



# Edgy Times at the Ballet

Brandon Stirling Baker Collaborates with Justin Peck on His Latest Work

Lighting designer Brandon Stirling Baker returned to the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center to light the January 26 premiere of *The Times Are Racing*. “Ballet is more accessible now than it has ever been,” he says. “And I think this piece is a great example of that.”

Informally dubbed “the sneaker ballet,” the piece, which marks his 15th collaboration with the New York City Ballet resident choreographer and principal dancer Justin Peck, breaks with tradition in ways that go well beyond footwear.

Not only do the dancers eschew ballet shoes for modified sneakers, but their costumes also include nary a tutu or unitard. Instead, they are clad in a colorful array of outfits, from booty shorts to jeans and even overalls, paired with T-shirts and hoodies emblazoned with words like “Unite,” “Act,” and “Protest,” all created by fashion designer Humberto Leon for Opening Ceremony.

Peck chose for the score the last four tracks from electronic composer/musician Dan Deacon’s 2012 album, *America*. It’s also played from a recording, a rare occurrence at New York City Ballet.

Spurred by the somewhat bleak and, at times, aggres-

sively propulsive score, Peck creates a sense of constant running throughout the piece. The music also inspired Peck to include a wide range of styles for himself and his 20-person troupe: Savion Glover’s tap/funk, Gene Kelly’s athletic leaps, and Fred Astaire’s soft-shoe as well as hip-hop and party dance moves all meld with the lyricism of traditional ballet steps.

“A lot of what Justin and I did was create moments that kind of pay tribute to the old Balanchine ballets or the classical work of Jerome Robbins that really has only one light cue,” he continues. “That was a major inspiration for us for this specific work.”

Naturally, the unconventional music heavily influenced Baker’s lighting design. From their first discussions about the music and the overall concept, Peck and Baker focused on a quote from philosopher Marshall McLuhan: “The medium is the message.”

“I thought about that a lot and it told me everything about what the lighting should be for this piece,” Baker says. “I knew I wanted to light the whole thing with arc sources and LED sources. I knew I had to add something that was very much foreign to this space.”

After several discussions with resident lighting director Penny Jacobus and director of production Marquerite Mehler, Baker chose to add four Martin by Harman MAC Aura XPs to the company’s repertory plot. “I have been very careful in the past about adding anything, because you only get 15 minutes, so it has to be very easy and cost-friendly to set up,” Baker says. “I very much wanted these foreign sources and was unapologetic about their angles. I chose the Auras because they are so bright. There is a moment in the beginning where I light the entire stage with only those

four Auras and there is something so beautiful about how simple that is.”

Baker also adjusted a couple of focuses for the sidelight booms, which he uses to great effect, and relied heavily on the Philips Vari\*Lite VL3500 Wash luminaires in the rep plot and the Auras as the workhorses of the piece.

“New York City Ballet has a really amazing rep light plot, so you don’t usually need to add a lot to it,” Baker says. “I really love the VL3500 Washes because they are so soft. I am a huge

fan of an arc source in general, especially if it has a soft edge.

“I chose moments where I wanted to keep the arc sources and LED sources just to establish that look from the beginning,” he continues. “We do have pockets within the ballet that are more traditional. But then we pop right out of that. Just when you get comfortable, the entire visual changes. That was our way of keeping things very exciting, visually.”

Lighting programmer Evan Purcell helped Baker make all of this hap-

pen—in the four hours of time they had over the course of four days to put it all together. “That was my first time meeting Evan and he was amazing,” Baker says. “We used the rep’s ETC Eos console and it’s fantastic. I use it a lot and it allows me to be really creative. I don’t have to think too much about the nuts and bolts and can just focus on the work.”

Much of that attention went to the costumes, which are so colorful overall that Baker wanted to let them speak for themselves. “I knew I didn’t have to add a ton of color, so the lighting leans toward pastels, with variations of white: arc white, LED white, and tungsten white,” he explains. “I played around with those three visual ideas to create certain moments. But it was also important that Justin didn’t want to feel movement—he wanted it to feel like one big piece. So that was also a big factor in the color choices, that there was progression.”

Baker took full advantage of the rep plot’s bridge followspots, which are positioned directly over the stage. “I love them,” he says. “I always cringe when I see companies use a hard-edge followspot, but the beauty of the bridge spots is that they allow you to be selective about who you pick up.”

On a catwalk above the stage, four spot operators cue the ETC Source Fours. “They have individually controlled dimmers so they control everything,” Baker says. “It’s such a great tool—using a followspot allows you to be extremely delicate. There is a moment in the ballet where it’s very bright, and, all of a sudden, at what would be considered a music build or a chorus, the lighting snaps to only four bridge spots. It’s a really exciting moment but the truth is that the bridge spots were on the whole time.”

*The Times Are Racing* is scheduled to return to Lincoln Center in May and likely October with stops at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in July and the Kennedy Center at a yet-to-be-determined date. —**Catherine McHugh**

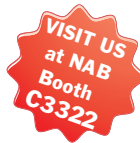
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