

Storytelling Through Dance

The art of dance began with man's most primitive efforts to tell stories. And if the array of terpsichorean work shown in New York this past month is any indication, storytelling remains a primary motivation for making dances. Eifman Ballet presented extravagant evening-length productions that told stories from classic literary works—Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Chekhov's *The Seagull*—and weaved the tales of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and ballet's *Giselle* into the biographical stories of real-life characters. Contemporary choreographer Amy Marshall made dances inspired by the stories of Joan of Arc and early-20th-century textile-mill workers from North and South Carolina. New York City Ballet offered a brand-new telling of *Romeo and Juliet*, while Ragamala used the actions and gestures of Bharatanatyam to tell tales of Hindu gods.

Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg

If you like your ballet big, broad, and over the top, with spectacular sets and costumes; lush, loud music; exaggerated pantomiming; and astounding physical technique approached with an extreme-sports sense of athletic adventure, then Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg is your cup of tea. And it won't be that wimpy-flavored green tea preferred by the health-conscious, but a deep, dark, rich black tea that will gratify your thirst for hedonistic excess.

In celebration of its 30th anniversary, Eifman Ballet presented an ambitious season at City Center (April 13–29), offering a gala evening of excerpts, the New York premiere of *The Seagull*, and performances of three of the troupe's most popular ballets—*Red Giselle* (1997), *Russian Hamlet* (2000), and *Anna Karenina* (2005)—all choreographed by Artistic Director Boris Eifman (with the exception of one piece on the gala program).

Though I attended three different performances and found them all absolutely electrifying and impressive in their dramatic clarity, there is a seen-one-seen-'em-all similarity to Eifman's ravishing renderings of high drama through startlingly expressive dance set to powerful selections of famous music. The ballets all include lots of inventively acrobatic pas de deux work in which the classical vocabulary is beautifully distorted, impassioned solos that fuse ballet and modern dance, and lively ensemble passages that borrow liberally from vernacular dance styles. In *Red Giselle*, the corps de ballet does a raucous, Gypsy-flavored hoedown, as well as a stylish Charleston. In *The Seagull*

they do hip-hop, while in *Anna Karenina* they transform into the moving train in front of which the heroine plunges to her suicidal death.

Amy Marshall Dance Company

Amy Marshall is an adept choreographer whose talent lies in her ability to evoke stimulating drama from basic pedestrian movements. The appealing evening of her choreography, presented by the Amy Marshall Dance Company at the Alvin Ailey Citigroup Theater (April 26–28), included two compelling story-based works and two less-successful pure-movement pieces.

Depicting the final days in the life of Joan of Arc, the ensemble work "Fire of the Dove" is solidly built out of a vocabulary of plain actions imbued with just a hint of stylization. The choreography's expressiveness, therefore, feels firmly rooted in real, elemental human behavior. Though Marshall makes exciting use of high lifts, they are often just punctuation for a choreographic phrase, the main event of which may be a simple raising of the arms.

With "Moonshine," a world premiere, Marshall offers a bit of Americana as she affectionately portrays a community of hard-working country folk in a charming episodic piece that feels like something Agnes de Mille might have choreographed. Marshall winsomely combines square-dance maneuvers, clogging steps, Keystone Kops-like fast-action comedy, the weighted movements of a large ensemble of suffering women, and the clumsily romantic courtship activities of young lovers—highlighted by Chad Levy's winning performance as a

clueless hick—to draw a moving historical portrait of life in the rural South.

"Metamorphosis," also a world premiere, is a dull group piece set to a highly textured original score by Marlon Cherry. There are all kinds of booms, tinkles, and snippets of melody floating around in the music, and the layerless choreography feels flat in comparison. The dance contains too many slow, plodding lunges and torso undulations done in unison with hands pressed into the lumbar region as if the performers were suffering from back pain.

With its bold athletic movements, "In Fieri" evokes a sharp, sassy attitude that is intermittently interrupted by a dorky, hands-on-the-shoulders, elbows-sticking-out arm move that undermines the work's hip quality.

New York City Ballet: 'Romeo + Juliet'

The spanking new production *Romeo + Juliet*, choreographed for New York City Ballet by Ballet Master in Chief Peter Martins, is a real snoozer. Presented at the New York State Theater (May 1–13), it features ghastly sets designed by Per Kirkeby and hideous costumes by Kirkeby and Kirsten Lund Nielsen. The ballet is brightened only by some nifty sword-fighting scenes, which were staged in association with Rick Washburn and Nigel Poulton, and a playful divertissement called "The Mandolin Dance," which was expertly performed by a quintet of young boys from the School of American Ballet.

Martins' choreography is a rhythmic bore: Every important step is placed squarely on the beat and, as nothing much happens off or in between the beats, the dancing has little sense of musical movement or urgency. Most of the time, the dancers are given too little to do: They walk around interminably and gesture here and there. The ballroom scene is deadly, and the extended mime sequences are completely devoid of kinetic interest.

Sean Suozzi made a dashing yet not quite youthful enough Romeo and sometimes appeared to be working too hard. He did everything very quickly and with too much attack. Tiler Peck found an effervescent innocence in her feisty, well-danced portrayal of Juliet.

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