Ballez Talks Back

Janet Werther


The Ballez is an experimental dance company that uses ballet vocabulary to tell queer stories while simultaneously queering the ballet genre. Combining its techniques promiscuously with other styles, the company eschews ballet’s parameters of expertise, refusing to adhere to its gendered or bodily norms and expectations. Sleeping Beauty & the Beast is the second full-length Ballez.¹ In the performance, I played the role of Little Red Riding Hood as part of the gender-diverse, multiracial, variously sized and trained cast that premiered the completed work at La Mama in the spring of 2016.

CHOREOGRAPHING A QUEER FANTASY

Sleeping Beauty and the Beast begins in unison with the corps de ballet circling over and under taut cords of yarn, weaving the fabric of the universe in which the narrative will take place. Beyond its symbolic and narrative functions, this is the hardest dance I have ever performed. In this segment, ballet technique is not beholden to abstract ideals of line; it is in service of a full-bodied practice of weaving. If a leg extension is not high enough to clear the web of yarn, the dancer will knock over a chair through which the yarn was weaved. If dancers fail to crouch low enough while slithering under the yarn, the spindle might catch. The relations between bodies in the corps are also functional, not decorative: without maintaining both spacing and body angles, dancers will collide and the entire apparatus will collapse. This dance is literally breathtaking: the audience holds its collective breath, hoping alongside us that nothing will go awry.

Following the opening ritual, the Ballez retells the Sleeping Beauty fairytale as a coming-out story. Aurora (Madison Krekel) is the daughter of a wealthy Lower East Side sweatshop owner who falls in love with a butch union organizer and labor agitator (Jules Skloot). Endowed with femme sensibilities by the faerie fashion
The corps de ballet performing the weaving dance in *Sleeping Beauty & the Beast*. Photo: Theo Coté, Courtesy of La MaMa.
designers, Aurora is attracted to the working-class self-sufficiency and masculinity of the organizer and other working women of the factory. When Aurora and her motley court wake up in 1993, one hundred years after pricking her finger, we awaken in the LES queer club scene. Riffing on the fairy tale wedding attendees from the canonical Petipa ballet, we experiment with gender roles and kinky sexual subtext, such as BDSM sex, while caring for and partying with the faeries. Reincarnated as Dying Swans in the throes of the AIDS crisis, the three original faeries are joined by many others. One by one they fall, unable to rise. In the concluding moments, we dance a ridiculous, highly presentational number to Roy Orbison’s “Crying.” Skloot (as The Beast) lip-synchs in drag king style, and we are joined by the three faeries in a final winged incarnation as angels. The dance is an absurdist reminder of the affective labor and working conditions of dancers from this era. It seems unimaginable to me that my elders continued performing night after night after burying their friends and loved ones. I am awestruck by their dedication to their craft and each other.

DONE INTO (LACK OF) DISCOURSE

We stood in a circle as Katy ostensibly apologized, but I heard her words as a call to action. She was not apologizing for the work—or its reception—but for the possibility that we, the performers, had not seen this storm brewing. After weeks of celebratory pre-press coverage and more than two years of a caring, humorous, and collaborative rehearsal process, negative reviews were a shock to our system. Katy reminded us that our goal was never to squeeze into the normative framework of the ballet, but rather to explode it. Like the Union Organizer/Beast character, our fearless leader was not asking for reform. She was agitating for revolution. In a version of this pep talk for distribution on social media, Katy declared, “If it all falls apart in the end, if we blow this all up from the inside out, if we destroy your belief systems about what ballet is, can and should be, THEN and only THEN, will we have done our work.” Let’s burn it down, I thought.

Negative press, especially from the New York Times, has become a badge of honor in the downtown scene. Our experience of unsympathetic reviewing felt incongruous, however, after the positive media blitz in the run up to the show. Beyond a warm preview by Gia Kourlas in the Times, we were featured in such far-flung media outlets as The Huffington Post, Salon, and even Teen Vogue. In some cases the pre-press was thoughtful and incisive. But overall, the preview tone was uncritically celebratory. Several publications relied on interviews, particularly with Katy but occasionally including other members of the collective. Thanks to these interviews, the digisphere emphatically announced our intentions in our own words.
This pre-celebratory aura dimmed slightly when the reviews came out. The disjuncture between the reviewers’ perceptions and our reality was maddening. Fortunately, as a dancer at the apex of a career fueled by anger at those who would dismiss or underestimate me, I dance best when dancing furiously. Nonetheless, these reviews were vexing on two primary counts. First, some reviewers articulated their very apt observations of the work and its methodology in gratuitously negative terms. Regrettably, Elizabeth Zimmer and Brian Siebert both saw our work as “bad” ballet rather than good Ballez. Siebert’s review in the *Times* criticized the production for refusing to conceal the labor of our dancing. He lambasted our visible efforts to “work with what [we] have,” lamenting our failure to “relax.” What Siebert forgets, however, is that this visible effort *queers* and critiques ballet norms. Where classical ballet obscures the effort of skillful dancing, affecting weightlessness and ease in the most challenging maneuvers, Ballez sets out to foreground the hard labor of dancing bodies, celebrating the effort of virtuosic movement. Additionally, this spectacle of effort distances Ballez from the post-Judson aesthetic of nonchalance and the hegemony of release techniques as the kinesthetic foundation of “downtown” dance, thus refusing either genre’s norms.

Zimmer’s *Village Voice* review likewise described a key kinesthetic choice with incisive detail only to assert it as a point of failure. She notes that the factory workers “seem to have arrived out of a 1930s Martha Graham dance rather than a nineteenth-century ballet.” Indeed, the factory dance self-consciously appropriates classical modern dance motifs and techniques. But our movements were predicated on a Humphrey-style “fall and recovery” schema, not on Graham’s “contraction and release.” Even more disappointing in Zimmer’s critique was her privileging of historical accuracy in the context of what was clearly a trans-temporal fairytale. By marking our modern dance movement as inaccurate, Zimmer fails to analyze how including this technique *queers* the dramaturgical context of the performance. This section’s function is twofold: to perform the very critique of ballet’s conventions that classical modern dance performed in its time, and to position the factory women as foremothers of the leftist workers’ dance movement in the 1920s and 30s.

Despite its lesser importance as a publication, the most egregious review was offered by Barnett Serchuk for *Broadway World*, in which a misunderstanding of the work was combined with femme-phobia and a lack of knowledge regarding camp aesthetics. Serchuk seemed vaguely aware that the work was intended as a parody or send-up, but he was at a complete loss to comprehend the uniquely queer blend of adulation, failure, and shame that combine with parody to produce our unique camp style. While I vehemently disagree with Serchuk that the faeries lack technical capacity, I further insist that to achieve the particular camp effect that Ballez relishes, the choreography *must* push the individual dancer to the edge of failure.
In good ballet, dancers do not allow themselves to fall out of a triple turn if they can safely land a double. They perform the most extreme technical feats that they can accomplish with ease. Good Ballez, however, performs an excess that insists that any turn is most exciting when we fear that the dancer might lose his or her balance. I would further suggest that Serchuk should reconsider his relationship to queer shame, as he seems particularly perturbed by the Scarlet Faerie’s (Charles Gowin’s) masterfully limp-wristed performance of effeminacy.5

In its broadest sense, the Ballez creates space for misfit queerdos trained in ballet, using a classical form in one of its canonical iterations for the purpose of disrupting those very norms. We engage overtly with narrative and representation for the explicit purposes of social justice. Suturing meticulously researched history with the grandest, most far-flung fantasy, we collaborate with the audience in order to produce and experience what Jill Dolan has called “utopia in performance.”6 For Dolan, as for the Ballez, these utopic moments (however brief and ultimately unsustainable) enable us to collectively rehearse our participation in a potential future that is more equitable and less painfully exclusionary. To fulfill the promise of such radical dance practices, however, we need to expand the critical discourse so that it approaches contemporary performance on its own terms, attending to the effects of a work’s tactical choices in the context of its unique dramaturgical logic. Despite our appropriation of ballet techniques, narratives, and fantasies, Sleeping Beauty & the Beast is not “bad ballet.” It is Ballez.

NOTES


JANET WERTHER is earning her PhD in theatre and performance at The Graduate Center, CUNY. She holds an MFA in dance from Sarah Lawrence College, and her writing has been published in Critical Correspondence and Studies in Musical Theatre. She has been a “ballezbian” since the autumn of 2013.