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Dance

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Wall of thorns

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On American Ballet Theatre's *Sleeping Beauty* at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

“In front of each fairy was a golden plate and a golden casket made to hold her knife, fork and spoon. These caskets were beautifully carved and engraved, and each one was of a different shape... . they were the King’s presents to the fairy godmothers.”

—C. S. Evans, *The Sleeping Beauty*

In the same time and place that the Imperial goldsmith Carl Fabergé was making incomparable eggs, flowers, and follies for Czar Alexander III and Nicholas II after him, a Frenchman named Marius Petipa was making incomparable ballets for the Czar’s Imperial Theatre. As maître de ballet for forty years, until his retirement in 1903, Petipa made over fifty classical dance entertainments—long evenings, history tells us, filled with magical effects that included fountains spouting, fires burning, oceans roaring (nothing was too expensive for a Czar). Of all these ballets only a handful survived. Of this handful, the most important was *The Sleeping Beauty*.

It is hardly more than a coming-out party gone wrong and set right. Hence the story’s stress on table appointments, gifts, and godmothers, only these godmothers are fairies. And yet it is also a Fabergé egg of a ballet, a chased and trellised confection that opens upon a tiny kingdom, a glittering realm where classical dancing is cradled, then nestled in thorn, then crowned. Premiered in St. Petersburg at the Mariinsky Theatre in 1890, the ballet of *The Sleeping Beauty* is a simple story told in steps and symbols, though its score by Tchaikovsky, which seems to flash and flow like spun gold from a wheel, is not simple.

Tchaikovsky was taking direction from Petipa, composing on short order, yet serving up structured measures and melodies (soufflés in sunrooms), and consequently the unabridged score of *The Sleeping Beauty* is massive, a musical kingdom in itself, complete with unvisited turrets and forgotten passageways. “Tchaikovsky added, wrote in, threw out,” George Balanchine says in the book *Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky*. “[He] didn’t even orchestrate some of the numbers, they were written simply for piano.” This means that those who restage the ballet have plenty of extra music to choose from should they wish to tinker with the tale.

Most have the good sense to leave the surviving Petipa numbers alone, and if tinkering is done (say, updating the story to a more modern time) it happens in the space around these islands of choreography. Points of departure in stagings through the years tend to occur at the entrances and exits in both the Prologue and Act One. In Act Two, Prince Désiré’s hunting party—his aristocratic entourage, his curious ennui—is often prey to revision. And in Act Three, the lead-up to the Awakening (the kiss) inspires endless futzing, as does the number of divertissements at the wedding.

“Petipa’s *Sleeping Beauty* was sheer genius,” Balanchine, another genius, has said. “But if I do *Sleeping Beauty* [which he never did] ... I’ll have to make additions, cuts, things like that. Ballet isn’t a museum, where a painting can hang for a hundred or two hundred years.”

And yet, when it comes to *The Sleeping Beauty*, balletomanes want that museum. To put a finer point on it, we look for a reverent, or relevant, response to the place in history this ballet holds—its articulations so richly worked in Petipa’s choreography; its images of roses, spindles, and spinning wheels the subtext of so many steps; and its stress on sunlight, lightness of step, and a light touch in the storytelling tantamount, for so many, to an aesthetic conversion. Or we look for our own history—something of that first experience of *The Sleeping Beauty*, which reads, with its golden shapes and forms, like an invitation to the kingdom of classical dance. So a new production of *The Sleeping Beauty* can inspire an almost irrational expectation coupled with harsh scrutiny. Certainly *Beauty* comes in for more judgment than the latest *Swan Lake*, where the psychosexual questions in its story and score leave dark spaces for interpretive play. Darkness in *The Sleeping Beauty* is concentrated in the person of Carabosse, the antisocial, uninvited fairy who casts an evil spell over Aurora’s cradle. Otherwise, the ballet is beatific, in such perfect plumb it appears to float.

American Ballet Theatre premiered a new *Sleeping Beauty* last June at the Metropolitan Opera House, and it didn’t quite float. Staged by the artistic director Kevin McKenzie, the former ABT ballerina Gelsey Kirkland, and the dramaturg Michael Chernov, the production had two immediate goals. The first, which we’re seeing in every full-length ballet made in the iPod age, was to come in under three hours with only one intermission. Thankfully, the intermission comes at the right place: the kingdom’s sink into slumber. The second goal was to flesh out the ballet during the hundred-year sleep, giving a more dynamic sense of story to Prince Désiré’s rescue of Aurora. For purists, of course, both these goals are unnecessary and even intrusive. It didn’t help that on opening night the production was not ready to be seen: spacing was cramped, the staging was busy, and the company was self-conscious with nerves. Three nights later, somewhat reblocked and streamlined, the ballet began to breathe.

ABT’s new production respects tradition and has no huge gaffes. Rather there is an accumulation of visual irritations and needless additions. Would the baby Aurora really be carried aloft and passed around? When the fairies’ wands are held by a nursemaid, one wonders, Should magic wands be touched by human hands? And why is the Act One Garland Dance performed by so few people? This curvaceous expression of community should be a big set piece, and ABT has the corps to do it. In Act Two, while I have no problem with the introduction of an enchanted river whose waters, when drunk by the Prince, enable him to see his fate (Aurora’s castle in the distance), I do think the addition of fairy knights who then carry him aloft in a dream sequence (prelude to the Vision Scene) is just too much parallel action with the Prologue. And as Joel Lobenthal wrote in the *New York Sun*, “Does a vision need to be preceded by a dream?” In Act Three’s Wedding celebration, I don’t terribly mind the cutting of divertissements, but I do mind the sparse number of subjects in the room, and also the fact that Aurora’s parents, like Moses at the Promised Land, had to stay back in the previous century. Their absence robs the wedding of continuity and thus a certain species of joy.

Perhaps the loudest objections attended the sets and costumes. The truth is, *The Sleeping Beauty* doesn’t need much beyond a castle, a cradle, a crown, wings for the fairies, vines, a wood, and some mist. (Two of the most beguiling versions of *Beauty* are productions restaged for film: the starkly minimalist 1955 kinescope of the Royal Ballet with Margot Fonteyn; and the Kirov’s surreal treatment of 1963, with Alla Sizova and Yuri Soloviev.) I wish ABT had stuck with Zack Brown for sets and costumes, the designer who brought such intelligent tonality and historical detail to the company’s *Swan Lake* and *Raymonda*. Instead, ABT went Broadway with the choice of Willa Kim (costumes) and Tony Walton (sets), and the explosion of ideas never pulls into one ruling idea.

Kim's costumes are glitzy and over-the-top (that kilted Scot in the purple boa!), or they are so demure as to be illegible without opera glasses. And Walton, he was said to be taking Arthur Rackham's famous illustrations as a point of departure, but Rackham's inkily kinetic orbs and swoops are present in only two scrim—the very effective vines. Otherwise, millennial Disney seems to be the model. And while that chunky castle is toadstool cute, it takes up too much stage space (hence the pruning of the Garland Dance), though not as much as the dour Medieval receiving hall of the Prologue. The Act Three chamber of turquoise, snow white, and silver is Versailles in a disco ball—an eyepopper. So design-wise the production is all over the map.

And yet there are pockets of vision. Bright and alive is the small scene in front of the curtain when royal subjects are caught with a spindle: the king and queen appear, beautifully gaslit by the footlights, vivid in robes of royal blue glittering with gold, he pantomiming “death” and she miming “lenience,” and the silhouette of the scene is Arthurian, straight out of a storybook, Errol Flynn in the air. Also lovely are the deep-woods greens that end Act One, mossy and ghostly beyond black vines. And the wood in Act Two, when mist creeps in and the lighting shimmers the dapple effect suggests energies coalescing, destiny coming to pass. In these moments one feels the presence of another author, J. R. R. Tolkien.

Such an evocation is not without logic, given the influence of Richard Wagner's *Ring* on Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the man who prepared *Beauty's* scenario for Petipa and Tchaikovsky. As Tchaikovsky's friend Hermann Laroche wrote, “The basic motive of *The Sleeping Beauty* is similar to that of the story of Brunnhilde, who is protected by fire; she is one of the innumerable embodiments of the earth which lays winter to rest and is awakened by the kiss of spring; Siegfried and Prince Désiré in this respect are one and the same.”

I'm guessing the ABT team bumped up Désiré's role in order to bring the ballet into sync with today's pop-cult mythologies, our stress on fantastic (and too often sadistic) individual trial and triumph. The Tolkien echo is pointed when Désiré, approaching the wall of thorns, gets caught in a silver spider's web, like Frodo on the mountain path to Mordor. As does Frodo, he has to be rescued, in this case, by the Lilac Fairy. The action grows murky when Carabosse appears suspended from the fly, the spinner of the web who seems, I think, to commit suicide. The staging isn't clear, and omits the powerful face-off between Lilac and Carabosse, the “we meet again” polarity of good and evil without which there is no story. And again a redundancy: though it's exquisite, why introduce a web when it is the wall of thorns that snags and kills young princes? ABT's previous *Beauty*, the cold and clinical Kenneth MacMillan production of 1987, had little to say about the ballet. This production says too much. It is too hands-on, with not enough trust in the cognitive and poetic leap.

ABT did leap, however, in its casting. The big news of this *Beauty* was the announcement that the soloist Veronika Part would dance the opening night Aurora. Part has become controversial. Her fans revere her for what she is (deep and vulnerable); her detractors insult her for what she isn't (fast and invulnerable). Her every performance is an event. At the same time, because she is so intensely watched and judged, her every performance is also an existential test, the bar set higher for Part than for any other dancer in New York. And still she takes the stage without camouflage or cheating or sell, bringing before us classical dancing in all its purity and poetry and risk.

When Part was cast as Aurora, some of her critics were actively hoping she'd fail—a level of partisan nastiness I've never seen in twenty-five years of reviewing. Even among those who love her dancing, some thought she was miscast. Aurora is an allegro role and Part is an adagio dancer. I myself was thrilled at the casting, not because I had hoped for it—I assumed Part would do Lilac Fairy—but when you adore a dancer you want to see them in everything: *What will she do with it?* I missed the preview of *Beauty* excerpts at the season's opening gala, but heard that Part was rattled in the Rose Adagio and lost her balances. Knives sharpened.

Part has a tendency of fluffing first tries then coming back on high beam, and on opening night she came back and triumphed. Not with an imitation Aurora—bouncy and overbright—and not with theatrical finessing, flash thrown onto the end of ho-hum phrases. She triumphed with simplicity, with petite batterie of feathery loft, and with a clean, thoroughly achieved classical line (no decorative embellishment, no girlish mannerisms). In the intermission, Irina Kolpakova, one of the world's great Auroras, described Part's performance as "like milk." Not cream—though Part's aplomb has often been called creamy—but lighter, modest, milk. I can't help thinking of Thomas Hardy's milkmaid princess, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, with "just that touch of rarity about her."

As always, Part's first appearance, her entrance in Act One, lifted the ballet to a higher and, because of her height, stranger place. She seemed born not of this king and queen but of vine-covered history. Her climactic port de bras in the Rose Adagio—dipping, reaching, rising over a turning spindle of bourrées (Petipa's brilliance: he's hinting at her fate just minutes away)—really was petaled, a long-stemmed rose ecstatically opening. And in the Vision Scene, no one performs that reaching piqué arabesque which whorls 'round into an extension *en avant* with the centrifugal pull and plumb of Part, creating a wave, opening space. Notice how Petipa reverses this move in the Wedding Pas. Facing the Prince, holding his hand, Aurora unfurls a *développé en avant* on pointe, arches her upper body backward from it, then flick, she pivots into an attitude that has them both facing the audience. It's a cantilevered strength move, very difficult, and where most dancers lay back stiffly, Part's arch sinks back into dream, revisiting the spell and giving us a glimpse of the curve, stress, and bevel that held her in that hundred-year sleep, and still holds in classical dancing. This is Part's power: radiant, radical imagining. In an era of allegro, she emerges—like something in a fairy tale—from the rhythms, the river, of adagio, with its rising inner life and ardor arrested, explored.

After Part has been in a ballet, it can be difficult to see others come in. It isn't a question of interpretation, rather of dimension. Part has a way of opening the physical parameters of a role, not through conventional virtuosity, such as adding extra turns on a pirouette (her doubles are calla lilies; don't ask for triples), but by enlarging the measure of give within a phrase: deepening the pliés; hitting the high note of a *développé* with singingly perfect placement; bringing a blossom, a volumetric expansion, to a seemingly thin linearity. Part is a tautology: If you can't see what makes her great you're not really fit to judge her.

My second Aurora was Gillian Murphy. She is loved. She's a redhead and has the bluish luminescence that redheads with their pale skin take from the lighting gels. And she's a student of the late Melissa Hayden, ballet's patron saint of go-for-broke. Indeed, when Murphy bounds out in Act One it's a go-with-what-you've-got entrance: jumpy, bouncy, barreling almost, Aurora straight from the soccer field. I'm kidding. But do the gifts of the five fairies—sincerity, fervor, charity, joy, valor—only add up to a physical display? Murphy has long legs with bumpy knees, which you wouldn't notice if she were a little more turned out. She rides high on those long legs and that's nice. Her arabesque is pretty, even when the lift in her leg levers her torso forward—then she resembles a bird in a nest (a wood thrush, let's say). She's fearless in turns, throwing off triple pirouettes the way New York women hail cabs, stepping into traffic hardly looking. She has all the speed you could wish for. What's elusive is the song within the dance. Murphy compensates with head wags and chin tucks, a coyness that really should have been coached out of her by now. Still, she danced herself into a zone and her last solo in Act Three was just right—collected, soft, finally lyric.

On closing night I was struck by how correct and honorable Paloma Herrera's reading of Aurora was. It was more English than American, her emotional containment quite strict, her technical command one of clarity within rules. Herrera can have an odd dispassion about her, a sense of freedom tamped down—like Audrey Hepburn in the beginning of *Roman Holiday*, coming to grips with life as a princess. Herrera hasn't found a way to feel freedom in her prowess, to explore what

might be there beyond spin and balance. I think that's why so little happiness comes off her, why her Aurora is such a dutiful girl. Herrera is at a point in her career where she needs a demanding and brilliant coach. If she doesn't get one she'll continue to be a straight-A Aurora, but we all know straight A's aren't enough, especially in ballet. She wants more. We want more.

As Prince Désiré, Marcelo Gomes on opening night was a burstingly elegant presence. He doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve; you feel it big within his chest. He's all about commitment—to his ballerina, to classical comportment. His partnership with Veronika Part is one of the pleasures of our time. And it's elating to see his big-boned masculinity completed in Petipa's rose-gold curves and verticals, to get such brio—the roar in the shell—from these 117-year-old forms.

Ethan Stiefel, paired with Gillian Murphy, danced with such panache one had to laugh. He captured Désiré in leaps and turns like silver arrows, but even more in the way he stuck his landings, as if bobbles were plebeian, meanwhile flourishing a princely hand as if it were the feather in his cap (if he wore a cap). Stiefel brings a cool intelligence to the stage and it's part of his refinement, a Fabergé grace that comes with maturity and is his alone.

Angel Corella, Paloma Herrera's prince, was great in the role from the waist up, where he looked rapt and aristocratic. It's waist down that he's inconsistent, and the night I saw him his legs and feet were doughy, lacking charge. I have no idea why he's a thoroughbred one night and a plug the next, only that this is so and that it's tolerated. But a plug Désiré with a stumpy arabesque, a draggy back leg in jeté, a crummy turnout *à la seconde*, and throwing himself at the music—this is not what we expect to see in our leading men, let alone a star.

Throughout the run, the dancing of the fairy solos was impressive. Clearly they'd been well coached, and, while some of my colleagues thought them overcoached, I liked seeing the carving on these little solos, each a golden casket of a different shape. Sarah Lane stood out with a classical deportment, eyes lifted to the balcony, that is charmingly old-school. Hee Seo and Zhong-Jing Fang danced with delicacy. Kristi Boone, wherever she turned up, lit up the stage. She was a zoom-in Fairy of Fervor, a haughty hoot of a White Cat (one suddenly wished for the entire variation). While I would have loved to see her try Lilac (Maria Bystrova, too), when Gelsey Kirkland was injured during a rocket-fire exit Boone did get a small shot at Carabosse, taking over in Act Two. She didn't have time to apply the sinister stage makeup, so we got an evil fairy with a beautiful face.

I prefer a glamorous Carabosse to a greasepaint crone—a vain diva makes a flintier, sparkier match for Lilac. But Kirkland, not seen on this stage for twenty years, burned it up, no rockets necessary. She's still a slip of a woman, perhaps the tiniest Carabosse in the history of the ballet. And she's still a swift and merciless theater beast. Here was Carabosse as Kabuki ancient—a fairy of scary slither and envenomed eyes. “What the hammer? what the chain?/ In what furnace was thy brain?” It takes heat to forge a golden casket.

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

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