

Some Funky Things Happen on the Way to the Kiss

By **JOHN ROCKWELL**

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The choreographer Donald Byrd has had a long and complex and honorable career. He has worked all over the country but was mostly based in New York. Three years ago, he decamped for Seattle to become artistic director of the Spectrum Dance Theater there. After reshaping the company in a reportedly stormy fashion, he returned to New York on Wednesday night at Dance Theater Workshop with the first of an eight-performance run of an evening-length piece called "The Sleeping Beauty Notebook."



Joel Myers and Peter deGrasse in the Donald Byrd/Spectrum Dance Theater's "Sleeping Beauty Notebook."

Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

It was a fascinating, erratic and ultimately deeply moving evening, quite apart from its symbolism as Mr. Byrd's homecoming. Mr. Byrd and his dramaturge, Thomas DeFrantz, have almost more ideas than they know what to do with, but they do something compelling with most of them. The piece recalled Jérôme Bel's conceptual exercises, except that Mr. Bel tends to spin out one idea over time, while Mr. Byrd crams a million ideas into time.

Mr. Byrd has long liked to play with ballet classics, and as the "Notebook" title suggests, this is a series of commentaries, variations, re-enactments and contemporary extensions of "The Sleeping Beauty," all set to Valery Gergiev's gorgeous recording of the Tchaikovsky score. There are obscenities and sometimes coy, projected commentary. There are dancers shouting out glosses on the action: "She will prick her finger; she will die." There is a seven-minute compacted version. There is a learned disquisition about why "The Sleeping Beauty" is not a "white" ballet, followed by a

giant bed whereupon seven women in white tutus lie in expectation of being awakened by the Prince's kiss. There are allusions to 18th-century court dance and feral women and loutish, drunken men. There is an audience discussion about Carabosse, the wicked witch, as a marginalized outsider. And on it goes, although the ballet's third-act celebration of the royal wedding is pretty much ignored.

All this held together admirably, even with its fragmented diversity. That was partly because of the inherent cleverness of the idea, the funky imagination of the costumes and props and the charm of many of the dancers.

The erratic quality had mostly to do with the forced application of ballet positions and movements (often overtly echoing Petipa's original choreography). While nearly all the Spectrum women have had ballet experience, they did not have conventional ballet bodies. To see a bunch of barefooted, chunky modern dancers trying to evoke this ballet classic might have been intended as commentary, but it became tiresome; it looked like failure.

That said, most of the women had arresting personalities and moved well on their own terms. And even if the extensive dialogue sometimes devolved into high school histrionics, at other times it worked cleverly.

There are three men, and they were more convincingly balletic. Together in a terrific bar scene, in which they intermittently court, insult and manhandle one another and a perky Aurora (Lara Seefeldt), they danced with panache; Joel Myers had an especially winsome charm, but David Alewine and Peter deGrasse were just as good.

Mr. Byrd, Mr. Alewine and one of the women, Julia Wilkins, came spectacularly into their own in the final duet. Ms. Wilkins - who had been Carabosse at the end of the first part - emerged from the tutu pack and engaged in a long modern-dance duet with Mr. Alewine, free of all ballet pretensions. It was remarkable, mirroring almost every possible emotion the two characters might have felt, from love, of course, to anger to maternal dependency to death. It recalled the equally complex, shifting relationship between Siegfried and Brünnhilde in the long final duet of Wagner's "Siegfried," another grand stage work in which someone is awakened with a kiss.

At the very end, the Prince dies, and I could have done without the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. But that's what "The Sleeping Beauty Notebook" is all about: ideas tumbling on top of one another, some good, some not so good, but in totality a triumph.

Donald Byrd's "Sleeping Beauty Notebook," with the Spectrum Dance Theater of Seattle, continues through tomorrow and again from Wednesday to Nov. 12 at Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 924-0077 or dtw.org.