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Photo: Alexander Izilaev

Sparkling at Fifty--PA Ballet in "Jewels"

by Patricia Graham

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With the blessings of renowned choreographer George Balanchine, Barbara Weisberger, a dancer in his troupe, formed a new company. Fifty years later, in celebration, and after countless ups and downs, Pennsylvania Ballet, now almost forty dancers strong, presents the Philadelphia premiere of *Jewels*, one of Balanchine's master works. Yes, the crowd went wild, in a Philadelphia balletomane kind of way.

Pennsylvania Ballet (PAB) has been performing Balanchine ballets throughout its history, including the *Rubies* section of *Jewels*, but the full-length version demands multiple resources – a large and skillful corps de ballet and outstanding solo and principal artists. *Jewels* debuted at Balanchine's company, the New York City Ballet, in 1967. He choreographed the work to fit the qualities of his leading dancers at the time, a glamorous and gifted crew. How does a ballet company rise to the challenge of bringing this work to life? PAB brought in expert coaches, répétiteurs Sandra Jennings and Merrill Ashley, who both worked directly with Mr. B. on *Jewels*. They shared details that clarified the choreographer's vision, helping the dancers deepen their interpretation for this premiere.

Jewels is a three-act ballet, in which Balanchine partners with a different composer for each act. Each section begins with the curtains opening to reveal a dazzling tableau of shining dancers, in a fresh color scheme, drawing appreciative murmurs from the audience each time. The white stage draping defines a fantasy place—a palace or a cloud. The dancers' regal attire puts them squarely in the palace; all women wear tiaras, all men princely tunics. I found it interesting that this work, touted in its time by NYCB as the first abstract ballet, retained these particular balletic conventions.

Act 1—*Emeralds*—set to music by Faure, harkens to the romantic era in costuming and choreographic style with long tulle skirts and curving lines. Arcs shape the spatial patterns and the dancers' bodies as they take lunges a tad deeper than usual, topped by swooning torsos or *épaulement*. They lean about like wind-blown flowers that Balanchine winds into ever changing garlands. But I'm not feeling the bliss until he introduces a *pas de deux* that stands out as an interlude of strange beauty. The woman walks slowly on *pointe*, taking long steps, her hand on her partners' proffered arm; the two glide as though making their way through a pocket of fog. They raise their arms in angular pie wedge segments, cresting in a curve at the top. This straight-line motif is expressed in the legs as well and stands out in the antique world of arcs. Similarly, the duo's mysterious presence as they move together, as though in a dream, beckons us to travel with them on their private journey.

In *Rubies*, the work's second section, the dancers wear their crowns at a more rakish angle, by way of the sleek red costumes and movement vocabulary—a world of unexpected juxtapositions, jazz stylings, undulating spines, a cakewalk, running games. In the role originally choreographed for Edward Villella, PAB dancer Alexander Peters delighted the audience with his unbounded physical glee on opening night. This is a twentieth-century vision of ragged movement and spunk, one of Balanchine's works where, to quote scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, he utilizes “significant markers of African American dance.” We see a repeating motif of steps for the lead couple motivated by a decidedly unclassical pelvis leading their walk forward and back. This section is the Balanchine I delight in who has his ballerina folded in half and then rippling up her spine while on *pointe* and drawing unlimited inspiration from Stravinsky's music.

In act 3, the subdued buoyancy of the corps dancers' waltzing gently pulls me into *Diamonds*' white tulle, swan lake-y world. It's Tchaikovsky this time who sets the atmosphere for the classicism of the archetypal ballerina. Originally choreographed for Balanchine muse Suzanne Farrell, Julie Diana stepped serenely into the role with her own cool fire. There is a hint of a story in her exquisite, prolonged duet with partner Zachary Hench. With great self possession she dances with him then seems to avoid him, exiting into a mass of dancers, coming out one way; as Hench follows her in, he exits the tangle by another way. At the end, when he kisses her hand, the startled turn of her head reflects our surprise as well as hers. Balanchine's masterful flow of more than thirty bodies in space ends with a personal moment of awakening. The swan queen was never as real as in this modern moment amid a classical context.

Balanchine dared to choreograph a new and unconventional ballet, one that's often described as uniquely American in style, much of that style—as mentioned earlier—deriving from black dance forms. He famously featured African American dancer Arthur Mitchell but never fully integrated New York City Ballet. I wonder too about the ethnic make-up of PAB, Balanchine's stepchild. Having witnessed first-hand the passion for ballet among a wide array of children recently, at several local dance recitals, I feel disappointed that professional ballet still appears predominantly a white people's activity. I'm not sure where the gap occurs: training, opportunity, hiring?

This 50th anniversary and the performance of *Jewels* make clear to me my belief that when we drop the convention of predominantly European American casting in classical ballet, we will arrive at an American ballet that reflects the tremendous interest and talent cultivated in dancing schools big and small across the country. Not to detract from PAB's achievements—the company is on an artistic high, performing with an overflowing of heart and skill—I look forward soon to seeing the ballet dressed not just in the colors of jewels, but in all the colors that we are.

George Balanchine's *Jewels*, Pennsylvania Ballet, October 17 – 27, Academy of Music, www.paballet.org

Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT.: Praeger

Publishers, 1996).

Nancy Goldner, *Balanchine Variations* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008).

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