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March 2024 complete issue: <https://link.isamedia.com/mar2024>

A Threnody for Ukraine

By: David Barbour

Solitude, at New York City Ballet, is a powerful comment on the ravages of war



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One rarely looks to the world of ballet for a response to recent world events, but Alexei Ratmansky, the recently appointed resident choreographer at New York City Ballet, grew up in Ukraine. His parents still live there. Thus, his newest work, *Solitude*, which premiered in mid-February, is a poetic reflection of the devastation visited on his home country since its invasion by Russia two years ago.

The focus of the piece—set to "Funeral March" from Symphony No. 1 and the fourth movement, "Adagietto," from Symphony No. 5, both by Gustav Mahler—is a young man (NYCB principal Joseph Gordon) quietly tending to the prone body of his son. (In Moritz Junge's costume design, the adult figure wears a green sweater seemingly intended to evoke the presence of Volodymyr Zelenskyy.) Coming in and out of the darkness are other members of the company. As described by *New York Times* dance critic Gia Kourlas, "Limbs are shown at brittle, broken angles or sometimes even like weapons. At one point, the women are carried offstage with a bent knee and a straight leg raised in the air; when their bodies are flipped, they're like guns aimed into the wing. From time to time, the men pause to stand on one leg while crossing the other in front and holding it by the shin—balancing like amputees. When Ratmansky's images register through the stage's darkness, they're chilling."

The darkness referred to above is managed by Mark Stanley, the company's resident lighting designer. "It's dark," he admits, "and it's darker than when I started it. "But Alexei was insistent, and [referring to the dancers moving through the piece] he kept saying, 'Ghosts, ghosts'." Stanley



Stanley devised a white horizon line that rises to the top of the upstage drop over the course of the ballet. Jung, he says, “designed a scrim that transforms the horizon,” going in front of the projection screen and adding an extra level of diffusion. “It became the line between the physical and emotional worlds of light and dark,” Stanley adds.

admits he worried about the action being enveloped by the dim atmosphere, but given the strong critical and audience reception, it isn't a problem.

Still, the designer adds, “Threading the needle between not becoming melodrama yet being really honest about each moment” was the big challenge. Having established the mournful atmosphere, he says the question was: “Where do we go from here? At the end of the day, it's a tragedy about the loss of this child and the father's emotion [expressed in a powerful solo]; I was trying to stay true to that.”

Junge's set design includes a kind of fortification upstage, consisting of rocks and barbed wire, as well as a drop that Stanley uses for a gorgeous effect. However, the lighting designer says, “We didn't consider the inclusion of scenic elements until Alexei was well into the choreography of the piece. I was out of town, working on another show, when Marquerite [Mehler, the ballet's director of production] called me and said, ‘You have to be on a Zoom tomorrow.’ Moritz was at the meeting. He had done some quick sketches of an idea that Alexei

wanted, involving darkness taking over. But how could we do it?”

“Moritz had conceived the scenic ground row, and, behind it, he thought, we could bury on the floor a black curtain, which could slowly go up over the course of the ballet. Technically, however, this was fraught with peril: You'd have cables and a pile of fabric with a 60' span and a 40' height on the floor. How could we make it not look like a curtain flying out? Then, I thought, how could we do this with light?”

“I quickly did a sketch of another idea: If we put lights and the curtain on the same pipe and hid it behind a rear-projection screen, and bounced the light off the back wall, [both the scenic and lighting elements] could rise together, creating a sense of enveloping darkness.” The effect would be that of a white horizon light and darkness below, rising and rising until the light eventually disappeared. Everybody said, ‘Great! That solves all our problems!’ Then I thought, now I've got to make this happen because it was just an idea in my head.”

Thinking it over, Stanley says, he

realized, “I have done ballets where we've moved a line of light, but never did we create something where the darkness sort of took over. We did a couple of tests onstage; the idea seemed solid, and everybody was onboard with it. And it was more successful than I ever expected it to be; it does exactly what we wanted it to do.” To facilitate the effect, he adds, “Moritz designed a scrim that transforms the horizon,” going in front of the projection screen and adding an extra level of diffusion. The result is remarkably effective: “It became the line between the physical and emotional worlds of light and dark,” Stanley says.

The stage crew makes the effect happen manually, inching the pipe up by degrees over the course of ten minutes. “They have a big countdown clock and marks that they have to hit at three, six, eight minutes,” Stanley says. “A question that came up during the tech process was whether we should leave any light at the very top of the drop at the end of the ballet. Should the last image be total darkness, or would there be a glimmer of

CLOSE-UP: DANCE



The color palette is restrained except for some icy blues and the strategic use of red to suggest carnage. The latter is very lightly applied. “We were very careful about putting too much symbolism on the use of red,” Stanley says.

hope? We decided to end with a narrow band of light at the very top.” The units used in the effect are Chroma-Q Color Force 72s.

The ballet’s color palette is restrained except for some icy blues and the strategic use of red to suggest carnage. The latter is very lightly

deployed: “We were very careful about putting too much symbolism in the use of red; it just seemed a little too on the nose. When the curtain goes up on the ballet, there’s just a hint of red upstage of the father and son; it was as low as I could get it with you still seeing it. At the end, when there’s a big flash of

white light, a missile explosion, the stage slowly dissolves to red and then fades out to nothing except the father, son, and the band of white at the top.”

City Ballet, which rents lighting gear from 4Wall Entertainment, has been evolving its rig to the point where the automated portion consists entirely of Robe FORTES. “We switched to them about a season and a half ago,” Stanley says, adding that it became clear that local shops were no longer supporting Vari-Lite VL3500 Washes and 3500 Spots, which had been the company’s main automated units. “We did some testing and the FORTES have been great,” he adds. The conventional portion of the rig consists of ETC Source Four Lustrs and incandescent Source Fours. (“We still have scrollers,” on some units, Stanley adds.) Lighting is controlled using ETC Apex consoles.

Although the piece unfolds in a shifting atmosphere, Stanley says, “There are fewer cues than when I started. I felt that there was great graphic storytelling, involving the corps de ballet upstage, that I wanted to reveal through darkness. It also has an unconventional structure: These principal dancers come in and out; they’re part of the corps and then they’re on their own. How much of that do you need to highlight? But Alexei wanted it to be seamless and flowing, so I compressed it a bit; it’s a 22-minute ballet and there are 50 cues, which comes to about one every thirty seconds; it all flows together.”

At the performance LSA attended, *Solitude* received a deeply emotional response from the audience, suggesting it may make a quick return in future seasons. It also made a strong visual contrast with the two other pieces on the bill: *Opus 19/The Dreamer*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins, and *Symphony in Three Movements*, a classic George Balanchine work. For audience members, it was a priceless chance to see the work of three masters, each at the top of his form. 🎭