

 Cecily Placenti · Jul 20 · 4 min read

Sleeping Beauty

Updated: Jul 21

Sheep Meadow Dance Theater Sleeping Beauty

June 22, 2021
Virtual performance streamed live from The Plaxall Gallery, Queens
Choreography: Billy Blanken
Dancers: Billy Blanken, Kenny Corrigan, Jillian Davis, Alexa DeBarr, Laura Kaufman, Darren McArthur, Sabrina Pretto, Amanda Summers, Tanya Trombly, Kara Walsh
Production Design: 10K Productions
Scenic Design/Video Art: Lauren Woods

Theaters may still be dark in New York City, but Sheep Meadow Dance Theater is lighting up screens with their second foray into what Artistic Director Billy Blanken calls “living dance film.” Undaunted by the prospect of making and sharing art in a time where the usual modes of presentation are only beginning to resurrect, Blanken continues to provide high quality dance entertainment for his audiences while creating new opportunities for his dancers. As with their production of *The Nutcracker* in December, 2020, *Sleeping Beauty* is filmed at the Plaxall Gallery in Queens and gives a contemporary twist to a well known story.



A gorgeous wash of fuschia and violet commands the screen and audiences are transported to a woodland at dusk. Lauren Woods’ scene designs astound with color and vibrancy, implying movement and rhythm with every brushstroke. As a procession of fairies enter, the prismatic backdrop shifts. Blue and orange swirls envelop the dancers like a mist. Although based on a fairy tale, Blanken’s version of *Sleeping Beauty* is rooted in reality. Conceived as humanity collectively emerges from a global pandemic, the ballet addresses themes of healing, realignment, and rebirth. The story of *Sleeping Beauty* is based on *The Sun, the Moon, and Talia* written by the Italian poet Giambattista Basile in 1634 and can easily be seen as a tale of non-consent and abuse. In the original version, a married king finds a girl asleep and rapes her. Blanken addresses this traumatic exchange of energies by choosing to focus on the healthy and beautiful ways this conjunction can exist. Premiered during Pride month, his version highlights the union of communities that, despite external differences, have lived through a common experience.



To this end, all but one dancer in the cast of ten performs the role of Aurora throughout the ballet, reminding us that the power to heal lies inside each of us. As representations of the different chakras or energy centers within the body, each performer wears a simple leotard and skirt in their corresponding color. Amanda Summers in light blue represents the throat chakra, responsible for communication and self expression. As she floats through arabesques and sails into pirouettes, she arouses a sense of joy and calm. Laura Kaufman in red embodies the root chakra with jazzy chugs and carefree wrist flicks that evoke feelings of playfulness and freedom. In a later solo, her expressive upper body rides atop her needlepoint feet with easy grace. Dressed in sherbert orange, Tanya Trombly dances the confidence and enthusiasm of the sacral chakra in a solo that was my particular favorite. Her peppery jumps and syncopated steps are a playful conversation with Tchaikovsky’s score, and her ability to sail through notes and catch up with fast footwork is especially pleasing. As they move in unison, the chakras align and healing can begin.

Employing classical ballet steps arranged in unexpected ways- petite allegro with a flexed foot and surprising directional changes- Blanken’s choreography is familiar yet refreshing. He retains the skeleton of this well known story but tells it through gesture and choreography rather than acting and pantomime. Carabosse, performed by the captivating Jillian Davis (current dancer with Complexions Contemporary Ballet) quickly references the needle-prick curse that is Aurora’s demise, but does not overstate. With her sinuous arms and viscous port de bras, she conjures a spell that sends dancers scurrying to hoard toilet paper and share hand sanitizer- an overt reference to the Covid-19 virus that looks slightly out of place in this ethereal world. Blanken uses Tchaikovsky’s iconic score in refreshing ways as well, omitting some sections and rearranging others. Reminiscent of The Rose Adagio in classical iterations of *Sleeping Beauty*, Aurora’s Act I variation is instead done in the second half of the ballet. Alexa DeBarr holds a long piece of fabric above her head as Darren McArthur and Blanken, each holding an end, promenade her in a perfectly balanced arabesque, offering a compelling take on a traditional moment without sacrificing its inherent challenges.

Act II further explores contemporary vocabulary with floor work and knee spins as Woods’ black and white images swirl, creating the illusion of dancers moving inside a kaleidoscope, their bodies both active and reactive images in the shifting landscape. 10k Productions amplifies this landscape by filming the dancers from overhead and varying camera angles throughout the piece, offering new perspectives on familiar steps. Audiences are treated to a three dimensional view of attitude balances and arabesque lines that give the sensation of being inside the movements rather than seeing them merely from the front or side view offered in a proscenium theater. As the dancers roll and rise from the floor, repeatedly escaping and succumbing to gravity, a rebirth occurs. They begin to walk and observe one another in short individual solo’s of release and longing, our shared humanity felt in the act of witnessing. In the end, orbs of red, yellow, green, orange and blue blaze like tiny suns and then slowly come together into one wash of light. The dancers walk into that light as one community, regenerated.



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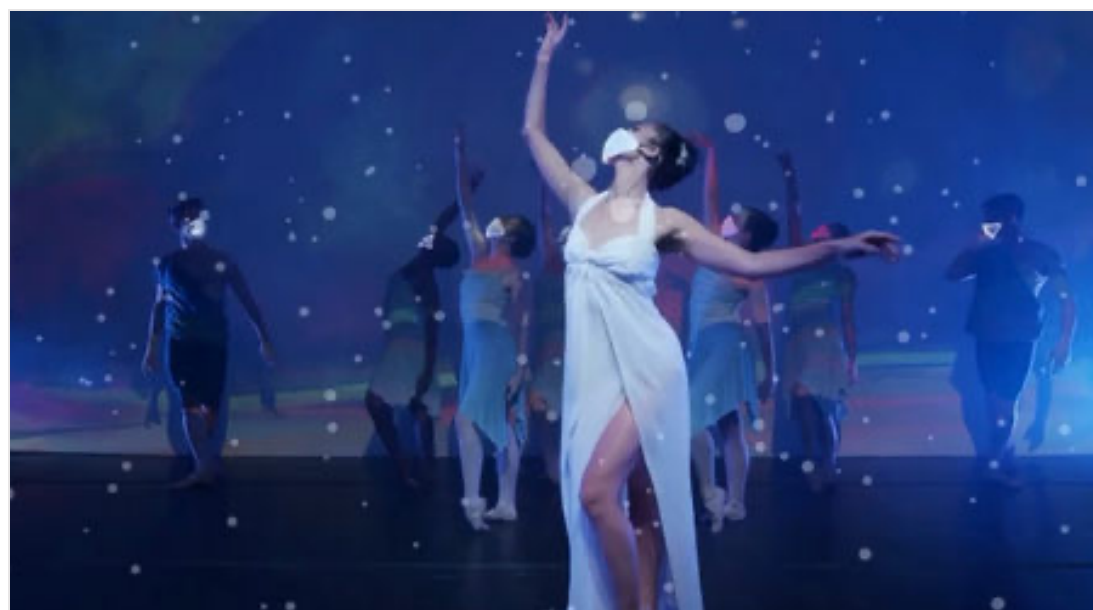
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