Ashton and Anniversaries

Joffrey Ballet
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reviewed by Joan Acocella
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For its thirtieth birthday, the Joffrey Ballet did something expensive—it mounted Frederick Ashton's *Fille Mal Gardée*—and everyone shared in the present. Ashton has said that *Fille* was his "tribute to nature," and the aspect of nature that he celebrates above all is her rightness, her capacity to make things right. All this is there in the plot. The practical-minded Widow Simone

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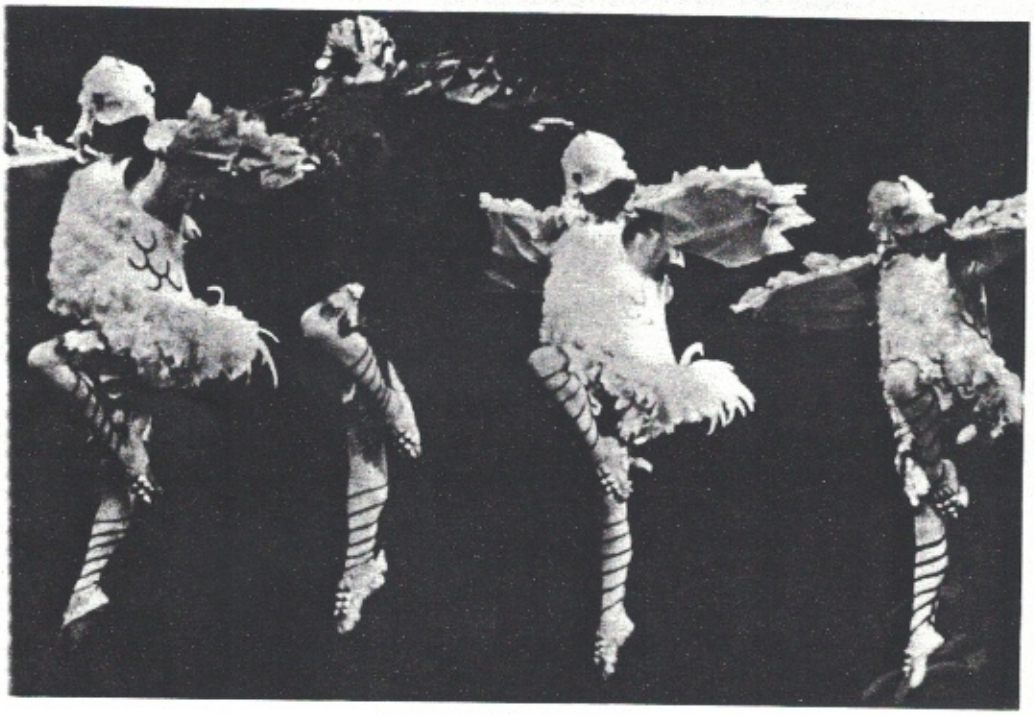

***Bucolic bounty:** Ashton has described his* Fille Mal Gardée *as his "tribute to nature." Included in the celebration are, above, an opening pas de cinq for soloist rooster and corps of four hens; right, the famous clog dance for the Widow Simone (Stanley Holden, center); and, opposite page, the love story of Colas and Lise (David Palmer and Tina LeBlanc) who, "by following nature, have found what is right for them."*

intends to marry her beautiful and spunky daughter, Lise, to Alain, a neighboring nerd rich in vineyards. But Lise is in love with Colas, who is her perfect match. Through an error, Lise gets locked in her bedroom with Colas, and once the two of them emerge, with the appropriate looks on their faces, it is deemed that now they *have* to marry. Just as the rain knows how to fall, and the flowers to grow, Lise and Colas, by following nature, have found what is right for them.

This trusting vision of life is what gives the ballet its warmth. It also permits great variety. Like the children of a good mother, Ashton's characters are free to play, to change, to commit sins and follies without being harshly punished. Many people have written about the moral generosity of this ballet: how Widow Simone, though foiled, is not shamed, and above all how Alain, in returning at the end after the wedding party has departed and joyously reclaiming his beloved red umbrella, is really given the last laugh. I think, though, that this generosity is merely part of the atmosphere of freedom that permeates the ballet. Because nature is going to make things okay, Ashton doesn't have to worry about that. Therefore he doesn't have to keep track every minute of who's right and who's wrong, and what "kind" of people they are. Widow Simone may be a crusty old dame, and one who is willing to barter her daughter for a vineyard, yet she clearly loves Lise. When the girl is cold, the mother blows on her hands, rubs her arms, gets her a little pink scarf for her neck. Though Alain is not what one would wish to marry, he is not unlovable; watching his bursting, jumping-up-and-down excitement during the maypole dance, you want to take him home with you. Lise herself is highly changeable. Though love at times makes a woman of her—a ballerina—at other times she is a child (she slides down the parlor stairs on her rear), and in the snippets of Widow Simone's clog dance that bump up in Lise's solo work we see the old woman that she will be. Within the limits of the comic convention, each character is his own little horn of plenty.

The same is true, more true, of the choreography. Ashton packs his dances with richness, dragging in every ballet convention that he thinks would be fun to use—bits from *La Sylphide, Swan Lake,* even, I think, *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort*—along with a music-hall turn for the chickens, a stick dance and a maypole dance for the harvesters, and the famous clog dance for Widow Simone. Above all, he packs his classical dances. Particularly in Colas's solos, he no sooner finishes one amazing invention than he is in the middle of the next. At other times—as in Lise's long prances on pointe and her many passages of glorious, unadorned jetés, with arms flung back in joy—he breaks into pure simplicity, like a great swimmer coming up for air.

The Joffrey production, supervised by Alexander Grant (the original Alain), with choreography reconstructed from Benesh notation by Faith Worth, fully honored the original. Everyone knew who he was and was happy to be it, from the sweet, prefeminist chickens (Dominique Angel, Mary Barton, Jennifer Demko, Cynthia Giannini), their eyes fixed demurely on their feet, to the bewildered notary (Richard Englund), to Lise's Friends (Beth Bartholomew, Linda Bechtold, Deborah Dawn, Kathryn Ginden, Julie Janus, Elizabeth Parkinson, Victoria Pasquale, Lauren Rouse), who, tall and ebullient, made the perfect ballet "Friends": a background of ideal young womanhood against which the individuality of the heroine is set off.

Among the principals, the greatest was Stanley Holden, who was Ashton's first Widow Simone and who now, twenty-six years later, seems to be playing the role for the first time —seems, indeed, to be Widow Simone. To see her (him), wrathful in curlpapers, remembering thriftily to unpot her geranium before throwing it at Colas, or hesitating between delicacy and resolve before hurling her weight onto the pony cart, or, when Alain has aimed an uncouth kiss at her and missed, shifting her feet and finding something on the ground to look at in order to give him time for a second shot, was to wish that you could spend a whole performance just looking at her. I think some people did. The audience's laughter was keyed to Holden. If people started laughing and you didn't know why, all you had to do was look for Simone, and there she was, in some corner of the stage, doing something terrific.

The other great gift of this production was Tina LeBlanc's Lise. LeBlanc, to begin with, *looks* like a country girl. She is dark-haired, rosy, and well built, and her body, when still, has a genuine repose, like a Degas dancer. More important, she is a natural actress and a robust dancer. Indeed, the two qualities are one. What makes her dancing so red-blooded is that the drama is flowing through its veins, making her plié deep, cutting her second position big and clear, throwing her arms back wide, wide, in her huge jetés. And what makes her acting so natural is that it is *in* the dancing. At the very end, when Colas lifts her in sitting position high into the air and carries her toward us, she holds out her arms to us. This, presumably, is in the choreography: a gesture of farewell and of tribute to the audience. But LeBlanc made it seem utterly spontaneous, as if, her cup of love running over, she were asking us to take some: "Here is my happiness—share it with me."

The two other Lises, Carole Valleskey and Dawn Caccamo, both danced ably, but neither with the corn-fed richness of LeBlanc's performance. (Also, both tended to pout and mug their way through the acting.) As for the roster of Colases—David Palmer, Glenn Edgerton, and Ashley Wheater—all three had trouble with their difficult solo work. (Wing-and-a-prayer landings for all in the series of sauts de basque that begins Colas's solo in the "Elssler" pas de deux.) And all three had their charms. Edgerton has a handsome line and great musicality. Wheater, who was the least secure technically (especially in pirouettes), is nevertheless marvelous in the air, a real flyer, and a fine, subtle actor. (Later in the season he made a wonderful debut as the Groom in *A Wedding Bouquet.*) Palmer, the best of the three, was yet the most troubling, for his dancing was not up to the very high level of past seasons. He had the spirit, but not the letter. Edward Stierle, new to the company, gave Alain perhaps too many volts (this is a company characteristic—they almost squeal with exuberance), but that is better than too few.

Second to *Fille,* the event of the season was Mark Morris's new ballet, *Esteemed Guests,* to C.P.E. Bach's Concerto in A major for Violoncello and String Orchestra. *Esteemed Guests* is an exemplary neoclassical work: Its structure arises out of the music, its emotions arise out of the movement, and the movement is the *danse d'école,* however reimagined. When the curtain goes up, you see the whole cast on the stage in fifth position. This, Morris is saying, is a *ballet.* But then, while all the others remain fixed in this pose, Leslie Carothers, at a far corner of the stage, goes through a quick, unceremonious combination and then snaps back into line, in fifth—and all of this in silence. (Only once Carothers has finished does the music begin.) Here we see the old tradition meeting the new. On the one hand, this massed company, glamorously clad, symmetrically deployed, standing in a tight fifth: Russian classicism, via Balanchine. On the other

Certain charms: Above center, Glenn Edgerton's "handsome line and great musicality" proved particular assets in his portrayal of Colas in the Joffrey production of Ashton's Fille.

hand, this weird, asymmetrical, music-less sally, rudely violating our expectation.

The first time you see the ballet, you go on seeing the one hand and the other hand, the classicism and the postmodernism. The piece remains firmly balletic—traditional patterns, traditional steps, traditional hierarchy of ensemble, soloists, and principal. Yet that principal (Carothers) has no partner, and the corps women dance with their backs to us, and the men bourrée in sweat socks, and in the somber second movement (Largo) several women, jeweled chignons and all, lie face down on the floor—flat-out prostrate, their soles facing us—something I never expected to see in a ballet. So you continue seeing two styles—as I expect people saw two styles in Balanchine's Petrograd ballets—until, I think, a moment at the very end of the Largo. The corps forms a double column, upstage-downstage, with Carothers seen at the end of it. This is a Balanchinean maneuver if ever there was one: the woman at the end of the tunnel, the vision focused. But then, as Carothers enters the tunnel, rushing forward, the music of the Largo comes to an end, and the tunnel begins to revolve, to spin, spilling its contents, the dancers, across the stage, where they fall into position for the third, fast movement. In this potent, almost terrifying image—a dream surfacing and sinking, in an instant, in silence—you no longer see two styles, but one: Mark Morris as ballet choreographer, taking what he needs from the past and making what is new and his own. It is wonderful to think what he will do.

The other new ballet of the season—*The Gardens of Boboli,* by a recent Juilliard graduate, Mark Haim—had lesser vistas but was still a happy surprise. Made on Joffrey II, it is a ballet for young dancers and, curiously for a choreographer who is himself only in his twenties, has some of that sentimentality about the young that one finds in Robbins and also in Paul Taylor, whose influence could be felt throughout the piece. (Maybe Mark Morris's influence too?) But in certain of its well-defined sections—the ballet was set to excerpts from Albinoni—Haim did achieve a true, youthful hilarity, and got the Joffrey dancers to move faster than I have seen them move in a long time. And one odd section is hard to forget: In what begins as a conventional passage, Carothers, dancing opposite four other women, suddenly lifts her arms high and heaves them to the side, and then does this again and again, as if trying to cast off a huge weight. Strongly highlighted against very simple legwork (mostly plain piqué steps), this strange maneuver was carried through to the end of the section—a mystery that Haim, to his credit, was willing to lay out powerfully and leave unsolved.

The season showed few debuts, but many still-sterling routines: Beatriz Rodriguez and Charlene Gehm in *A Wedding Bouquet,* Philip Jerry as the Chinese Conjuror in *Parade,* truly convinced of his evil power, Elizabeth Parkinson in *Monotones II,* her upper body all a liquid rush, then all stillness. Carothers, in whatever she does, is riveting: a spun-glass delicacy combined with grand, architectural phrasing. And Denise Jackson, retiring after seventeen years in the company, put in one final performance as the queen of the rink in *Les Patineurs,* doing her gently comical "special lift"—upside down and legs extended, the better to show off her white and silver skirt—with serene, blissful confidence. □