

Two at City Ballet

By: David Barbour



Above and opposite: *From You Within Me*. Manning's backdrop featured vivid, swirling colors; Geiger says she and Manning experimented in a light lab, "lighting a sample of the scenery in different ways" to understand the most effective ways of treating the drop.

One rep plot plus two creative teams yield very different results

New York City Ballet's spring season featured two premieres that strikingly demonstrate how different designers can get distinct looks from the same repertory plot. *From You Within Me*, choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon and set to Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, was warm to the touch, with movement aligned to the slow, sensual lines of the music and a stunningly colorful scenic design by the artist Kylie Manning.

As described by *New York Times* dance critic Brian Seibert, "There are two paintings, enormous and full of life. One, transformed into a translucent scrim at the front of the stage, is

a swirl of oceanic blues and forest greens suggestive of a coastline and turbulent waters. The other, a backdrop, is more of a cloudscape of peach and turquoise. We see the start of the dance through the front scrim, which later rises to reveal a clear stage and the backdrop, its colors shifting in Mary Louise Geiger's lighting."

Geiger, who has worked with Wheeldon on many projects, says of the design's genesis, "Chris wanted to see how Kylie responded to the music and how he would respond to her painting. He and I talked about the ability of light to change the perception of the painting." To understand this last point better, she says, "Kylie and I

worked in a light lab, lighting a sample of the scenery in different ways." Geiger also had a swatch of the deep-red costumes designed by Manning and Marc Happel. "I found that as I got more intense with teal light, I could turn the costumes black, completely killing the red; also, if I lit the entire group of dancers in 116 [Medium Blue-Green] and the sidelight was in 201, it made the red pop out."

Employing the lessons of the lab, Geiger's lighting made the upstage drop into a thing of constantly changing colors and textures. "Chris turned to me in rehearsal and said, 'I don't think we should see the whole painting until the end.' So, by lighting it in different colors, I could kill some of the painting's colors and support others. For example, if we hit it with cyan it kills the color. Also, there's a progres-

sion from cool to warm and from a small to a more expansive look.”

Basically, Geiger uses 750W ETC Source Fours “in Clear versus 201, a cold version and a warm version, just upstage of the drop, aimed in three different places at three different heights. They cross on all three levels. As opposed to coming straight at them, the lights heighten the angles of the painting. Mark [Stanley, City Ballet’s resident lighting designer and the scenic supervisor for *From You Within Me*] arranged for Kylie and me to see a rehearsal of *Sleeping Beauty*, for her to get a sense of how drops work in the theatre. It was super-helpful to be able to show her how he would light here from the top and there from the bottom.”

In addition, Geiger says, “I put templates on the drop—they’re super soft—to push some things out and bring others forward. The question was how to bring out specific swaths of the painting, which is horizontal, when the drops are typically lit to be even.” To achieve this, she “put some Lekos behind the drop and [ETC] Lustrs on the special boom on the front bridge; two Lustrs per side can light the mid-

dle swath of the drop. For example, there’s a big cyan-and-turquoise swath on that center area with a [Rosco] 7166 cloud template and R119 [Light Hamburg Frost]; the color and broken light really bring forward parts of the drop.” During the tech process, she also experimented with color with an eye toward bringing the dancers, clad in deep red costumes, out from the upstage drop. “I have Lee 201 [Full CT Blue] in the shins and Lee 110 [Middle Rose] in the mids with Robe FORTes as backlights and [Vari-Lite] VL3000s.”

In terms of the music, Geiger says, “I tried to stick with the time signature, avoiding doing anything too fast, and responding to the modulations. There are five sections of music and five sections of choreography. The first is behind the scrim; it’s kind of moody, darker, and less penetrable. The scrim is lit with four Lekos from the balcony rail (two per side with templates and frost above the heads of the dancers). The drop behind is mostly lit by rovers from the back and the templates.” The rovers are rolling booms with three Lekos each. “They get placed and focused before our piece starts. The drop is backed with RP so it can be lit

without anyone seeing the sources. Later, we light the drop with strip lights that have Lee 110, 728 [Steel Green], and 201. After the scrim goes out, the dancers are more present and exposed. Sara [Mearns, who created the role of the piece’s principal figure] has her solo in section three. Section four is the longest, then it builds toward a big modulation when the entire painting is exposed.” Throughout, as per Wheeldon’s preference, she must not cover the floor too expansively. But, basically, using a combination of colors and angles, Geiger keeps the drop in a constant state of transformation.

Standard Deviation

In contrast to the deeply romantic vision of *From You Within Me*, Alysa Pires’ *Standard Deviation* is angular and almost mathematically precise. As Nadia Vostrikov noted in *Ballet Herald*, “The title is shared with the math concept which measures the dispersion of data in relation to its mean. Imagine a line with a bell curve; higher deviation would make the data more spread out (a flatter bell) whereas low deviation would mean more data clus-



The company seen silhouetted against the backdrop. The designer used a variety of techniques to transform the drop’s colors and textures.

CLOSE-UP: DANCE

tered around the mean (a slimmer, vertical bell).” The way the dancers relate to each other in the piece, set to a commissioned score by Jack Frerer, often suggests the working out of an advanced theorem.

Pires is a new face to New York audiences; Stanley, who lit the piece, says, “Her ideas were very clear. The piece has three components: The machine, which is the corps de ballet; a couple, costumed in blue, who escape the machine; and [soloist] Tiler Peck, stuck in the middle, trying to get out as the machine swallows her up. The last image of the ballet was important to Alysa, with Tiler repeating her steps as the curtain slowly comes down in silence, trying to find her way out of a dystopia.” Thus, the dancers are confined in a square formation of white overhead light. “I found ways to repeat the square,” Stanley says. “And it keeps reinforcing the boundaries of whatever is trapping Tiler.”

Regarding his restrained palette, Stanley says, “I took the key of color from [Dana Osborne, the costume designer], who wanted to keep the dancers neutral and uniform. The only

break from that is the principal couple in blue; everyone else is in gray. I assembled a lighting world around that idea. The one exception is in the second movement, the dream sequence, when the people in the machine are thinking of life outside it. It has intense blues that are reminiscent of the couple and their escape world. Other scenes play off the different shades of gray in the costumes and underscore the dystopian world.”

The blue washes are created by movers in the rep rig. “This is our first season with Robe FORTES,” Stanley says. “We had VL3500s for a long time. 4Wall [Entertainment, the gear supplier] gave us some shoot-out time, along with one-on-one time with different manufacturers. The Robe units stuck out as giving us the most versatility and flexibility between softness and hard edges.” Because both pieces debuted at City Ballet’s annual gala, which doesn’t have intermissions, he says, “There was no time to change the ground row between ballets. I gave our rep T-3s to Mary Louise and used [Chroma-Q] Color Force 72s for my backdrop.” He has since reworked the design so the rep

ground row can serve both pieces.

Talking about cueing, Stanley says, “I responded to the mechanical movement, which responds to the musical structure. One of our first questions was if the ballet starts with darkness and in silence, or with a strong image equal to the cacophonous sounds of the orchestration. Alysa wanted to express the idea that the machine is already in motion. I landed on the image of a single square of downlight that exposes the machine as the curtain rises. The choreography is so geometric that I need a variety of angles to reinforce the patterns of the dancers. During tech, I was continuously looking to reintroduce images of the square without making it overly repetitive.” The design, he adds, calls for “ten to 12 moving light presets that aren’t in the regular rep plot.”

Rep plots and new technology

Stanley notes, “We’re headed in the direction of” a heavily automated and/or LED-based rig. “It’s rare that we’re focusing specials other than side light and on drops. We have scrollers but we recently purchased a



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system of [ETC] Lustrs. Many colors in the scrollers burn out over a season; we're working on how to replace them. The challenge for dance companies is how to switch from the colors of conventional units to LEDs. We have over 250 ballets active in our repertory, out of almost 500."

It's an issue that must be dealt with time and again, Stanley notes. "We have 30 ballets in repertory each season. Some of them have more complex cuing and focus than others. John [Cuff, the company's lighting director] has developed a system by which the color palette in the rig matches the old scrollers in the rep plot. He has a book saying, 'Rosco 361 at full equals this, and, at 50, equals that.' And you need to consider how one system additively mixes with another, how the spectral com-

position of the LED source creates the color, and how metamers come into play. It's a huge undertaking." The challenges never end; after the spring season, City Ballet was off to the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, where the house rig consists of Martin gear, meaning that new calculations and equivalencies would be required.

"Building something from scratch is easier," Stanley says. "But if I have a uniquely created color in every system for every ballet, I can't replace it when we go elsewhere. I grew up studying under Gilbert Hemsley, learning to mix colors additively. I build an overall palette that I can mix from, rather than leaning into a huge library of unique colors." City Ballet is an early adopter of ETC's APEX console, which, he adds, "has been great. It gives us incredible flexibility as we adapt the

rep plot for the future."

Stanley says, "The key thing for the [*Standard Deviation*] design was identifying the three worlds and finding that dystopian grayness that had an edge but didn't appear murky, and to give the dream a distinguishing look. I started the cuing process more timidly than I ended up. I discovered ways to be bolder and edgier. We added silhouettes that we hadn't discussed in the original concept and found other ways to reinforce the geometry of the movement and score. The way that Alysa used the space lent itself to a more dramatic lighting approach, so I pushed it further than some other designs in the repertory."

City Ballet's fall season begins on September 19 with a 75th-anniversary program celebrating company founder George Balanchine. 📡