

Summer 2015

Ballet Review





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Cover photograph by Costas: Wendy Whelan
and Nikolaj Hübbe in *La Sonnambula*.

the prince and Clara, but they make no claim to sovereignty over the other creatures.

—All clamor around the homecoming prince and Clara and urge them to tell their story of war and love. Afterwards, in what is perhaps the only moment of gravity in the entire evening, Drosselmeier and the Sugar Plum Fairy show the young couple a house, whose threshold they solemnly cross together, like bride and groom. Out front, everyone dances.

—The Arabian variation is particularly telling. In a *Nutcracker* that is largely about the tribulations and rewards of love between a man and a woman, this variation parodies in another Romantic Realist vignette the consequences of trying to divide your love among four wives or concubines. Four women start out vying for the pasha's attention. As he continues to play one against the other, however—rather than commit himself exclusively to one, as they request—the women wax angry. In a decisive show of female solidarity, they all abandon him at once, leaving him in a heap of frustration at center stage.

—The adult Clara and Nutcracker Prince (whom we know well already as a result of the action's many flash forwards) emerge from the house to dance the grand pas de deux. Clara is crowned in token of her bond with the prince and perhaps of her belonging to this utopic land of joyful fairies, flowers and bees, polichinelles, and lovers. At the very end, Clara wakes from her dream in the Stahlbaums' house. But she will never be the same again.

—And this is all danced brilliantly in the zippy, ironic, hyperclean style with which Ratmansky has revived the art form over these past ten years. It is refreshing to have narrative dramaturgy that really makes sense again. But his choreography is the real miracle—authentic, complexly musical, astonishingly inventive and fresh, unquestionably of the

twenty-first century, although his vocabulary and line are in many ways closer to Petipa and Cecchetti than Balanchine was. Or, rather, Balanchine extended and revised the Petipa aesthetic to form a new continuity.

—Ratmansky alternates the old-school Russian aesthetic with post-postmodern pastiche and slapstick to create a new discontinuity.

(Mere postmodernism would not tolerate Ratmansky's friendly and generative intercourse with classicism.)

—How is that possible? Who could have foreseen that the academic vocabulary of ballet would survive into our century? Then again, who could have foreseen that it would survive into the twentieth? Never mind. Just be grateful that New York City once again has a Russian-born man of the theater who not only knows the ins and outs of turnout and pointe work but also has a vision of human action and intercourse worth aspiring to.

El Paso

Karen Greenspan

Here on the west Texas border, along the Rio Grande, in an area known for college basketball and sometimes prickly, or dangerous, border tensions with neighboring Ciudad Juarez,

the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) celebrated its centennial anniversary on August 30, 2014, with a cross-cultural collaboration called "Opera Bhutan." Dancers and musicians from "The Land of Gross National Happiness" traveled halfway around the world to join international vocalists and opera directors as well as a chorus and orchestra comprised of UTEP students and faculty (including some from Juarez). Together, they performed the George Frideric Handel opera, *Acis and Galatea*, based on a Greek myth retold in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

As I walked to the venue to attend a dress rehearsal, my jaw dropped as I realized we were entering the university's huge Don Haskin's Center, a basketball arena that seats 12,000 people. I am not used to that level of opera attendance – even in my hometown of New York City. Dr. Diana Natalicio, UTEP's President for twenty-six years, smiled as she told me they hoped for at least 7,500 to attend the free event, "a gift the school is presenting to the community in celebration of our centennial."

In 2004, early music specialist and conductor Aaron Carpenè had the novel idea to produce the first Western opera in Bhutan. He approached Preston Scott, consultant to the Bhutanese government and curator for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and in 2009 they proposed the idea to Bhutanese officials. The project would be a collaboration uniting elements of their performing arts traditions with the Western operatic form. The opera *Acis and Galatea*, with its story based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, seemed the perfect platform as it shares many universal themes that resonate in Buddhism – love, suffering as a result of anger and attachment, and death leading to transformation.

This baroque pastoral opera, composed by George Frideric Handel, originally premiered in 1718 as a courtly entertainment for a private gathering in the English countryside. Sung in English (which is Bhutan's second language), the opera's simple plot is a tragic love triangle. Acis, a young shepherd, falls in love

with the sea-nymph Galatea. Unfortunately, the cyclops Polyphemus has also been smitten by Galatea's beauty. Unable to control his jealousy, Polyphemus hurls a huge stone at Acis and kills him. The chorus consoles Galatea, convincing her to use her semidivine powers to transform her dead lover into a flowing stream, immortalizing him.

Once the Bhutanese expressed interest in hosting its first opera production, Mr. Carpenè approached Italian stage director, Stefano Vizioli, who was enticed by the novelty of the project and its potential for learning and reaching beyond the ordinary. Next, they would have to find a sponsoring partner.

After several rejections from various opera companies, Mr. Scott reached out to UTEP, recalling the curious link between the school and *Druk Yul*, or the Land of the Thunder Dragon. One hundred years ago, the wife of the first dean of the school, Kathleen Worrell, read a 1914 *National Geographic* photo essay, describing the travels of Jean Claude White, a colonial officer stationed in the Raj, who trekked across the isolated mountain kingdom of Bhutan. She likened the Himalayas to El Paso's Franklin Mountains and convinced her husband that Bhutan's architecture would be a good model for university buildings that needed reconstructing after a fire.

Since then, UTEP's buildings conform to the unique style of Bhutan – battered walls tapering outward at the base, a wide reddish band painted around the upper portion of the facade, Bhutanese designs dotting the band and the painted borders around the windows, and red roofs that seem to float above the tall walls crowned by golden pinnacles. Over the years this relationship has been nurtured to include frequent cultural events, student exchange, and now – Opera Bhutan.

Seeking ways to strengthen the school's relationship with Bhutan beyond its architecture and because of her own vision for her students and the larger El Paso community, in 2012 Dr. Natalicio threw her support behind Opera Bhutan and its creators. With a student population of 23,000, whose demographics re-

flect those of the region – 78 percent Mexican American and another 8 percent who commute across the border from Juarez – she is committed to creating the highest educational opportunities for a historically underserved population.

Through Opera Bhutan, UTEP students, performing in the opera chorus and orchestra (along with some faculty), would work professionally with international vocalists and opera directors, travel and work abroad in a completely foreign culture when the production premiered in Bhutan, and create an invaluable experience for their own community on the occasion of the university's centennial celebration. Dr. Natalicio acknowledged, "Creating a dissonance by producing a baroque/Bhutanese fusion opera on the Texas/Mexico border will cause people to scratch their heads and be curious to learn more about us." The plan was to premiere the opera in Bhutan in October 2013 and a year later in Texas for UTEP's centennial.

The directors wanted to achieve an authentic expression that would honor each culture's interpretation of the thematic material. Mr. Vizioli was adamant that this not be musical colonialism. To that end, the main production team traveled to Bhutan and met with Mr. Tshering, Principal of Bhutan's Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA). He recounted how Mr. Vizioli described the story of *Acis and Galatea* and blocked the opera into scenes. Together they decided where to incorporate elements of the country's sacred dance, folk music, and folk dance. Mr. Tshering selected elements from their repertory that enriched the telling of the story from the Bhutanese perspective.

Mr. Vizioli envisioned staging the production in a manner that would capture the atmosphere of a Bhutanese *tsechu* (sacred dance festival). In these outdoor courtyard performances the audience is arranged around the performance space at the same level of and in close proximity with the performers. Hence, the stage for the opera at UTEP was built jutting out into the audience. Sometimes the main

characters, chorus, and Bhutanese dancers made their entrances at audience level (below the stage) and proceeded around the stage before climbing up or leaping onto it.

Backstage in the RAPA dressing room, usually quarters for UTEP's famed basketball players, I couldn't help but notice the cultural dissonance between the posters of UTEP's star players plastered on the walls keeping company with the sacred dance masks and instruments of the Bhutanese dancers. I watched as the dancers donned layer after layer of costume infused with Himalayan Buddhist symbolism – colorful silk skirts, shirts, collars, belts, sashes, wigs, and crowns – fully transforming themselves into performers of a sacred tradition. Others were horsing around, cracking jokes, and tooting on the ten-foot-long *dungchen* (telescoping, brass horns frequently used in Himalayan rituals).

On the evening of the centennial performance the arena began to fill with students, faculty, families from El Paso and from Juarez, friends (some of whom worked on the production in Bhutan), and alumni of all ages.

The RAPA dancers opened the evening with two sacred dances, *Pacham* (Dance of the Heroes) and *Drametse Nga Cham* (The Drum Dance of Drametse). The latter is designated by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Humanity. Cham is a form of sacred dance, much like prayer or meditation – that reinforces Buddhist beliefs and values, and is believed to accumulate merit for the performers and spectators alike. This pre-performance treat gave the audience a glimpse into the powerful experience of cham.

To more effectively integrate the Bhutanese cultural elements into the Handel opera, Vizioli reimagined the story set in the early 1920s with a group of young European travelers visiting Bhutan for the first time. Galatea, sung with playful virtuosity by Francesca Lombardi Mazzulli, was portrayed as a member of the group of Western tourists. She made her initial entrance through the yellow silk curtains (reminiscent of Bhutanese temple and *tsechu* decor) carrying a copy of the his-

toric issue of *National Geographic* from April 1914, as if using the photo essay to identify the monasteries and fortresses in the surrounding foreign landscape.

The chorus, Galatea's Western traveling companions, dressed in 1920s period attire, performed pleasing choreography set by Italian choreographer and period dance specialist, Gloria Giordano. Ms. Giordano explained that the choreographic challenge for her was to give a specific historical context that reflected Vizioli's directorial choice to set the story in the early 1900s as opposed to the baroque period of the music. She integrated steps and formations from English country dances with the later forms of the quadrille and waltz to define a stylistically later period from that of Handel.

The Bhutanese performers supported the action as the Western travelers played out their drama. The female Bhutanese vocalist, Sangay Wangmo, sang a newly composed song with a haunting melody called "The Four Friends," based on a Buddhist teaching about the interconnectedness of all beings. She was accompanied by four Bhutanese masked dancers wearing multicolored silk skirts, silk tops, and animal masks, dancing an ersatz sacred dance. The introduction of this mystical, minor-key melody immediately following the previous upbeat baroque chorus was a jarring experience. The transition might have been accomplished with more subtlety had the cham dancers initially performed in silence. However, the presentation captured the exotic sights and sounds of Bhutan.

At times the masked dancers moved about the main players in a slow surreal fashion. With their mythical presence, they served as a kinetic stage set, facilitating the characters' progress through the plot.

A contemporary Bhutanese love song was woven into the story with an accompanying folk dance. The movements were gentle and flowing with fluid hand and wrist gestures – always made to look effortless in typical Bhutanese style. The dancers dressed in their traditional attire (different from the sacred

dance costumes) – men in red and gold-striped *gho* (wraparound, belted, knee-length robe with wide, white cuffs) and special embroidered knee-high boots, and Ms. Wangmo wore a salmon-colored brocade *kira* (long, narrow, wraparound skirt) topped off with an elegant matching silk *tego* (women's jacket). The folk dance and song had a magical quality as the folk dancers encircled Acis and Galatea, who were seated on the floor performing a mirroring sequence that communicated their enrapt state.

No sooner than we were carried away with the soaring emotions and music of the young lovers, than the winds of change and turbulence danced through in the form of Bhutanese masked performers. Wearing wrathful, red masks and tiger-skin skirts, they danced bare-chested, using hooked sticks to loudly beat large hand drums. Their entrance, with pounding drums and frightening costumes, set an alarming and sinister tone – foreshadowing impending doom for the idyllic love affair.

The choreography was a combination of two sacred dances attributed to a Bhutanese fifteenth-century saint, Pema Lingpa. Bhutanese believe he received dream revelations with choreographic instructions for these sacred dances that depict spirits who search out and subjugate obstacles and negativity. The dancers bounded and hopped in a circle as they struck the hooked sticks against the drums; then their torsos swooped in full arcs. The drums signify wisdom while the hooked sticks represent compassion, which unite in the striking of the instrument to create awareness.

Two silk-skirted Bhutanese dancers on opposite sides of the stage blowing the dramatic ten-foot-long *dungchen* heralded the entrance of the monster Polyphemus, played by Jacques-Greg Belobo, originally from Cameroon. With his rich bass voice, he sang of his intense attraction to Galatea.

All of a sudden, two *atsara* (Bhutanese jesters) sauntered onto the stage. These jokers, staple characters at the festivals in Bhutan,

typically use uninhibited, irreverent antics to poke fun at the performers and audience members alike. Costumed in red pajamas and red masks with a fabric phallus flopping around on top, they were cleverly integrated into the scene in which Polyphemus bemoaned his lack of success with Galatea.

Inspecting Polyphemus's manhood and sniffing up his cloak and body parts to assess their freshness, the atsara made fun of his pathetic attempts to woo her. They humorously aided Damon (friend and advisor to all), played and sung with skill and assurance by Brian Downen, as he advised Polyphemus on improving his chances with Galatea.

The opera hit a moving climax as Acis, convincingly played by Thomas Macleay of Canada, and Galatea sang a public declaration of their love, in what began as a duet, "The flocks shall leave the mountains." These sublime strains were joined by a jealous Polyphemus, who transformed it into an emotion-filled trio, until he could no longer contain his rage and killed Acis, crushing him with a boulder.

In a well-crafted and poignant transition, a solitary, barefoot, Bhutanese flute player walked onstage performing a traditional tune as Acis lay dead. As he finished, four masked dancers in the white skeleton costumes of the Bhutanese *Durdag* (Lords of the Cremation Grounds Dance) performed sections of this sacred dance around Acis's dead body. They shook the fingers of their floppy white gloves and twisted their bodies back and forth. These lords are believed to dwell in the cremation grounds to help liberate those who have departed.

A solo vocalist, Kencho Wangdi, dressed as an enlightened lama, accompanied the dancers and sang as he circumambulated the stage. He chanted a mournful melody with lyrics, composed by the revered eleventh-century yogi Milarepa, that spoke (once again) of the interconnectedness of all beings.

After a moving choral procession and lament, the chorus convinced Galatea to immortalize Acis by transforming him into a flowing stream. The Bhutanese entered (again

dressed in traditional folk costumes) carrying a giant, blue, silk cloth and placed it over Acis. In an exquisitely staged metamorphosis, Galatea emerged from her grief and wrapped herself in the blue silk, as if it were an all-encompassing cloak. Performing their effortless-looking folk-dance choreography with delicately rotating wrists, the Bhutanese encircled her. The chorus unfurled the remainder of the blue cloth to cover the entire stage and gently manipulated it to create the vision of a rippling stream. As Galatea released the cloak, she turned upstage to walk amidst the ripples, having transformed her lover and having been transformed by loving. This finale was breathtaking, as the chorus celebrated, singing that Acis (now a flowing stream) will forevermore be, "murmuring still thy gentle love."

Opera Bhutan's syncretic interpretation was affecting on many levels. The process employed to create the piece entailed thought, dialogue, cooperation, and compromise – skills we sorely need in the domains of family, domestic, and global relations. Artists from distinct cultures learned and contributed their unique expressions of shared themes and values – amplifying the range of expressivity.

The opportunities for the varied audiences to gain exposure to new sights, sounds, and expressions raised the potential for resonating connections. Both East and West sacrificed some cultural purity for the sake of the production, but the collaborative process itself was an authentic artistic expression. Most of the cultural transitions worked well; a couple could have been smoother and probably would have been, had more performances allowed the production to ripen.

The Opera Bhutan directors are creating waves in the opera world, and have received proposals for more intercultural collaborative projects – *The Magic Flute* in Cambodia and *Orfeo* in Japan. The UTEP student performers and their families, some of whom cross the border every time they travel to and from the university, have been utterly changed by participating in a creative process drawing on

artistic and cultural expressions that transcend political boundaries and geographic borders. The university offered an unprecedented opportunity for exposure and learning to its students, the surrounding communities, and the Bhutanese collaborating artists and audiences.

Remarkably, this Western classical myth of Acis and Galatea served as a perfect vehicle to illustrate the Himalayan Buddhist view of the transitory nature of the physical world. Opera Bhutan has taken this tale of transformation through love and added its own unique story of reaching across cultures – achieving an expression that transcends the ordinary.

San Francisco

Rachel Howard

Insatiable San Francisco Ballet patrons were well fed by artistic director Helgi Tomasson's casting generosity for *Giselle*: six casts over the course of an eight performance run. (And a seventh *Giselle* was scheduled, but Lorena Feijóo had to cancel due to injury.) I was able to catch just two *Giselle* Albrecht pairings, but left the War Memorial Opera House deeply sated.

—Mathilde Froustey had her second go at the

role, after delivering a riveting act I last spring. (Her mad *Giselle* swung Albrecht's sword around so hazardously that she ripped the velvet dress worn by Bathilde, a gesture the wardrobe department is surely relieved she did not repeat.)

—Froustey came to San Francisco last season on a two-year sabbatical from the Paris Opera Ballet, where she was not elevated from *sujet*. Many in the Bay Area are praying she will find San Francisco sufficiently fulfilling to defect permanently, all the more so after her second act of *Giselle* showed such depth.

—Tiit Helimets, Froustey's Albrecht, connected with his *Giselle* through glance and gesture. His minutely fluttering feet during his marathon series of *entrechats* are a wondrous expression of terror.

—Froustey has said she wanted to work toward conveying both the lightness of *Giselle*'s ghostly form and the heaviness of death, and she succeeded movingly. Certain optical-illusion steps that she had not mastered last year were magical this time, like the series of *entrechats* where *Giselle* must appear to be batted around the stage like a wisp in the wind. Equally important, in each passage she has built an escalation—a particular touch or look from Albrecht sending her into greater desperation to save him, and a more frenzied energy in her famously silken *ports de bras*.

—Yet suddenly, when the sun had risen and the Willis had fled, Froustey became again dead weight. In the lift when Albrecht lays the fully stretched *Giselle* across his arm, which with many ballerinas reads like mere display of a pretty pose, Froustey became a true corpse. Her return to the grave was not so much the fading of a ghost as the decomposition of a body.

—Frances Chung also de-