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Year's Best: 1986 in Review

In this special issue, Times critics pick their favorites and render judgment on a year marked by memorable moments.



DANCE —

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Lois Greenfield

DANCE VIEW

ANNA KISSELGOFF

This Was The Year of The Foreign Invasion

The early tidings announced that the British were coming. And so they did — along with the French, the Chinese, the Spaniards, the Canadians and many more. It was the year of the foreign invasion in dance. The impact of visiting companies was the strongest in a decade — both in numbers and the quality they demonstrated.

Nonetheless, it was Lar Lubovitch, an American, who shot to the front ranks of choreographers in 1986. Very clearly on a creative jag after several years spent in a minimalist rut, Mr. Lubovitch offered a modern-dance premiere, "Concerto Six Twenty-Two," that heralded a flamboyant inventiveness. Along with his recent "Brahms Symphony," this ingenious work to Mozart delivered a cornucopia of glorious dancing.

The year, however, did not bring out the most inspired new work on much of the home front, especially in the ballet companies. That the Americans were doing business as usual is a factor to consider in determining the extent of the foreign visitors' impact.

Was it only curiosity and novelty value that created excitement around the foreign companies? While we have seen plenty of other visitors from abroad in recent years, the effect was hardly the same. Perhaps it was that even with their sometimes flawed productions or possibly less-than-perfect dancers (depending on the case) the visitors revealed aspects of excellence that made residual reservations melt away. The truth of the matter is that the Kirov Ballet's corps is unsurpassed, the Paris Opera Ballet has produced a sensational new crop of outstanding stars, the Central Ballet of China's young dancers have a potential that is totally winning and the National Ballet of Canada's production of Glen Tetley's "Alice" is a stand-out by any standard.

Europe — in the past, hardly a place to look toward for modern dance — is now a cynosure in the experimental field. The occasional meteor (Pina Bausch) that shoots up from the Old World should make us realize that,



Jack Vartoogian

The Kirov's corps de ballet, below in "Swan Lake," exemplifies the troupe's crystalline style.

Beatriz Schiller

Maxine Sherman (at left) in Martha Graham's new "Temptations of the Moon"



Sarah Lane Lawson

Members of Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker's company from Belgium perform "Rosas Danst Rosas." Below, Rudolf Nureyev in the Paris Opera Ballet's "Swan Lake."

European terms, Europe is rapidly becoming a New World. This year's meteor is Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker from Belgium.

In her company's New York debut at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with "Rosas Danst Rosas," Ms. de Keersmaeker managed to actually give repetition a good name; more than that, she infused strongly formalist structures with throbbing pain and passion. Her reductive vocabulary was given amazingly emotional resonance, as repeated gestures were modified through speed, rhythm and movement quality. Ms. de Keersmaeker's insistent nihilism is very different from the angst in former "psychological" modern dance. Making us aware of her formal techniques, the choreographer distances us from her images — and also draws us in.

The esthetic leap back from this kind of work to "The Sleeping Beauty" is the equivalent of the hundred-year nap taken by the heroine of this famous 19th-century ballet. Peter Wright's "Beauty" for Britain's Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet proved how a modern recension could make a classic look excitingly new and still remain faithful to its essence.

In a compact touring version (and despite less than first-rate casting) the Royal Ballet's second company triumphed through pure spectacle. Knowing that the 1890 Petipa original had also triumphed through production values, Mr. Wright and his designer, Philip Prowse, created a ballet-féerie of their own: visually dazzling and richly stimulating in its focus on the battle between light and darkness inherent in Tchaikovsky's score.

The Sadler's Wells troupe had visited the United States only in 1951. The Paris Opera Ballet had come only once, in 1948. Discovering old new companies (the Kirov's last visit was in 1964) became the vogue this year.

There is no question that the exuberance, schooling and energy of the dancers in the Paris Opera Ballet (nearly all in their 20's) created the real excitement this year. One could look askance at Rudolf Nureyev's productions of "Swan Lake" and other ballets. But one had also to proclaim the obvious — that as director, he had breathed fresh life into a once moribund troupe and brought its coruscatingly impressive young dancers up to international standards.

Exultant in a classical style of the utmost clarity, these dancers are almost too numerous to single out. Nonetheless, Patrick Dupond, a great dancer familiar from past guest appearances, showed off a new dramatic side in the revival of "Les Mirages" by Serge Lifar. Very young principals like Laurent Hilaire and Manuel Legris are dancers to watch in the future. Among the plethora of ballerinas one does have to make a special place for Isabel Guérin, a first-class and international-level Swan Queen, as well as the public's favorite, the glamorous and very promising Sylvie Guillem.

To see the Kirov Ballet from Leningrad was to take a trip more into the past than into the future. Yet, what a past! The crystalline style and the classical heritage of Russian ballet were on view with each step that the su-

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perb corps took in a fine "Swan Lake," "La Bayadère" and "Chopiniana."

The company did not visit New York but did perform in Los Angeles, Wolf Trap, Philadelphia and Trenton, as well as in Canada. The scores of ballet fans who went out of their way to see the Kirov might have been disappointed not to find a new Nureyev or Baryshnikov in its ranks. Yet, here too, talent was on the upswing. The outstanding new dancer is Aleksandr Lunev, exemplary in his purity, high leaps and amazingly soft landings. As for the women, the budding international star is the exotic Altyнай Assylmuratova, whose passion breaks through every step she takes.

The Central Ballet of China from Peking does not pretend to be a top-rank company. For one thing, the careers of its first generation of dancers were virtually destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. Yet, the commitment of its current young dancers, who made their American debut at the Brooklyn Academy, was thrilling. With their solid Soviet-style training, these dancers are sure to go far — especially with better ballets. One senses it in their presence.

The proof that this is possible is seen in the only slightly older National Ballet of Canada. The Toronto troupe has often come to New York with guest stars. Given a ballet suited to its own dancers and with built-in audience appeal, the National gave us the best ballet of the season. This was Mr. Tetley's treatment of "Alice in Wonderland," to David Del Tredici's score inspired by the Lewis Carroll work. Mr. Tetley's poignant exploration of the relationship between Carroll and the real Alice is delightfully interwoven with the fantasy characters. Kimberly Glascoe and Karen Kain were piquant and sensuous, respectively, as the heroine in her child and adult phases.

A very different hit was "Flamenco Puro," produced as a follow-up to "Tango Argentino." Featuring gypsy dancers, singers and guitarists from Spain, the production was really an assemblage of soloists. Gypsies know how to reach into the inner depths of flamenco's soul. Manuela Carrasco,

sculptural in her proud dignity, and her exuberant colleagues offered the best Spanish dancing seen here since Carmen Amaya in the 1950's.

Speaking of nostalgia, the Moiseyev Dance Company from Moscow, if not quite what it used to be, still vibrated with bravura and showed off Igor Moiseyev's genius for theatricalizing folk material.

The emphasis so far may suggest that 1986 was a year when the dancers were better than the dance. A few premieres made for notable exceptions, among them Mr. Lubovitch's "Concerto Six Twenty-Two." You never know what Mr. Lubovitch will do next in this piece — what shapes his wonderful dancers will assume in midair, for instance. Everything is movement, energy, power and intensely musical. The playfulness that imbues the first and third sections is contrasted with a moving male duet in between — the surprise that is at the heart of the work.

"Temptations of the Moon," a premiere by Martha Graham, was another successfully fresh approach to music. Miss Graham transformed the frenzy of the gypsy rhythms in a Bartok score into a wonderfully pagan round. The vibrant dance images had a continuum unusual for the choreographer — playful leaps and forcefulness alternated with mythic resonances. The Graham season was studded also with a stunning revival of the stark 1929 "Heretic," a series of Denishawn revivals and a sleeper of a new piece, "Tangle Night," in which Christine Dakin's and sinuous mermaid was a performance to remember.

There were other moments: Murray Louis's nuanced performance of his solo, "The Disenchantment of Pierrot," and the Paul Taylor Dance Company in that rarity, a contemporary dance work — "From Soup to Nuts," choreographed by Mr. Taylor to a score by Peter Schickele.

Granted, a few other highlights could be suggested. Certainly the level of dancing in all American companies remained uniformly high. But perhaps uniformity can be deadening. Mr. Nureyev noted this year that ballet, at least, had turned away from being a special event into an everyday activity. He may be right. An art form without a galvanizing spirit retains its form but not its art.