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MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*: 50 Years Later, And Still For The First Time

by Daniel Cappello

Though no English writer would dare try to improve upon William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, certain adaptations, especially in other art forms, can take on such a life of their own that they become—like the play itself—so consummate, it seems hard to imagine the world without them. Perhaps this was never truer than in the case of Kenneth MacMillan's 1965 balletic masterpiece of the same title, which is currently celebrating 50 splendid years.

By 1960, the Scottish-born MacMillan had abandoned his dance career and was busy choreographing works on a young Canadian dancer, Lynn Seymour, who was to become his muse. A founder of the Sadler's Wells Theatre (now Royal) Ballet, MacMillan was fascinated by people and longed to reveal, through dance, the psychology of the human condition. After seeing John Cranko's version of *Romeo and Juliet* for the Stuttgart Ballet in 1964, MacMillan quickly wished to create his own. It made sense to focus on this particular drama since the British were celebrating Shakespeare's 400th anniversary, but the timing only amplified the risk: MacMillan had never before produced a three-act ballet. As the management of The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, weighed the gamble, MacMillan seized a separate opportunity to create a *pièce d'occasion* for Seymour back in her native Canada, where she was being honored in a special TV program. He offered to create a love pas de deux based on the famous balcony scene and, with Christopher Gable as her Romeo, Seymour was born as MacMillan's Juliet. "In rehearsal," Seymour recalls in her biography, "Christopher and I—both in fine fettle—responded to what Kenneth wanted as if we three were under a potent spell. Like a man possessed, Kenneth completed the balcony pas-de-deux in three rehearsals." Once the show aired, Frederick Ashton, then artistic director of The Royal Ballet, consented to a full-length production, and MacMillan had less than five months to create his take on the timeless love story.

Determined to free ballet from its precious exactitude, MacMillan endeavored a more naturalistic approach, eventually changing the face of ballet for the 20th century. In contrast to Cranko and other predecessors, MacMillan did away with grand entrances and picturesque poses. In his Verona, we meet Romeo for the first time cloaked in semi-darkness, lurking anonymously in pursuit of Rosaline; later, Juliet slips into the Capulet ball—being held in her honor—almost unnoticed. His is a blood-and-guts, tear-your-heart-out ballet that moves between patrician households and the more tarnished parts of town. Some characters, like Romeo's pals Mercutio and Benvolio, are given bravura steps to distinguish them from street fighters and stately aristocrats. Only Juliet and her ladies are ever on pointe. In her first encounter with Romeo, Juliet is literally swept off her feet—on pointe—but the choreography is forgiving should she happen to fall off. What's important is the emotion



Photo: Martha Swope

Leslie Browne and Robert LaFosse in the Company Premiere of Romeo and Juliet, 1985.

of the moment—of fluttering across the stage, however those slippers happen to be grazing the floor. To be sure, one of the most delightful designs of MacMillan's choreography is its deliberateness at falling off pointe, not staying on.

The production was trailblazing at its London premiere in 1965 (when the safety curtain at Covent Garden had to be lowered to get the audience to leave after 43 curtain calls), and it remains so today, on the 30th anniversary of its debut at American Ballet Theatre. It's hard to think of another ballet where the music so magnificently fits the story like a glove. The 1935 Sergei Prokofiev score is as glorious and monumental as the noble households themselves, yet is also accentuated by delicate melodies that evoke a staggering emotional depth. MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* could be described in any number of words—honest, arresting, passionate, dramatic—but, in a word, the ballet is romantic. By his command, movement becomes magical. As Leslie Browne, whom MacMillan selected as the first Juliet for ABT, puts it, "The movement had to say something—there couldn't be any empty moments in there." In other words, it's not just movement for movement's sake. Here, an arabesque isn't so much a technicality as it is communication between characters. When Romeo lands on an arabesque, it's almost deliberately softened, slouched and swayed, toward Juliet. It's a gesture intended for her, not us, and we don't applaud; instead, we get swept up

Photo: Gene Schiavone



Photo: Rosalie O'Connor



Photo: Gene Schiavone



Top: Scene from *Romeo and Juliet*; middle: Natalia Osipova and David Hallberg in *Romeo and Juliet*; bottom: Stella Abrera as *Lady Capulet*.

ourselves in the narration.

The ballet's dramatic sensibility is pure MacMillan. He and Seymour collaborated to conceive Juliet as a headstrong, passionate girl who is in control: she concocts the secret wedding plan, drinks a potion to fake her death, and eventually stabs herself to death for love. She's also more of the directional lead, rendering her Romeo—submissively smitten—to his knees. Gable, for his part, helped form Romeo as a young man swept off his feet by love, dancing in dizzy exultation. It's the kind of choreography that Keith Roberts, a ballet master with ABT and onetime principal who danced the role himself, describes as "fluid, organic, wind-swept—the vocabulary that is Romeo."

Formed on Seymour and Gable but premiered (for box-office purposes) to rapturous acclaim by Rudolph Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn, MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* quickly became a signature work of The Royal Ballet's repertoire. When MacMillan moved Stateside in the 1980s to serve as ABT's associate director, he gave *Romeo* a happy second home with the company, passing along the nuanced underpinnings of the ballet's soul. Leslie Browne recalls working with him in the studio: "As opposed to, say, Tudor or Balanchine—who knew exactly what they wanted, knew the counts, knew where you should be on the musicality—MacMillan was more passive in his approach," she explains. "He liked working on a muse. He would tell you, 'It's kind of something up and around, and then you can bring a leg around.'"

He didn't use ballet terms, but instead described the shape of the movement. It wasn't just pure dance, but dance with intention."

Another crucial instructor—the lifeblood of ABT's *Romeo and Juliet*—was Georgina



Photo: Dina Makaroff

Kenneth MacMillan at curtain call for Romeo and Juliet with Natalia Makarova and Kevin McKenzie following a 1988 performance for Live from Lincoln Center.

Parkinson, MacMillan's original Rosaline who went on to train generations of Ballet Theatre dancers. "Infused in all of our performances is Georgina's dramatic flair and her close relationship with MacMillan himself," explains Julie Kent, one of ABT's most celebrated Juliets. As Browne puts it, "Georgina alone knew the style of the piece. She knew what was truthful and what wasn't." Stella Abrera, who has cornered a claim on the Lady Capulet role, notes how "having Georgina's encouragement to help us make the roles our own was so very liberating." Kent describes it similarly: "The third act requires your own imagination and your own physicality. Juliet has to command that stage throughout the act, and you can't let the audience lose interest. 'You have to be fabulous,' as Georgina would say."

It doesn't hurt to have a fabulous partner, either. Amanda McKerrow, one of the first Juliets at ABT, remembers a special Romeo in Julio Bocca. "There was a certain abandon in his partnering that lent itself beautifully to the choreography," McKerrow recalls. "It would surprise me. Sometimes he wouldn't be exactly where you expected him to be, but you always knew he would catch you in the end." David Hallberg agrees, "It's not something you can rehearse. It comes when you're on stage in that moment. It either happens or it doesn't." One of the most affecting performances for Hallberg was when he danced opposite Natalia Osipova for her 2010 debut as Juliet. "Something happened the moment I laid eyes on her in the ballroom scene," he remembers. "We had literally fallen in love—and died for each other."

That, in essence, is what makes MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet* so beautiful and so enduring—that kinetic unity that's demanded of every pair who ever plays the youthful lovers. It's why audiences, knowing full well the fateful ending, keep coming back time and again: to see what magic a given partnership might conjure at a given performance. There's a reason MacMillan's ballet only seems to get better in time: the sheer grace of its sweeping lines stirs a fundamental instinct of our humanity, and, with every trip to the opera house, something in our genetic code makes us fall in love all over again.

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