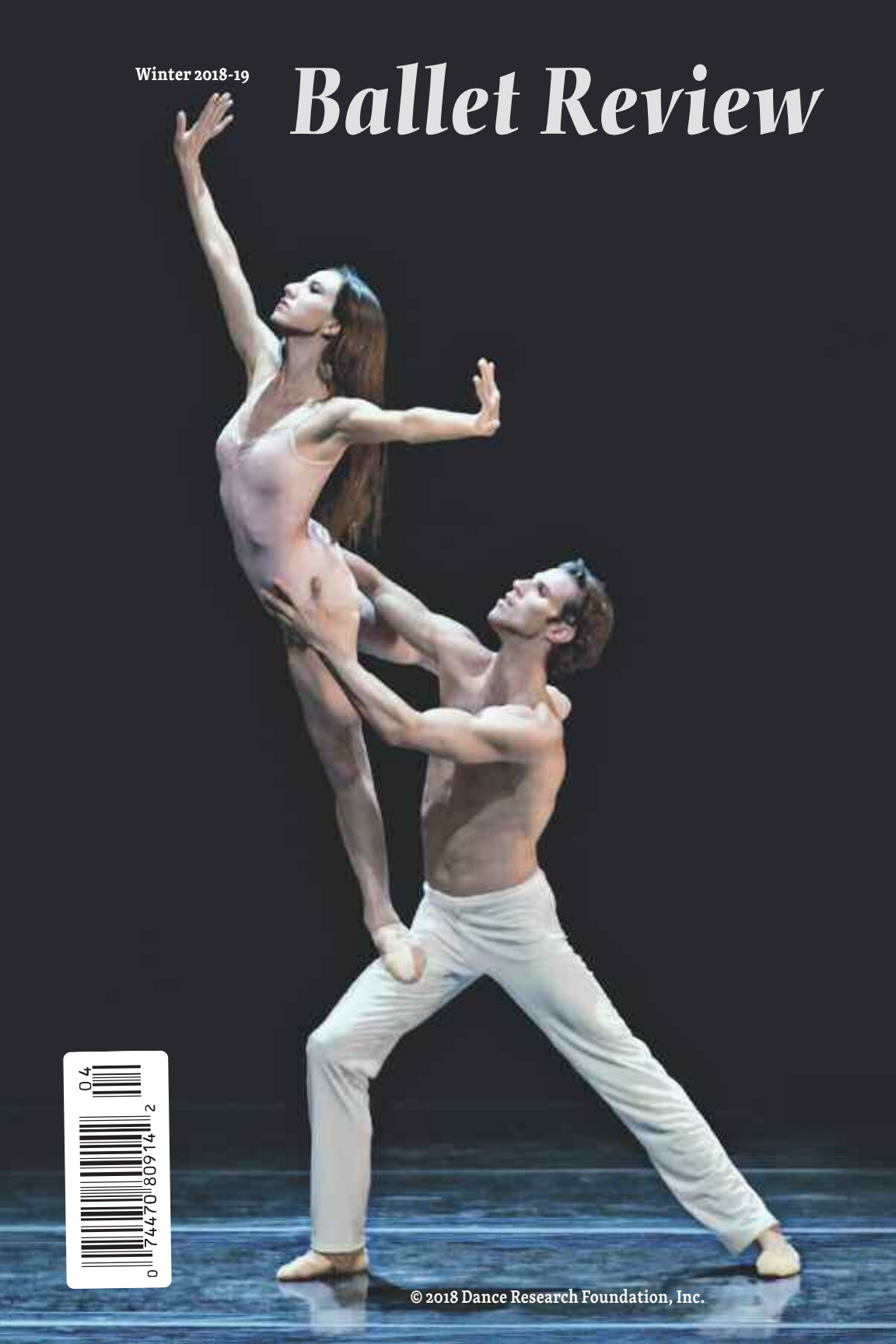
Winter 2018-19

Ballet Review



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Cover photograph by Karolina Kuras, Ballet Sun Valley Festival: Isabella Boylston and James Whiteside in the *After the Rain* pas de deux.

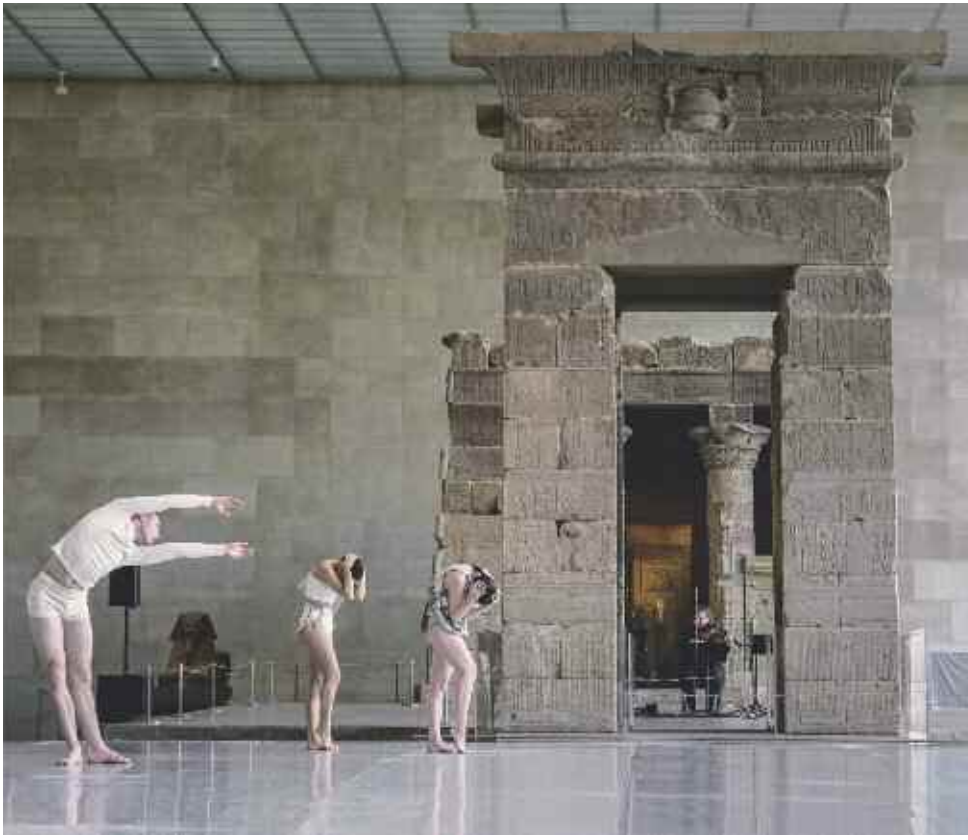
The Space Between

Karen Greenspan

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is venturing into new relationships with performing artists, inviting them "to mine the vast Met collection and interrogate, interpret, and illuminate it through performance." Andrea Miller, 2017-2018 Met artist in residence and founder and artistic director of Gallim Dance, first seized this opportunity to create *Stone Skipping*, a site-specific work that inhabited one of the most magnificent spaces in the museum, and for that matter, the world – The Temple of Dendur. Miller, who has an appetite for bold dreams and daring choreography, found the means to meet the ambitious challenge of choreographing for the commanding space with its crowning ancient artifact.

Limor Tomer, general manager of MetLive Arts (performances within the context of the Met's collection and exhibitions), had been following Miller's work and approached her a couple of years ago about doing site-specific choreography at the Met. They took a walk through the museum and viewed many different spaces. Miller was most drawn to the Temple because "it was anchored in something historic." Miller continued, "I loved that the space had water, light, the temple, the park, the scale! It was a challenge. It was an opportunity."

After producing a fifteen-minute mock-up, Miller was invited to create a full-length work for the space. Although, in the past, the Met has commissioned individual dance works and



Andrea Miller's *Stone Skipping*. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, MetLiveArts)

has appointed musicians and theater companies to the position of artist in residence, Miller is the first choreographer to be chosen for the role.

Miller sensed that the Temple of Dendur contained a natural blueprint for the dance. She examined the life cycle of the temple – from a religious/political monument of 2000 years ago to an artifact and cultural object today – and imagined where and what it might be 2000 years from now. Miller then extended this reflection to the life cycles of humans and natural, nonhuman life forms. No small order.

Knowing she would need to supplement her eleven-member company with additional dancers for the project, Miller approached Juilliard, her alma mater, and auditioned for six more dancers. Gallim had two initial working sessions in the museum space and then returned to its Brooklyn studio for morning rehearsals and traveled to Juilliard two afternoons a week to rehearse with the additional cast.

When they came back to the museum two months later, nothing worked. So they revised their working process to include a weekly rehearsal in the museum space, which had to be during museum hours, giving the public unique exposure to Gallim's gritty process of dance making.

They needed to work in the specific space to meet its demands and incorporate its assets. For instance, the stage was raised eighteen inches above the ground. Miller used this construction to create an illusory effect in which the dancers emerged and disappeared into the earth: she had them step off the stage, descend onto their backs, and shimmy along the floor unseen by the audience.

Miller commissioned new music for the dance – a viola quartet – from downtown veteran composer Phil Kline. Three days before the performance only 40 percent of the music was complete, so the dancers rehearsed to music from a previous work that consisted of repetitive electronic tones. Miller later confided that Kline was still composing on the day of the show and, while stuck in traffic on his way to the Met, was e-mailing the music to the sound operator.

The composer wasn't the only one working up until the last minute. When I stopped by the studio a few days before the show, the dancers were still improvising a new duet evoking a scene from *Animal Planet*. A male crawls on all fours and nuzzles up to the female, eventually pulling himself up onto her. Though she seems indifferent to him, he clutches at her, forcing an interaction by lifting her up overhead. In a heroic move, he runs in a circle carrying her aloft as she rotates around changing positions in the air. Fearless and uncompromising in their pursuit of a universal expression, Miller and the dancers experimented with the physically demanding sequence until it was refined.

For the performances inside the monumental, glass-walled Sackler Wing that houses the ancient Egyptian temple, the public was seated around three sides of the reflecting pool situated in front of the stone floor surrounding the temple platform. Before the giant stone structure, a lone dancer emerged out of the floor like a new form of life on Earth. The deep, almost prehistoric sound that reverberated through the cavernous space called to mind Eve as she might have experienced her first inkling of "knowledge" while in the Garden of Eden. The dancer wore a bronze, metallic, fabric, one-piece "swimsuit" – one of the various individualized designs by Jose Solís. The use of bare legs along with the textured draping of fabric in skin tones, white, and metallic bronze lent a feeling of "prehistoric chic."

From the back of the vast hall, more dancers entered and pressed forward in slow motion, as if arriving at the birth of civilization. The original inhabitant circled the space, running with elation at the arrival of the human procession while resounding church-like chords permeated the mythic scene.

Seated in the center of the temple structure, the musicians of the quartet Firewood (all violists) formed an elegant vision in the distance. They played an expressive, varied score

Stone Skipping. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, MLA)

intermeshed with electronic sounds that evoked a wide range of emotions – from wondrous awe to harsh dissonance; from mournful isolation to redemptive interconnection.

An environment of natural life unfolded with a large group of dancers breathing and undulating together like underwater flora. Another group coalesced and then broke apart bit by bit, like waves crashing and receding against rocky promontories. Life forms evolved into couples butting heads; chasing, clasping, and supporting each other; and then entwining to form insect-like shapes. Destruction, represented by the manipulation of a great, rumpled plastic sheet, consumed everyone in its path.

Amidst the scene of devastation, the dancers mapped the making and breaking of relationships and alliances through the constant and strained formation of new groupings in response to the roving plastic sheet. Finally, two individuals broke off to connect in the intimate duet I had observed a few days before in the studio.

Meanwhile, the other fifteen dancers moved upstage and merged into a line lying across the floor. They resembled a giant, reclining, vertebral column as they used one body part and then another to beat a unison, pulsing rhythm into the floor. The primal thrum kept time for the members of the couple who had disconnected and proceeded to face off in a wrestling match. The reclining spine uprighted itself maintaining its insistent percussion – now with thudding hops – as it formed a dancing tribal circle. The tribe dispersed (and took the curtain call) leaving only one final member continuing the steady pulse of the rhythmic dance.

Miller handily met the challenge of creating a dance that could fill a great space and converse as an equal with the Met's Temple of Dendur around the theme of survival – of monuments, species, and civilizations. She accessed nuanced emotional states by wringing deeply felt solos and duets from her amazing Gallim dancers, and juxtaposed varied groupings to create relational complexity. The

Andrea Miller's *(C)arbon*. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, MLA)

enlarged cast allowed her to develop en masse choreography to create vast landscapes and powerful images of scale in a grand portrayal of the collective human experience.

For the second part of the Met residency, Miller and Gallim innovated a dance called *(C)arbon* for three empty galleries in the Met Breuer. In contrast to *Stone Skipping*, *(C)arbon* set up a very close relationship between the audience and the dancers within various spaces. The piece was inspired by the Met Breuer's art exhibition *Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body*. Indeed, these realistic, erotic, painful, and provocative sculptural works provided a perfect jumping-off point, as Miller explained during an open rehearsal in the museum space, "to investigate the body as a conduit for experience in an age where so much of our experience is automated."

The piece took place in three connected galleries – one large and rectangular white space and two small, linked galleries. Two of the galleries had red clay sculptures created by Eric Ehrnschwender that added a textured, earthy accent. The music, composed by Will Epstein, combined the intimate experience of a chamber performance along with a vast sonic score comprised of sounds from nature, like the washing of waves, that transitioned naturally into evocative electronic sound.

The audience entered the galleries to the live performance of a mood-setting acoustic duet. The composer meandered about playing a soulful saxophone improvisation as filmmaker Ben Stamper sat in a corner of the large gallery on a child-size chair and played a portable pumping organ. The live musicians and their music filled the space as Stamper's film projected, on three of the large gallery's walls, close-up views of isolated body parts as well as other natural elements (rocks, water, trees). As the live musicians finished their overture, the dancers entered the galleries to perform amid the electronic soundscape and visual projections.

Each gallery housed a different perspective of the lived and felt experience of a human body – as an individual, in dual relationships, and in communities. One of the smaller galleries showcased a single dancer opposite a large, textured, clay wedge. From an initial fetus-like shape, the dancer awakened to life

and the physical experience of inhabiting the body with the wiggling of toes and the stretching of limbs. This pleasing state quickly evaporated as the dancer contorted and strained in an ongoing struggle to free himself from the pull of gravity and stand upright. At long last, the dancer stood and mounted the steep incline of the clay structure to sit at the top and take in the wide view from its height. To crown this moment of triumphal ecstasy, the filmed image of rushing waters flooded the wall behind him. And in the next moment, it all dissolved as he fell backward, out of sight, with a thud.

In the large gallery, three dancers clustered together in an effortful social interaction – lifting, supporting, transporting, and pulling away from each other as they traversed the perimeter of the space. One of the dancers was lifted on the shoulders of the others and carried horizontally as her feet walked along the wall's vertical surface. Unable to maintain the demands of social cohesion, they pulled away from the wall and then from each other, dispersing to opposite ends of the large gallery space. In spite of the expansive space between them, the dancers' searching gazes and performance of identical movements in synchrony revealed their social instinct to come back together. The reconvened group returned to the wall and continued their fraught journey together.

I found the dual relationship danced in the small gallery to be the most riveting. Two dancers dressed in orange, metallic boxing shorts danced atop a two-foot-high, square pedestal only slightly smaller than the room itself. The viewers stood around the perimeter only inches away from the "boxing ring" as the two dancers interacted with edgy energy portraying emotional states of desire and intimacy that alternated with aggression and confrontation. Toward the end, the two sat gazing into each other's eyes with such intensity that one could feel the electric charge in the narrow space between them. They climbed down from the platform and stood one behind the other. Maintaining a hair's breadth between their two bodies, they exited the gallery walking as one.

Each section of choreography (within each gallery) was approximately thirty minutes in duration and designed to be experienced in any order and in an up-close and personal relationship. Viewers took cues from the performers and, upon their exit, would proceed into another gallery. This afforded viewers a physical closeness with the dancers in a way they never normally get. And because the performers in each gallery rotated so as to perform all sections of the piece, it was possible for a viewer to stay in the same gallery and watch the same section performed by three different casts. This brought a unique emotional range and richness to the possible experiences that one could have in this format.

In *(C)arbon*, the Gallim dancers brought together a radical, emotional honesty coupled with the skillful use of tension, effort, touch, gaze, and space (or lack thereof) between dancers. Breaking the norms and barriers associated with most staged performance, they offered up the gamut of uncensored human experience – vulnerability, suffering, excitement, eroticism, danger, comfort, and more – affording exceptional proximity for the viewers. The electronic score magnified the intensity of the portrayed relationships and situations in an affecting accompaniment.

The only downside to this set-up was the fragmented nature of the experience. With no beginning, middle, and end, the overall experience is similar to meandering through an uncurated collection of marvelous artwork. These are interesting issues and challenges for choreographers who are forging relationships with museums, inhabiting their space, and relating to their content. It is certainly exciting to watch these relationships unfold and develop as they provide more possibilities to conceive and experience dance.