The Sleeping Beauty Awakes

On March 6 and 7, at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa, California, I attended the ABT production of Marius Petipa's The Sleeping Beauty, as researched, reconstructed, and staged by Alexei Ratmansky. I cannot remember if I have ever experienced evenings at the ballet that left me with so many vivid memories, so much to think about and discuss. It made me appreciate how powerful 19th century ballets could be. There seemed to be that same feeling in the theatre crowd, some 3,000 spectators frequently and enthusiastically applauding. The happy buzz during the intervals was a testament to the excitement we were experiencing. Here are some of my thoughts about the production:

Given my interests, I was particularly focused on the dance technique, and I was rewarded with dancing performed mostly in keeping with practices in the period, 1890, of the ballet.

Chaîné turns were performed on demi-pointe, as they were then, so that we could see vivid rhythmic accents, instead of the usual blur when the turns are whirled on full pointe today. However, both Auroras that I saw finished their final pas in the final act with a whoosh of chaînés on full pointe. Was that in the notation??

I may have missed it, but I never saw a preparation for a pirouette en dehors taken from 2nd position, which seems a strange omission for that period. But, a plus was seeing pirouettes in which the raised foot was placed at the ankle for the men, or just above the ankle for the women, rather than at the knee. For the women, this meant the foot was always in view below the skirts. The knee-length tutus were so flattering, and they made the eye focus more on the lower legs and feet, thus enhancing the rapid, intricate rhythms and articulations of the limbs.

The hip-height développés were wonderful examples of period style and thus the subtleties that they could convey. Unlike the above-head-height extensions thrown up today, these lower extensions allowed the dancers to convey a range of meaningful expressions. For example, as Aurora, Paloma Herrera, did a series of développés with slow, shy extensions, looking at each suitor questioningly, then, with a quick
lowering of her leg, she took a little step to the next fellow; whereas, Diana Vishneva (who I thought usually seemed to portray Vishneva, not Aurora), did rapid, and somewhat higher extensions ("I am a princess"), and then a slow lowering of the leg ("and who are you"). I regret that I did not see Isabella Boylston in the role, as she was reported to be especially impressive as Aurora.

I thought that the port de bras and épaulements, often the most difficult nuances for today’s dancers, were well done for the most part, although I wished for more movement in elbows, wrists, and hands. For example, I missed seeing any moments where the hands were rounded with fingers grouped together, and then opening out at expressive moments, with a corresponding outward opening from the wrists.

Particularly strange for contemporary ballet dancers is the concept that their legs might have gradations of “relaxation”, that is, not always being entirely straight (even hyper-extended) or sharply bent. Anything other than those extremes “seems sloppy” today. But, in some lovely instances in this production, we saw such relaxed knees, and how sweet and how meaningful they seemed. Under the longer tutus and full breeches of the period, knees were usually more relaxed than is the norm today, thus enhancing the rapidity of the allegro passages. Severely straight legs limit speed, and deeply bent knees in plié slow things down.

I was impressed that many passages of allegro ended with the legs straight, which was customary, rather than in a demi-plié, as is usual today. It seemed a bit strange, therefore, when, on occasion, the dancers lingered in plié.

The poses of attitude and arabesque were, for the most part, performed within the stylistic range understood at the time. More might have been differentiated in execution of the attitudes, for example, en face and en croisé---in which the body is held upright, the lifted knee sharply bent and lower than the raised foot---and the attitudes in profile and en effacé---in which the torso can lean forward a bit, the knee raised higher, not as sharply bent, and the leg more extended.
The arabesques were lovely and correct for the period—the extended leg, usually slightly relaxed at the knee and raised to hip level, the torso tilted forward, the arms extended forward with the lower arm parallel with the floor.

There was chatter afterwards about the occasional six-o’clock arabesques “penchées” (I don’t remember the term penché appearing in this period, but perhaps....) Those extreme poses were indeed a bit startling, but dancers, at least on their own time, were practicing stretches that would eventually lead to such split extensions. For example, Edgar Degas has a sketch (c.1880) of a dancer doing such a stretch, with hand on her knee and lifting that leg well above her head, perhaps at about 5:50 o’clock. Her torso is tilted way to the side, in order to accommodate the otherwise binding discomfort from her corset.

The most effective male solo was the Bluebird variation, with choreography attributed, in dance history accounts, to Enrico Cecchetti who premiered the role in 1890. Gabe Stone Shayer, as the Bluebird on Saturday evening, demonstrated how profound an image could be when the fluid upper body, arms, and facial expressions were performed along with meticulous beats, but at a lower elevation, than, for example, those by the Friday Bluebird, who hurled himself into the air as high as possible but stiffly and without expression.

The choreographic and rhythmic variety and inventiveness by Petipa for the women’s variations were wondrous to behold. The pace and legibility of “telling the story”, managed by Ratmansky while shortening the original production by quite a bit, was, I thought quite brilliant. Certainly the huge and very diverse audience (age, ethnicity, and social strata) seemed to accept and appreciate all this quite easily.

I did wonder about the costumes of the court, which were entirely 18th century. Therefore, we did not get a sense of a hundred years’ passage from the casting of the spell to the awakening. Even so, when did I ever pay much attention to the queen mother, often a bored-looking young thing trying to look mature? This one, Ratmansky’s wife Tatiana, seemed truly motherly, even in the elaborate gowns over the enormous
panniers. The pure opulence of this production makes every other “Beauty” seem pretty tawdry.

It was charming to see the final poses of many variations: front leg straight, back leg in 4th but with the foot on the demi-pointe. I think there may have been distinctions in the 19th century between final poses, thus described, and beginning poses for certain enchaînements, where the back foot was fully pointed. This subtlety seems to be indicated in some of the works of Degas. I would like to see this production again, and again, to look for more of these nuances.

In these few comments, I am trying to flesh out what I saw, what I remember, and something of what I have come to understand about 19th century ballet technique, which continued to evolve, of course, and in ways that we may never fully understand. I do think that this production of *The Sleeping Beauty* creates an enormous opening into that understanding.

I have only admiration for the enormity of this valuable effort to capture a balletic treasure from the past.

Finally, after 125 years, *The Sleeping Beauty* is really awake!!

Happy Spring,
Sandra Noll Hammond
April, 2015