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Rummaging for Repertory, City Ballet Jumps to Jazz

Character is fate, as Heraclitus put it, but for ballet companies, it's repertory that's fate: Without it, you don't have anything, no matter how good your dancers are.

Unfortunately, major choreographers are thin on the ground, which is why every company in the world today is desperately searching for old works

to rediscover or reinvent and new works that can attract an audience and stimulate its dancers for at least a season or two. No company has a more difficult balancing act to pull off in this regard than New York City Ballet. Without its vast heritage of Balanchine and Robbins works, it has no real point, yet, as its director, Peter Martins, argues reasonably, it can't be just a museum. To address this problem, Mr. Martins has himself made well over 50 ballets since the late 70's (generally, alas, of an increasing emptiness); he's given opportunities to a sizable array of mostly disappointing choreographers; he's whipped up festivals and celebrations—the current 50th anniversary hoopla seems to have been going on for the entire half-century. He's staged a new *Sleeping Beauty* of modest virtues and the recent new *Swan Lake* of virtues even more modest. So what next?

For a second time, he has brought in Wynton Marsalis to collaborate on a new work. In 1993, they came up with *Jazz*, and have now revived it on a program that included their new piece, *Them Twos*, and another new piece, *Duke!*, to Ellington music. It's a perfect novelty evening for a Lincoln Center crowd that idolizes Mr. Marsalis, the Pavarotti of jazz. But does this collaboration reflect a profound affinity between Mr. Martins and Mr. Marsalis? Definitely not—in neither ballet does the music stretch Mr. Martins as a dance maker, nor has the challenge of working with dancers led Mr. Marsalis to anything remarkable.

Jazz is indeed set to jazz music, and not mere jazz but jazz with High Intentions—the various sections have titles like "The Scent of Democracy" and "Trail of Tears—Across Death Ground," and the choreography is correspondingly embarrassing (though there's one interesting duet that cleverly contrasts Wendy Whelan's strong and highly articulated attack with Peter Boal's softer lyricism). Throughout, Mr. Marsalis' brilliant trumpet from the pit rides roughshod over the dancing, and the ballet is further undermined by the execrable costumes, which seem designed to chop up the dancers' bodies. For some mysterious (masochistic?) reason, Mr. Martins has chosen to accept co-credit for the design of these garments.

The new Martins-Marsalis opus, *Them Twos*, is set not to jazz but to a dull orchestral score, a pastiche of classical music—here a touch of Stravinsky, there a bit of Bernstein. It has no personality of its own, and Mr. Martins simply uses it as background sound for five duets. This time, the pretensions are emotional, not historical: After the overture (accurately titled "Forever") comes "First Love," your standard First

favorably to Balanchine's *Meditation*—the first ballet he created for Suzanne Farrell—it would be sad to see. Ms. Kistler has nothing to do other than bourrée in, swing her beautiful hair about while Mr. Soto is swinging her about, and bourrée out. If the loss Mr. Martins is grieving for is the diminishment of her powers, I join him in mourning. *Them Twos* as a whole is both histrionic and cynical, not least when it's straining to be romantic.

Then came *Duke!*. This time, Mr. Marsalis and 14 other jazz musicians were up on stage, on a podium at the rear. And they were playing—and loving—half a dozen beautiful Ellington numbers that only underlined the thinness of the Marsalis scores. *Duke!* has three sections, each by a different choreographer. The first, "Rockin' in Rhythm," is a cheerful, show-bizzy evocation of the lindy hop and the jitterbug, staged by Robert La Fosse and featuring Heléne Alexopoulos being tossed around by a game Mr. Askegard. Ms. Alexopoulos' dancing could use a little more punch, but her perfect, trim body is a superb instrument for this kind of thing, and she's as beautiful as ever. After "Trail of Tears" and "Horror," no wonder spirits in the theater soared with Ellington and the lindy!

They quickly sagged. The second part of *Duke!* is called "Ellington Elation," but there was nothing clating about it: Garth Fagan, the choreographer of *The Lion King*, is not the answer to City Ballet's repertory problems. Dancers rushed on in phalanxes, whirled and twirled, and rushed off. The costumes were dark, the lighting was dark, the movement was confused. Kathleen Tracey, who needs all the help she can get, was outfitted in a particularly unflattering manner; on the other hand, she had the large talent of Albert Evans to partner her. Miranda Weese was back with Nilas Martins.

Finally, came the big success of the evening, Susan Stroman's "Blossom Got Kissed." Ellington hails from jazz, Ms. Stroman from show business (*Crazy for You*), yet together they gave us a real ballet—and the rarest kind: comic. Maria Kowroski plays a wistful ballerina who'd like to swing but can't, until a sympathetic Robert La Fosse gentles her along and then ignites her with a kiss. Off snaps her tutu, and she's dancing up a storm with the rest of the ravers. It's the old story, pop versus classical, but it works. Ms. Stroman sometimes seems to feel that she has to fill every moment with business—her superb London *Oklahoma!*, too, is busy, busy, busy. But this is a piece that, without being on their exalted level, is good enough to join Robbins' *The Concert* and Balanchine's *Slaughter on 10th Avenue* as a hilarious

N.Y.C.B. audience-pleaser. Unfortunately, its format—with Mr. Marsalis and his sidekicks up on the stage—makes it unlikely that this can happen.

The season's other significant new work was shown first at the New York State Theater, then at the School of American Ballet workshop, where each year the newest crop of dancers is on display. There was no star performance this year, like Janie Taylor's a year ago, but three City Ballet standards looked very fine—Balanchine's *Valse Fantaisie* and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (slightly cramped on the Juilliard stage) and Robbins' *Fanfare*, revitalized. For the second year in a row, the main event was a new piece by Christopher Wheeldon, a soloist in the company and by far the most gifted choreographer N.Y.C.B. has come up with since early Martins. *Scènes de Ballet*, to music by Stravinsky, is in a familiar genre: the classroom ballet. Using more than 60 S.A.B. students, ranging from tiny tots to about-to-be-graduates, Mr. Wheeldon revealed his understanding of and love for the hierarchy of ballet and the supremacy of

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Maria Kowroski and Robert La Fosse in Susan Stroman's "Blossom Got Kissed" from *Duke!*.

Love ballet encounter, rescued from its generic content by the wonderfully talented young Janie Taylor. Her hair is up in a ponytail (of course), whereas Miranda Weese's hair, in "Almost," is down and aggressive. Its title suggests that this section is about a failed relationship, but it's more about a failed partnership, between the determined Ms. Weese and the lackadaisical Nilas Martins. In "Horror," the beautiful and elegant Maria Kowroski has a dramatic black and white coat rather than dramatic hair as she is pitted against an impressive Charles Askegard in another generic encounter: Battle of the Sexes. In "Sex," Yvonne Borree, in a haremlike outfit that does her no favors, is the object of overexcited attentions from Nikolaj Hübbe. (In this section, it's his hair that features.) Finally, Jock Soto is visited by an apparition, Darci Kistler, in "Loss." Even if this derivative duet did not compare so un-

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