

THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

A Footstep
of Air &
Opus 19/
The Dreamer
& Voluntaries

March 2007



Ballet Notes



Cover: Sonia Rodríguez and Aleksandar Antonijević in *Opus 19/The Dreamer* (2005).
This page: Artists of the Ballet in *Voluntaries* (2002).

A Footstep of Air

Choreography: Eliot Feld

Staged by: Eliot Feld and Patrice Hemsworth

Music: Irish and Scottish folk songs arranged by

Ludwig van Beethoven and orchestrated by Sol Berkowitz

Costume Design: Willa Kim

Lighting Design: Allen Lee Hughes

A Footstep of Air is a gift from
THE VOLUNTEER COMMITTEE,
THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA.

Opus 19/The Dreamer

Choreography: Jerome Robbins

Staged by: Susan Hendl with the assistance of Lindsay Fischer

Music: Sergei Prokofiev, *Violin Concerto No.1 in D Major* (1917)

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Costume Design: Ben Benson

Lighting Design: Jennifer Tipton, recreated by Les Dickert

Opus 19/The Dreamer is made possible by a generous
contribution from David and Torunn Banks.

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Voluntaries

Choreography: Glen Tetley

Staged by: Bronwen Curry and Peter Ottmann

Music: Francis Poulenc, *Concerto in G minor for
Organ, Strings and Timpani*

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Set and Costume Design: Rouben Ter-Arutunian

Lighting Design: John B. Read

Voluntaries is performed in tribute to Mr. Tetley
who passed away on January 26th, 2007.



Eliot Feld
Choreographer

A Footstep of Air

Eliot Feld's *A Footstep of Air* (1977), a Canadian premiere, is a bright, bumptious suite of rustic dances such as you've probably never seen before outside musical comedy, and it's set to Beethoven as you've probably never heard him. The score is Feld's selection from a vast collection of popular Irish, Welsh, and Scottish airs originally commissioned by Edinburgh publisher George Thomson for three main reasons: to document and ornament the Celtic musical heritage; to promote appreciation of Celtic culture; and to infiltrate middle class British households with Celtic songs, both lively and sentimental, for marriageable women to employ in charming eligible bachelors, a custom exemplified most humorously in the novels of Jane Austen.

To assemble this collection and turn folk music into respectable art, Thomson called on Scots poets like Robert Burns and fashionable continental composers such as Haydn (who arranged over 400 songs) and Beethoven (who contributed about 170 between 1809 and 1820). The commissions were lucrative, netting Beethoven over 600 pounds after a good deal of haggling over price and artistic standards—Thomson found Beethoven's work, scored for violin, cello, piano, and voice, too difficult for its intended domestic audience and made wholesale editorial changes in some of the arrangements.

Feld's selections from this compilation were then transformed, with appropriate artistic license, by Sol Berkowitz's jaunty contemporary orchestration, reminiscent of tongue-in-cheek 18th century ballad operas like John Gay's *A Beggar's Opera*.

With its dancers garbed in rustic finery designed by Willa Kim, *A Footstep of Air* is a deliciously quirky Gaelic hoedown blending classical technique (bravura footwork and jumps) and folk elements (flexed feet, skipping, hip-waggles) into an eccentric romp. It's as if Marie Antoinette's elegant little Hameau were to meet "So You Think You Can Dance" in a celebration of *carpe diem*.

The first two numbers—"Ye Shepherds of This Pleasant Vale" and "Music, Love, and Wine"—introduce the full

cast in flirtatious line and couple dances. The third, a major highlight, is a solo to "Behold, My Love, How Green the Groves." Here, a bucolic idyll is set to a sweet-flowing melody, and Feld introduces a long shepherd's crook that turns the dance into a pas de deux with slow pole-vaulted jumps. The magical lyricism is occasionally brought down to earth by the attack of a rapacious mosquito or an inadvertent landing in a cow pat.

"The Pulse of an Irishman," featuring a randy fellow with a runny nose and three game girls, is set to a brisk jig, while "Peggy's Daughter" is a romantic couple dance with walking-on-air lifts as the dominant movement motif. "Sally in Our Alley," in contrast, shows a younger, simpler girl-next-door practising dance steps alone for her own pleasure.

"Put Round the Bright Wine" is a rowdy drinking song for three tipsy men. Its lyrics provide title and theme for the whole ballet: "*When wine in my head can its wisdom impart, and love has its promise to make to my heart; when dim in far shade sink the spectres of care, and I tread a bright world with a footstep of air.*"

"That Mischief Woman" introduces a lusty heroine who aims at quick seduction by means of her vigorous hip shakes, flamboyant gestures, and "*glossy eyes, sae dark and wily.*" In "Charlie is My Darling," perhaps the most familiar of the songs to modern audiences, the text—originally pertaining to Bonnie Prince Charlie—is undercut by a foppish courtier full of choler and braggadocio who fights an imaginary duel with himself, or perhaps with his erratic, unwieldy foil.

Two ensemble dances—"Come Fill, Fill, My Good Fellow" and "Since Greybeards Inform Us That Youth Will Decay"—conclude the ballet with exuberant energy as the querulous cavalier Charlie reappears and drives everyone else off the stage.

Creating a successful comic non-narrative ballet must be one of the hardest things in the world to do, and Feld succeeds brilliantly with this engaging, playful entertainment and its imaginative prop-enriched star-turn solos for men.



Jerome Robbins
Choreographer

Opus 19/The Dreamer

The dual title of *Opus 19/The Dreamer* hints at one reason for the ballet's elusive power: the work is both abstract, distanced by the relatively generic "Opus 19" (a reference to its chronological place in composer Sergei Prokofiev's *oeuvre*) and vaguely narrative, a ballet about "The Dreamer." Created in 1979 for Mikhail Baryshnikov during that dancer's brief sojourn with New York City Ballet, *Opus 19/The Dreamer* evokes the mood of a mysterious dream-like quest for something unknown, or perhaps only unrecognized.

Prokofiev's brilliant concerto was written in 1917, but its premiere was delayed for six years, in part due to the Russian political situation. Eventually, in 1923, the concerto was performed in Paris under the distinguished baton of Koussevitsky once a violinist could be found who was willing to play this dissonant, bittersweet, oddly compelling work with its blend of romanticism and modernity. In the audience were Picasso and Pavlova.

Dance and music are firmly linked here; the choreography emerges cohesively from the score. The first movement, *andantino*, begins with a hushed tremolo in the strings while the solo violin enters *sognando*, dreamily, with a lyrical theme that will recur at the end, both of this movement and of the whole concerto. Centre stage, the dreamer moves almost in place for the first part of his solo. Behind him huddles a group of barely visible dream-folk, six men and six women, whose movements often dimly echo his. His dance expresses his hesitancy, isolation, and yearning to be part of the group. Are we sensing the plight of Baryshnikov, new to the company, confronted by the close-knit NYCB dancers? Here as elsewhere, the spare choreography demands a strong presence and emotional depth, not technical virtuosity.

A group of women enters on pointe to pizzicato strings as the man watches from the side. Suddenly one woman emerges from the group and hurls herself at him. They dance, occasionally interrupted by the other men and women, until the main theme is repeated—and the man repeats the yearning gestures that opened the

ballet. In a very magical moment, the dancers form a straight line from front to back, and the woman braids her way backwards through the shifting line until she disappears.

The second movement, a chromatic scherzo with violent rhythms, unites the man and the woman again, but still he longs for more complete integration into the group.

In the third movement, the bassoon states a faintly threatening, faintly comical, new theme, and the choreography hints at Russian folk dance. Finally the musical theme from the first movement recurs to accompany the man's longing gestures, and the woman has vanished. The line of dancers from front to back re-forms, and the woman weaves her way invisibly from back to front. The ballet ends with the couple reunited—until waking?



Sonia Rodriguez and Aleksandar Antonijevic
in *Opus 19/The Dreamer* (2005).



Xiao Nan Yu and Patrick Lavoie
in *Voluntaries* (2002).



Glen Tetley
Choreographer

Voluntaries

Voluntaries (1973) takes its name from the free improvisations played on the organ as preludes or postludes to the celebration of the mass. Connotations of flight, desire, and free will exist both in the technical musical term and in the images of the ballet, a dance not of men and women but of powerful shimmering angels soaring above the stage.

Considered Tetley's signature piece, *Voluntaries* began its life as an impassioned response to tragedy—the sudden death of choreographer John Cranko, Artistic Director of Stuttgart Ballet, at the age of 46 in 1973. Tetley had planned to create a work for Stuttgart, but Cranko's death and Tetley's becoming Stuttgart Ballet's next Artistic Director (1974-77) provided the specific genesis of *Voluntaries* as an expression of profound grief, a commemoration of Cranko's life, and an assertion of the power of art to transform anguish into celebration.

The ballet's universal message also has deep meaning for The National Ballet of Canada: when beloved Artistic Director Erik Bruhn died suddenly in 1986, Tetley had just created *Alice* for the company. Once again helping pick up the pieces for grieving dancers, he became the company's Artistic Associate (1987-89), setting *Voluntaries* in 1988. The work became, for us, a deeply felt memorial to Bruhn as well as to Cranko.

Although lacking a conventional narrative, the ballet's emotional logic echoes Poulenc's dramatic, even cathartic, score, with its seven continuous sections alternating between stately andante and anxious allegro tempi. Poulenc's unusual orchestration omits brass and wind instruments, but the lush sweetness of the strings, the thunderings of timpani, and the continually varying registers of the organ provide textural and dynamic contrasts perfectly imaged in the dance.

Performed by a leading couple, a secondary trio, and six couples, *Voluntaries* offers cascades of sculpted movement on all levels—the floor, kneeling, standing,

on pointe, in high lifts. Phrases introduced by the leading couple or trio appear again, somewhat modified, for other dancers in other sections. In keeping with the elevated theme, arrowy sky-pointing leaps and lifts with a severe yet sensuous clarity of line dominate the dance imagery. The style fuses Graham technique, with its emotional intensity and deep contractions of the torso, with the upright linearity of classical ballet. This seemingly effortless fusion of two diametrically opposed dance traditions is one of Tetley's greatest contributions to dance, challenging classically trained dancers.

The ballet represents spiritual passion with memorable images, most notably a cruciform image evoking the pain and transcendence of the crucifixion. *Voluntaries* begins in near darkness and complete silence, with a dim spotlight on the leading couple. The lead woman crouches in front of the lead man, slowly unfolds upwards, and then, with a fortissimo minor chord blast from the organ, springs into the cruciform position as she is held at arm's length above the man like a sacrificial victim. Arms extended, fists clenched, back arched, she writhes in agony, a portrait of despair. Later, other dancers echo this image in a series of lifts with the woman leaping and arching backwards over the man's supporting arms. And at the ballet's end, to four great dissonant organ chords, the leading man lifts the woman in a cruciform shape yet again—but this time her hands are relaxed; the emotional agony is finally released.

Between these cruciform images are others resonant of the *pietà*, reflecting the limp exhaustion of prolonged grief. Yet despite its Christian imagery, this is not strictly speaking a religious work; rather, *Voluntaries* uses Christian imagery to make a universal spiritual statement recognized as an uplifting masterpiece of artistry and feeling.

— Penelope Reed Doob



Above: Sonia Rodríguez and Aleksandar Antonijevic in *Opus 19/The Dreamer* (2005).

Photography: Frederic Ohringer, Andrew Oxenham, Jim Varriale and Cylla von Tiedemann.

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