

Fall-Winter 2019

# Ballet Review



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Michael Trusnovec in *Aureole*.

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sented full-on; the comic elements aren't overemphasized. Changes in lighting are employed to signal a change in mood and, happily, these moods are so well balanced we aren't left with a schizoid point of view.

One oddity, though: a plot element that is introduced but then ignored. Medora does cut the traitorous Birbanto's wrist with a knife; however, when his wound and his treachery are revealed, Conrad doesn't shoot him. Birbanto disappears so quickly offstage I wondered if I had missed something. Possibly with only mime and little dancing left in the story, the directors wanted to cut to the finale, which in this case is the aforementioned happy ending: Medora and Conrad at sea, and Ali in the crow's nest, off perhaps to dance their way through further adventures.

## New York

Karen Greenspan

Jiva Dance, under the artistic direction of Sonali Skandan, is a New York-based company dedicated to preserving the traditional Indian performing arts while invigorating them with original content and arrangements. At Dixon Place, a small venue on Manhattan's Lower East Side, they presented an innovative production titled *The Four Horsemen*. Skandan co-choreographed the work with master teacher and performer Maya Kulkarni.

Drawn from the New Testament biblical account of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the dance piece remodels it into a feminist treatment using bharatanatyam dance vocabulary to convey the story – though not in the strict classical format. The *Book of Revelation* describes four mythical riders, who each ride on a colored horse – white, red, black, and pale



Amrita Doshi, Aishwarya Madhav, Bharathi Penneswaran, and Sonali Skandan in *The Four Horsemen*.

(gray). They symbolize the evils to come at the end of times, with the rider on the white horse representing conquest; the red, war; black, famine; and pale, death. The riveting music composed by Rajkumar Bharathi in concert with energetic vocal rhythms composed and performed by Bala Skandan paint an evocative sound portrait that sweeps the danced action along.

The four horsemen are reimagined as four female riders and costumed in dance saris in the four colors of their mythical horses. Appearing together as a quartet, they stir up the imaginary dust with galloping sequences, riding gestures, precise percussive footwork, and dynamic floor patterns that spin and churn the inevitable march of time and its consequences.

In the choreographic overture to the piece, each of the four riders is introduced. The white horse of conquest, danced by Aishwarya Madhav, becomes a story of a courtesan shackled to a life of enslavement. The red horse of war, danced by Sonali Skandan, is developed into the character of a woman who helps to prepare her lover for war and sends him off knowing she will never see him again. The black

horse of famine is expanded by Amrita Doshi into a mother who is unable to nurse her baby and must seek sustenance during the harshest of lean times. The pale horse of death is interpreted by Bharathi Penneswaran as an old woman who is facing her own impending demise.

Tightly choreographed and interestingly varied choral interludes for the four horsemen sweep the action along, bind the apocalyptic solos into a unified composition, and showcase the technical proficiency of these capable dancers. The individual solos provide each performer with an opportunity to demonstrate her *abhinaya* (expressive use of face and gesture) abilities. Each of the solos requires nimble role switching.

An outstanding example occurs when the horsemen, moving in unison, much like a military unit setting off for battle, exit the stage leaving the rider in red to dance the wrenching interactions of a couple that will be torn apart by war. In the role, Skandan deftly transitions back and forth between the part of the lover and that of the warrior. After a touching leave-taking scene, she inhabits an utter breakdown. Starting with her facial expression and then fully embodied in dance, Skandan portrays a painful premonition of her lover's fall in battle. The sound of galloping hooves seals her ominous vision into understood reality.

The quartet of horsemen returns to press the story onward. Some of the solos seem to stretch out too long. The final solo of the aged woman contemplating death skirts this issue with the reentry of the full cast in a scene of recollection (or re-creation) of happy memories. This adds renewed interest and awakens empathy for the rider in gray as her memories eventually disappear and she is left all alone to face her demise.

During a postshow Q&A moderated by Rajika Puri, Skandan explained that she had been drawn to this subject after the U.S. national election of 2016. It left her with an apocalyptic sense that this could be an end of times. She felt that the theme from this New Testa-

ment story was pan-religious and could have resonance for a wide audience. Kulkarni admitted that she has always been attracted to large themes and the challenge of translating them into a dance form that can be accessed at the human level.

I found this work to be an exciting development that demonstrates the strong voices and talented proponents of Indian classical arts who are creating and performing stimulating work right here in the United States. I hope to see more in this vein.

## Brooklyn

Alice Helpern

On the same day in three locations across the continent or across the pond the milestone hundredth birthday of Merce Cunningham was celebrated with three Events of one hundred solo dances that Merce Cunningham had created and were performed during his career. By the end of the day, all three performances had been live streamed and were available for a period of three weeks following the performance date.

I considered myself lucky to have contacted the Brooklyn Academy of Music in time for one of the last tickets to the Opera House. It was quickly sold out. At the last minute, seats were made available for an Open Dress Rehearsal the evening before. The performance itself was filled with members of the Cunningham family: dancers, collaborators, stage crew, musicians, and former students. I'm sure Merce would have been proud of this incredibly beautiful experience.

*Event* is the name Cunningham gave to performances that reassembled excerpts from his dances; his intention was to create a wholly new experience. An excerpt was not necessarily chosen by chance, although the order was meant to suit the performance venue or amount of *time* given – often for ninety minutes; *space* was determined by performance venue and location; and *energy* flowed from the dancers in movement and stillness. Music and sounds, costumes and décor were designed in