



REVIEW: PARIS SEASON OPENS WITH ALL BALANCHINE EVENING

By Patricia Boccadoro

PARIS, 23 NOVEMBER 2012 — There could have been no finer start to the season at the Paris Opera Ballet than *Serenade*, arguably the most beautiful ballet created by George Balanchine, one of the greatest and certainly the most influential choreographer of the 20th century. It is possibly the most popular of all his works, a world-wide favourite, and when danced by the Paris *corps de ballet*, a group of young dancers reputed to be amongst the best in the world, the effect was breathtaking.

Premiered in 1934, and created for the students of the new School of American ballet, *Serenade* has become a signature work of New York City Ballet, but the French dancers, moving as one and rehearsed by **Paul Boos**, member of the George Balanchine Trust, graced the ballet with their own style of femininity, musicality and impeccable footwork. The plot-less work was the essence of music made dance from the first strains of Tchaikovsky's score which enraptured the audience the moment the curtain rose on the group of ballerinas in long, ice-blue tutus, silhouetted motionless against a dark blue backcloth.



Paris Opera Ballet in *Serenade*
Choreography: Balanchine
Photo: Sebastien Mathé

It was the ideal ballet for soloist Ludmilla Pagliero who was the quintessence of a Balanchinian ballerina with her perfect physique, innate musicality, and quiet feminine charm. Since her nomination to the rank of *étoile* earlier this year, she has grown in confidence and assurance and she illuminated the work, sharing her joy of dancing with the audience.

The revelation, however, was corps de ballet member, Mathilde Froustey, who, following up her enormous success as Lise in [La Fille mal gardée](#) this summer, albeit in a second cast, showed that despite her smaller size, she, too, has the lyricism and beauty as well as the technique to interpret Balanchine's works. Somehow or other, during these last eighteen months, this exquisite ballerina, chosen by Grigorovitch to dance the role of Anastasia in *Ivan the Terrible* shortly after joining the company at the age of 17, and gold medalist at Varna in 2004, has changed from girl to woman. A soloist in her own right who would be a principal dancer in any other company, she has the potential of interpreting many different roles.

They were partnered with elegance by *étoile* Hervé Moreau, in fine form after a long absence due to injury.

Agon, the 1957 work said to be one of the greatest of the collaborations between Balanchine and Stravinsky saw the triumph of Myriam Ould-Braham, the lovely ballerina nominated *étoile* a few weeks after Pagliero. Like Froustey, Ould-Braham is not built in the image of what has become known as a Balanchinian ballerina personified by Diana Adams, tall, rangy yet regal, the dancer who created the work in New York in 1957. Slender, small-boned and delicate though she is, Ould-Braham was outstanding with her rapid, dynamic footwork and natural musicality. The ballet with its daring innovations took classical ballet to another level. It is a purely abstract work, without tutus or décor, where the body alone forms geometrical configurations.

The evening ended with Balanchine's early work, *Le Fils Prodigue*, written in 1929 for Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. It was created in close collaboration with Prokofiev and Boris Kochno, the latter being responsible for the libretto which, although

being inspired by the biblical story, is unambiguously and dramatically Russian, being conceived for the theatre and thus devoid of any biblical or religious overtones. The painter, George Rouault, was invited to create both sets and costumes. It is visually a most spectacular work.



Jérémie Bélingard in *The Prodigal Son*

Choreography: Balanchine

Photo: Sebastien Mathé

However, it remains a curiosity today, for not only was it the last production of the ballets Russes, staged three months before the great impresario's death, it was also one of Balanchine's rare narrative works. Moreover, created by the man who loved women and who repeatedly said that dance was woman, *The Prodigal Son* is constructed around an intensely dramatic central role for a man with an all-male corps de ballet. It was also a ballet that the choreographer himself said he disliked and pushed aside, although he did revive it for [Edward Villella](#) in 1959.

Unfortunately, although Paris Opera *étoile* Jérémie Bélingard danced his best, his interpretation did not seem to be in keeping with this highly expressive work. Certainly on a personal level, I felt he rather deserved his fate. Happily there was Agnès Letestu with her long, long legs and extraordinary feet in the role of the courtesan, the woman who seduces, humiliates then robs him. Cold and venomous, she was also exceedingly beautiful, chilling her audience with the subdued tension emanating from her whole body. She made one shiver in the role she first interpreted when a member of the *corps de ballet* almost twenty years ago. "Each time I dance it, I change my interpretation slightly, to suit my partner, my mood, yet always bearing in mind the way Balanchine intended it to be danced", she told me after the performance. "He wanted her to be icily cold, calculating and totally professional but sometimes I do feel something for my victim, and can't resist looking over my shoulder to see how he is reacting".



Agnès Letestu in *The Prodigal Son*
Choreography: Balanchine
Photo: Sebastien Mathé

The dancers of the *corps de ballet*, brutal, animal-like and totally grotesque with their shaven heads, were excellent.

Patricia Boccadoro writes on dance in Europe. She has contributed to *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *Dancing Times* and was dance consultant to the BBC Omnibus documentary on Rudolf Nureyev. Based in Paris, Patricia Boccadoro is the dance editor for Culturekiosque. She last wrote on [Sir Frederick Ashton's *La Fille mal Gardée*](#).

Headline image: Myriam Ould-Braham in *Agon*
Choreography: Balanchine
Photo: Sebastien Mathé