

Tudor and Limon Celebrated

Signatures 08: Antony Tudor and José Limón 100th Birthday Celebration

New York Theatre Ballet

Florence Gould Hall

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by Susan Reiter

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The centennials of two major, and very different, 20th-century choreographers were celebrated with evident dedication and charming intimacy in this program. Given New York Theatre Ballet's longtime association with Antony Tudor's works, in meticulous stagings by former ABT principal and Tudor specialist Sallie Wilson, the evening was primarily devoted



to his dances. But the inclusion of Limón's unfamiliar and surprising "Mazurkas" was an intelligent complementary bit of programming. With the benefit of coaching by dancers who had worked closely with the choreographers themselves and are clearly able to convey their intentions, and the larger world of each dance, to today's dancers, the performances were notable for their unmannered transparency and touching attention to detail.

Limón's 1958 "Mazurkas," which served as the evening's appetizer, is an uncomplicated and sweetly open-hearted piano ballet to Chopin, and thus quite different from what one generally associated with the choreographer. He is better known for works with historical and/or dramatic impetus, in which he himself played a pivotal role and set himself up with equally potent antagonists. The day before this work had

its premiere at the American Dance Festival, he offered another new dance in that vein -- "Serenata," in which he and Pauline Koner portrayed lovers. But the Chopin work has an amiable, lilting folk flavor and ensemble spirit, and with its understated mood shifts, it focuses on simpler matters, steering clear of grandeur and heroics.

This "Suite from 'Mazurkas,'" staged by veteran Limón dancer Sarah Stackhouse, includes eight of the work's twelve sections. In a post-performance discussion, she explained that the work was inspired by the company's visit to Poland as part of a 1957 European tour, during which they paid a visit to Chopin's home. She described the individual sections as "little gifts" from the choreographer to each dancer who had been on that tour. Certainly Limón can be seen as being ahead of the curve in creating a Chopin piano ballet, something that became a more familiar type of dance about a decade later.

The dance's lilting, scooping phrases and unhurried momentum show Limon working with fertile, unforced invention within a deliberately confined vocabulary, but finding many charming and appealing variations within that circumscribed territory. Seven dancers -- three men, four women --- in simple, soft black costumes are introduced in the opening, and then are presented in varied, unpredictable configurations in subsequent sections evoking moods ranging from robust optimism to plaintive regret. Rie Ogura's pensive delicacy and fluent phrasing were notable in a solo, and Kyle Coffman's vibrancy and refinement made an impact amid a generally impressive male ensemble. The male trio, set to the well-known mazurka that accompanies the finale of Robbins' "Other Dances" as well as a section of "Les Sylphides," was pleasantly vigorous, if somewhat schematically structured. The women's quartet that followed featured scooping arms, gentle rondes de jambes and sideways leaps. Throughout, one sensed Limón carefully limiting his material, maximizing the possibilities within deliberately simple means. In that way, it occasionally evoked the touchingly innocent purity of Paul Taylor's "Aureole," and it's intriguing to wonder whether that choreographer, a regular presence at the American Dance Festival, had seen this work.

The opportunity to see "Jardin aux Lilas," Tudor's eternally potent 1937 masterwork, in a small theater was a great blessing, as its quiet gestures and glances could register fully without the dancers having to resort to over-emphatic efforts. This production is not a vehicle for star performances, but a most persuasive and moving interpretation of

Tudor's brilliant dramatic subtlety. The surging emotions coursing beneath the white gloves and decorous manners at this sorrowful garden party -- the sense of a young life about to be ruined, passions thwarted and true feelings submerged in the interest of propriety -- came through with vivid and heart-rending impact. The meticulous coaching of Sallie Wilson clearly gave the dancers a strong sense of who they were onstage and their specific relationship with each of the others. She enabled them to make the most of understated moments such as when Her Lover steals up behind her and Caroline is thrilled by his unexpected touch, or when the four central characters stand alongside each other, arms linked, and one is made all the more aware of the lack of equilibrium or satisfaction between them, despite this outward image of stability.

The performances were beautifully honest and always made one aware of how eloquently, and at times daringly, Tudor placed his movements within the Chausson music. Coffman gave a particularly fine interpretation of Her Lover, marked by restraint within his headlong, doomed efforts to reconnect with Caroline. Elena Zahlmann was a bit placid, but still convincingly conveyed a woman who finds herself powerless and submitting to larger social forces. Julie-Anne Taylor did not overplay the hauteur of the Episode in His Past, who can sometimes seem like a complete outsider, and her situation was wonderfully delineated by the way everyone else reacted to her, as well as by her own interludes of yearning.

During the post-performance talk, Zahlmann mentioned how Wilson "strict" about letting the choreography speak for itself without any overlay of acting, insisting that the dancers "stay with what we were given and let the character emerge from that." Clearly, they absorbed her coaching well and did her proud with this performance.

The two other, less frequently performed, Tudor works were the delightful 1953 bagatelle, "Little Improvisations," and the hilariously sardonic "Judgment of Paris." In the former, two winsome children use their imaginations and inventiveness to adopt various personas or appropriate more adult emotions and situations. Ogura and Mitchell Kilby avoided all hints of cuteness, rather evoking the poignancy in a work that captures the brief moment when life offers such carefree diversion and openness to possibility.

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NYTB has always done well by "Judgment of Paris," in which an increasingly soused customer at a clearly down-on-its-heels cafe is entertained (one uses that word in the most dubious sense) by a trio of weary, blowsy, seen-it-all gals in hilariously tacky get-ups who recognize the futility of their tired acts, yet continue going through the motions. Tudor's choice of music from "Threepenny Opera" -- in a piano four-hands version here excellently performed by Noriko Suzuki and Ferdy Tumakaka -- is a brilliant stroke, since the biting melodies add their own layer of cynical mockery. The props each "goddess" employs, along with deliberately minimal, mock-creaky steps, allude to glamour and grand-scale showbiz allure that they are all too aware they lack. Diana Byer's almost apologetic sweetness, and the moments of private delight she seemed to get from her own meager efforts, were a particular delight.

The well-planned program, and the expertly calibrated tone of each performance, made this a most successful and satisfying evening, and one that fulfilled an important historical mission as well. The excellent musical accompaniment by the pianists, for all the works except "Jardin," was an added pleasure.

Photo by Richard Termine: "Jardin aux Lilas"