

Dance

Enduring Virtues Onstage in London

Royal Ballet Has Slipped a Little From Its Peak Form



Tristram Kenton/Royal Opera House; Johan Persson/Royal Opera House; Dee Conway/Royal Opera House

Left, Laura Morera as the Sugar Plum Fairy and Federico Bonelli as the Prince, in the Royal Ballet's "The Nutcracker." Center, Sarah Lamb. Right, Marianela Nuñez and Thiago Soares in the Royal Ballet's "Romeo and Juliet."

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Between 1949 and 1976, the Royal Ballet of London was the most frequent foreign ballet company to visit the United States. Beloved for both theatricality and purity of style, it made annual or biennial visits to New York and other American cities. Two of its coast-to-coast tours lasted five months each. New York became its second

home; one of its seasons at the Metropolitan Opera House was eight weeks long. Its stars included Margot Fonteyn, Moira Shearer, Beryl Grey, Svetlana Beriosova, Nadia Nerina, Antoinette Sibley, Lynn Seymour, Merle Park and Anthony Dowell, with Rudolf Nureyev its most celebrated guest artist. For many Americans, it was the yardstick by which to judge all other kinds of ballet classicism.

Since then, however, the Royal's visits have been shorter and rarer. No foreign company is familiar here anymore — the reasons are largely economic — but the big Russian troupes now visit more regularly than the Royal. The company last danced in New York in 2004: a two-week season, solely performing ballets by its founding choreographer, Frederick Ashton, to celebrate his centenary.

But the stars who carried that season — Sylvie Guillem, Darcey Bussell, Alina Cojocaru, Tamara Rojo, Miyako Yoshida, Leanne Benjamin, Jonathan Cope, Johan Kobborg — have either retired or departed. There are rumors the company may return to New York in 2015. Who are its leading dancers today? And in what ways is there still a Royal Ballet style?

Since I moved to New York in 2007, I've been able to observe the Royal each year in a cross section of its repertory; recently I watched it in London in eight performances in November and December. The company is no longer exemplary from top to bottom. Its corps de ballet, for decades the greatest in the West, has been variable since the 1980s in classical repertory. And whereas its productions of 19th-century classics used to be its cornerstone, leading the world in illuminating style, textual tradition and dramatic seriousness, none of its current ones are good enough. Yet the troupe retains enduring virtues, as you learn from watching its leading dancers. Though few of these are British, they all exemplify qualities of which the British are rightly proud.

Two of its finest ballerinas, both in their early 30s, derive from this side of the Atlantic: the light brunette [Marianela Núñez](#) (from Argentina) and the pale blond

Sarah Lamb (from Boston). Ms. Núñez was an experienced teenage prodigy before she joined the Royal Ballet School and then the company; Ms. Lamb was already a principal dancer of Boston Ballet when she joined the Royal in 2004. Yet these two dissimilar women have become the foremost exponents of Royal style.

Ms. Núñez is extraordinarily sunny, exuberant and pliant; her smile and her entire physicality have infectious amplitude. Ashton was forever telling dancers, “Bend more.” No 21st-century dancer has heeded those words better than Ms. Núñez; the rich suppleness of her torso is a marvel. In Act I of the 19th-century ballet “Coppélia,” the heroine Swanilda briskly bends sideways while balanced on one point; I’ve never seen anyone tip as far as [Ms. Núñez](#), or as merrily.

Ms. Lamb is svelte, elegant, picture pretty, intelligent, fascinatingly unknowable. You think of her as mysteriously cool and impressively collected, until you see the bubblyness with which she dances Lise in Ashton’s “[La Fille Mal Gardée](#)” or the thrusting assurance with which — like a supermodel demonstrating radical chic — she handles new choreography by [Wayne McGregor](#) or David Dawson. Her poise can be magical; in 19th-century ballerina roles, you always know she belongs to a fairy tale. Her sheer loveliness makes it a happy surprise to find that she, like Ms. Núñez, is one of the company’s super technicians, alternately feathery and crystalline in footwork, and marvelously centered in multiple pirouettes.

As these two women have grown over the years, they’ve shown what a haven the Royal can be for dancers who are hungry for diversity and refinement. It gives them immense range: the main 19th-century ballerina repertory, central roles by Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan, as well as George Balanchine works and 21st-century creations by Christopher Wheeldon, Mr. McGregor and other British choreographers. It insists on flowing lines from hand to toe, with unobtrusive wrists and fingers; on richly mobile upper bodies; on firmly melodic phrasing, with striking dynamic contrasts and rhythmic subtlety; on charming address of the audience,

good stage manners to colleagues and acting that combines vivid characterization, communicative mime and emotional intensity. These two ballerinas have become its luminaries.

It's taken time for Ms. Núñez to acquire pathos and tragedy. To observe how she deepened the role of Odette-Odile in "Swan Lake" between 2005 and the present has been marvelous; always ardent, she now has vulnerability, detail, variety — and is among the world's most tellingly musical dancers. Ms. Lamb, especially in 19th-century roles, can dance as if cut off from the world around her; recently, as Juliet, she was occasionally too unspontaneously picturesque. She is, however, the more varied actress.

Meanwhile, a native British dancer has ascended to ballerina roles: the dark-haired, long-limbed [Lauren Cuthbertson](#), now in her late 20s. When she emerged (not least in the second movement of Balanchine's "Symphony in C"), she would look nondescript until, as she extended a leg, her physique's vast stretch and sweep calmly but suddenly changed the whole world onstage. Today, she's full of inwardness and feeling, as shown when she [danced](#) Juliet in a 2012 HD live broadcast performance; and a 2012 Odette-Odile certainly showed she's lost nothing of that capacity for transformingly grand line.

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