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Bolshoi's Balanchine, From Stage to Screen

By [ALASTAIR MACAULAY](#) JAN. 20, 2014

Sunday's HD broadcast of George Balanchine's pure-dance and full-length "[Jewels](#)," live from the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, was — though by no means without drawbacks — both newsworthy and artistically noteworthy. One historic aspect occurred not in the dancing but at intermission.

A year after the notorious [acid-throwing attack](#) that seriously damaged his eyes, [Sergei Filin](#), the company's artistic director, joined Katerina Novikova, its press officer, onstage. Wearing dark glasses, he stood with easy dignity and talked ballet with calm good manners. Ms. Novikova, a regular star of the Bolshoi broadcasts, translated his Russian deftly into French and English.

Time was when "Jewels" — the 1967 work made up of "Emeralds," "Rubies" and "Diamonds" — was the exclusive property of New York City Ballet (where it returns on Wednesday evening). Especially in this century, however, it has made extraordinary inroads into international repertory. It's now danced from Moscow to Miami, from Seattle to Paris. It has been presented with different sets (the Mariinsky Ballet of St. Petersburg uses the original designs, which still work best), but the [Bolshoi's staging](#), new in 2012, also employs — as Mr. Filin discussed — new costumes.



Bolshoi Ballet Olga Smirnova and Semyon Chudin in Balanchine's "Jewels," broadcast live in HD from Moscow on Sunday. Credit Marc Haegeman

Those costumes, by Elena Zaitseva, are cut along lines similar to [Karinska's originals](#). But, at least on screen, the "Rubies" costumes lack the hardness and the right shade of red for these gems. The décor, by Alyona Pikalova, is distracting for the first two parts — five tall panels like modern stained-glass windows shining green in "Emeralds" and red in "Rubies" — while "Diamonds" merely becomes a ballet in which a royal court in glistening white dances before a starry sky.

In the first two ballets (staged by Sandra Jennings), the impressions given by the performance tended to stay general. Balanchine's stage choreography often resists camerawork. The screen image feels either too distant or too near, and it's hard to get the sense of dancers' musicality, a crucial element more evident in the theater. Vincent Bataillon, who directed this broadcast, also created a strange effect by superimposing the opening of each ballet suddenly onto an image of the empty stage. Apart from destroying the theatrical sensation of Balanchine's curtain raisers (the opening tableau in "Rubies" always creates a stir), this contrivance made the live broadcast feel far from live.

You could also observe the tension between Bolshoi style and Balanchine requirements. It's strange that a company usually associated with strong attack nonetheless often seemed too soft when dealing with the keen cut-and-thrust and musical sharpness of this choreography. Where American dancers have learned to arrive in a position, these Moscow artists eased themselves a fraction more gradually; but that missing fraction can be the very breath of choreography. The chief exception here was [Ekaterina Shipulina](#) (a dancer I well recall in the difficult fourth movement of Balanchine's "Symphony in C" in a 2006 performance), who excelled as the second female soloist of "Rubies": She was debonair, witty, glamorous. The opening corps dance of "Diamonds" seemed remote on screen

Its second and third movements, however, brought the remarkable young [Olga Smirnova](#) center screen for long periods. Ms. Smirnova is a 2011 graduate of St. Petersburg's prestigious Vaganova Ballet Academy. She doesn't just have the long limbs and neck of the ballet ideal, she also moves those legs with startlingly fluency and generosity of style. She has natural grandeur and a stage persona that compellingly suggests both remoteness and drama.

Audiences have long been used to the way "Swan Lake" and "The Nutcracker" become different ballets with each company. We're at an early stage of this process with Balanchine, nowhere more so than with the quickly spreading "Jewels." It's being staged by a number of Balanchine dancers, each of whom accentuates it differently, and each company brings its own native style to his work. In "Diamonds," I enjoyed the Hungarian accents brought out its staggers, Merrill Ashley and [Paul Boos](#). (When Ms. Ashley herself danced this ballet 30 years ago at New York City Ballet, it became an echo of the Hungarian-style ballet in the full-length "Raymonda.") And at all points, I loved the Bolshoi's spaciousness.

It's a shame that when the Bolshoi comes this summer to the Lincoln Center Festival, it will only play safe with those old chestnuts "Swan Lake," "Don Quixote" and "Spartacus." (It danced "Jewels" in London last summer, and, this month, Alexei Ratmanský's "Lost Illusions" in Paris, a live broadcast of which is scheduled for Feb. 2.) Of all cities, New York should have the chance to embrace this great company's least predictable facets.