tired he can pull flash out of his hat and it’s real, always within the lineaments of classicism. He sharpens a ballet. Here, Tharp takes juice from Stiefel’s circuitry, and plays with his precision silhouette as if it’s Silly Putty. You can see why he inspires her. As the second-cast *Rogue*, Marcelo Gomes—taller, darker, plumier—is more of a classic ham, hilariously full of himself. I think Elfman’s score, the scale of it, actually fits him better. But both *Rogues* are terrific: Stiefel like lightning in the phone line, and Gomes, a lustrous come-on, ready for his close-up.

Meanwhile, down in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Ballet, the young Canadian choreographer Peter Quanz debuted a ballet called *Jupiter Symphony*, set to Mozart’s Symphony in C, No. 41. How ballsy, to go for Mozart in his C range, which is Mozart at ground zero. And how intelligent, setting himself this challenge: to meet Mozart’s ineffable vertical metric with the heavier, horizontal course of the human body. The chilly mathematics of Mozart pull a choreographer into a place of objectivity, the springboard for a more difficult kind of poetry. There’s no time to worry about meaning with a capital M—no time for confessions or effusions. Just keep up with the genius, that’s more than enough.

Quanz, who’s twenty-eight, stripped the wings from the Academy of Music stage and in bare space had his designers unfurl a long, wide, white sheet from fly to floor, upstage to downstage, so the space feels like a lab, or a strange catwalk where something special is occurring for our observation. It’s a framing of a ballet I’ve never seen before—virginal, pristine, as if Quanz is returning to root chemical structures, the hydrogens and carbons from which balletic life springs.

There’s a studied quality to *Jupiter Symphony*, a spatial trance or enchantment that holds you at arm’s length even as it invites the eye in. Quanz is listening to Mozart’s music, taking energy from it, but he isn’t under its spell. You feel him held instead by another idea—or ideal. It’s something to do with the spatial nature of ballet, the way one pattern conjures another, the way they grow into a truth, and suddenly, a world. These are American dancers, but halfway through the ballet, in the

glamorous use of the back, the hauteur of the spacing, the keen stillness around arabesques, I felt I was at the Paris Opera—that European feeling of a sculpture garden in summer.

Amid many effortless, shifting symmetries and provocative asymmetries, I was struck by one moment in particular. The women were in lines at the sides of the stage, all of them weight forward in a lunge, croisé fourth, their arms stretched *à la seconde*. Quanz asked for a pulse in the port de bras, but not the one we always see, that winglike echo of Odette, pushing from the upper arm through the elbow. And not the one we sometimes see in Balanchine, a wave through the wrist. No, it was simply a stretch in the fingers. Only that. Yet so lovely, fragile, and flooding the way it filled the stage with fresh life, the translucence of opening buds, emerging nymphs. “The force,” Dylan Thomas famously wrote, “that through the green fuse drives the flower.”

At the end of the ballet, when the women in pink tutus mix with cavaliers dressed in green and brown, one realizes Quanz has indeed given us flowers, a ballet with roots in the French gardens of classical dance. If I had to sum it up in a sentence or two? Long-stemmed roses tossed on clean white sheets. The nature of culture. *Jupiter Symphony* is the work of an artist emerging from apprenticeship, examining his love of the art from a critical distance. I admire his balance, and await the moment he is ready to lose balance. In the meantime Quanz has given us a classical dance that looks like no other and references no other. It’s that rarest flower, the one you won’t find in any field guide.

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

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 September 2008, on page 32

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