

Dance

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Top 40

Lar Lubovitch celebrates an anniversary with new a *Jangle*.

By Gia Kourlas



MALE BONDING Lubovitch dancers perform 2007's *Little Rhapsodies*.
Photograph: Nan Meville

Longevity in dance is hard-won, and it's not often that a choreographer can chalk up 40 years of activity. Beginning Wednesday 5 at City Center, Lar Lubovitch, 65, celebrates a momentous anniversary in two programs featuring his newest dance, *Jangle*, as well as a couple of vintage gems: 1978's *North Star* and 1969's *Whirligogs*. Both will showcase dancers from Juilliard, Lubovitch's alma mater, where his teachers included Martha Graham, Antony Tudor and José Limón. Lubovitch, whose choreographic career has taken him to Broadway, professional figure skating and Hollywood (he appeared in Robert Altman's *The Company*), took a break from touring to talk about his rich history.

[Editor's note: This interview has been expanded with online bonus content/]

Do you remember the first dance you made?

The first dance I seriously intended was an audition piece I made for Juilliard. I choreographed a solo before I had anything to do with dance or choreography. I discovered dance all at once and did a little investigating about what I should do about it, and somehow or other I was told I should audition for Juilliard. I was at the University of Iowa when I choreographed that solo, and a friend working in the film and television department had filmed it as a project. A few years ago, a dancer in my company went there to teach and brought it back.

How did you feel when you watched it?

I felt very uplifted. I recognized that whatever I had done intuitively in that solo was still a part of my operating procedure—that I hadn't lost touch with some instinctive origin of my sense of movement or time or whatever it was that went into making a dance.

What was that origin?

I was improvising at a very early age, not knowing what I was doing or thinking that I was doing anything other than just sort of responding in an unthinking way. And that particular response before thinking has a great deal to do with the search for one's own voice, which is the most essential undertaking of being a choreographer. So I had a voice at a very early age, which was a natural, intuitive, instinctual response to moving to music. The effort to retain that voice, or to rediscover and speak in that voice in spite of the obstacles, has been the bottom line of the definition of integrity in trying to be a creator.

What do you mean when you refer to "obstacles"?

As one goes through this process, there's a great deal of resistance. Whether it's critical resistance by people who write or from those who are responsible for the funding of dance, many people have their own agenda and understanding of whatever it is that they define as right or beautiful. There are many people who attempt to create art in an effort to gain the approval of all of these varying parties. And, as the old saying goes, you cannot be all things to all people. The effort to be that only gets you further and further away from the origin of your own gift.

Has your idea of beauty changed in your choreography?

I've carried with me, for many years, a quote of Picasso's that I found in a newspaper article. I actually had it laminated decades ago and it's still in my wallet. In it, he said that he tried to portray the world as he saw it, and in a way that seemed most truthful to him and, therefore, most beautiful. That resonated for me: that having some sense of authenticity in one's output is the definition of beauty. The key line is, "In my own way, I have always said what I considered most true, most just and best, and therefore most beautiful."

You were a gymnast in high school. Why did you start studying gymnastics?

I had been a very physical kid and not athletic at all—I couldn't play sports—but physically inclined. Jumping, running, leaping: all things physical. And dancing, of course, but dancing as a private undertaking and gymnastics was something that seemed to draw me.

How did you hear of Juilliard?

I was an art major at the University of Iowa. Two things happened simultaneously. I was working as a novice gymnast and a woman came to watch our workouts; she said she was a choreographer and that she was looking for some "men to lift some women around." For one reason or another, it intrigued me. The word *dance* had a draw for me, and she introduced me to the idea of dance. And then, shortly thereafter, the José Limón Company visited the campus. I thought dance was just something that I did privately! So that, at once, appeared to be the things that I did best and loved most put together: art and gymnastics. I inquired immediately as to where this was happening, and it was actually a member of the Limón Company who told me that I could try out dancing at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College, and someone there told me about Juilliard. I found

out that José Limón and Martha Graham, who were teaching classes at the summer session, also taught at Juilliard, and that's where I could go to continue toward an academic degree and become a dancer. I was very fortunate to have begun dance at that particular point in history. Those people were all teaching at Juilliard and they were the very heart and soul of dance as we knew it at that time. My first teachers were José Limón and Martha Graham. Antony Tudor. A very young Alvin Ailey. Anna Sokolow was my choreography teacher.

Did you have a sense of how important they were?

None at all. I had no idea. As is the case of most people of that age, I was very self-possessed and the experience was being translated through a very uninformed young person's frame of reference. I really didn't understand the depth of my surroundings. I didn't understand it intellectually; I understood it on visceral level, though. I certainly knew I was part of something that was life altering.

Were you aiming to be a dancer?

I immediately set out to become a choreographer and I thought I should spend a few years learning about dance in order to do that. For me, becoming a dancer was a vehicle toward becoming a choreographer.

How important was learning history to you?

Very important. I think that's probably one of the things that I see most lacking in the world of dance today, and that is a problem for dance as a form. Dance tends to forget its own history; young people who dance and choreograph do their work not knowing fully what's preceded them, so they're frequently reinventing the wheel with great excitement and unfolding it into the world and are very grand about their great pronouncements and discoveries. I love to see new work—it means everything to me—but so often the real moves forward in dance are at such small increments. Dance spends a great deal of time moving sideways and often even backward. Because of the nature of dance, its history is so difficult to retain and understand for people who have not been in dance for long. It's the nature of what dance is. It's frustrating in a sense; there is always a tremendous, very poignant beauty to new work, whether it's rediscovering the wheel or truly making a new discovery. The heart and soul of what goes into it is so moving and poignant, and I'm always looking to the youngest, newest, most offbeat work to remind me that discovery is still possible.

What do you want to show about your life's work in the City Center program?

I don't know that I took that point of view. I've made a lot of dances in 40 years. As with many choreographers, I'm most interested in my newest work. I'm always hoping that the next one will get it right. Through the years, there have been very few that I personally feel have had value, or have stood some sense of time, or resonate for some reason or another. And it's a personal judgment, but there are very few dances that I care about in that way. I've tried to put together programs of dances that were watershed moments in my own evolution.

Talk about the new work, *Jangle*.

It's to Bartok, and it's subtitled "Four Hungarian Dances." It is about a way of dancing, described by Bartok's music, and it's very Slavic; he often quotes folk tunes and gypsy melodies. Bartok's music reaches a very wide range but there's an area of it that's very evocative of Slavic folk dance, and more than anything that's really what this dance seeks to do: to paint an image of Bartok's Slavic dance-inspired music. What the costume designer and I discussed was having these people look like they were walking down a street in Budapest in about 1936, and that there were street musicians on a corner, and that they spontaneously danced as a crowd gathered and were drawn into a unplanned street party.

Why are you working with an odd number of dancers?

Frequently, when I set out to make a dance, I try to work in a number that I haven't worked in; the results of working with seven are very different than with eight or nine. It presents a problem of geometry and balance and architecture, and there are a number of equations that seven presents to me that have to be resolved, and through the course of the dance there is, what is to my mind, an equation that amounts to a kind of architecture and time that eventually has to resolve. The number seven is a challenging number to resolve over time.

What was your frame of mind when you made *Whirligogs*?

I had really just begun to present choreography. My first concert was in October of 1968. I wasn't really thinking that a company was what I was engaged in, but there was no place to dance and I had a number of friends like myself, loosely looking for a way to do something. All I really wanted to do was to try making dances, but it did attract a great deal of attention, and very shortly thereafter, we were touring. The very first commission I ever got was from the Bat-Dor Dance Company in Israel. The dance itself was suggested to me by a Paul Taylor piece, [1956's] *3 Epitaphs*. For some reason, it struck a very strong chord in my imagination; at my first concert, I made a dance that featured one of the characters from *3 Epitaphs*. And when I was asked to do this piece in Israel, I decided I wanted to go further with that character, and I did this dance *Whirligogs*. Honestly, I was never driven too much by conscious thinking at that time. I was very much just doing whatever entered my mind. It was not an intellectual process. I was very free and unfettered by ambition. So I saw nothing right, wrong, innovative or not innovative in taking a character from *3 Epitaphs* and featuring it in a dance. [Laughs] *Whirligogs* was, in a way, an effort to create a sequel to *3 Epitaphs*—starring the same characters, but advancing the story.

Have you ever talked to Paul Taylor about it?

No! I never even told him, and I subsequently became quite good friends with him.

What was it about that dance that caught your imagination?

I think that the unusual blend of terror and comedy that is so much a part of Paul Taylor's work struck me very strongly. I don't know that I had seen something that put those two things together—funny and horror—and I found the dance scary in a way, the way clowns and puppets can be scary. I don't think I had known that particular quality before.



You've staged it for Juilliard students?

Yes. Since I went to Juilliard, I decided that, for a 40th anniversary, I would acknowledge something of my own history; Juilliard had been such an incredibly important part of my life. I wanted to have the students of Juilliard do two dances of mine that are two that I cared about along the way. Two of the very few dances that I think had any lasting value. *Whirligogs* was one of them and *North Star* was the next. Also, these are dances from long ago and dancers are so different now from the way they were then, and the way my company dances, and what my work is about now as opposed to then, would be more aptly served by young people with the kind of zeal that people of that age possess just naturally.

You've found so many great dancers along the way—especially men. Didn't you discover Rob Besserer?

It's a bit of a grand way to say it, but yes. I was on tour and we went to the University of Florida where Rob Besserer was a student. I taught his class and asked him to come to New York to work with me.

What can you see in dancers that other people can't? Are you proud of that?

I am sure in my ability to see something in dancers. I have a good eye for finding dancers that speak the language I'm looking for in my own work. And Rob was in possession of all of those things, even though he was early in his dance training. Rob is an unusual and peerless artist so I'm very happy to say that I had a contribution in helping him dance in the dance world.

Is it difficult to find technical dancers today?

Oh, unfortunately, it's too easy. One of the biggest problems is that technique has become regarded so highly. In America's typical technological obsession, a great deal of heart and soul is left behind. You see so many dancers who dance on their skin, who are so technically capable—generally dancers today have way more technical ability than dancers of earlier times, but very few are in possession of the understanding of where dancing really originates. I personally enjoy technique, but I, by no stretch of the imagination, believe that that's where dancing begins or ends.

It's nice to see Rasta Thomas in your company. He's had a strange career.

Yeah, he's an iconoclast as a dancer. I think that I have opened a bit of a door toward the idea of dance as an art undertaking rather than a physical task, and I think that his nature has understood that immediately. He's had one of those unusual kind of careers where he was recognized as a wunderkind and has enormous technical facility. But he's a hungry artist and I may be one of the people who he has called upon for the deeper search.

When you hire a dancer today, what are you looking for?

I look for a dancer's movement imagination. This is a dancer I can give a phrase of movement, and when they do it back for me, there's much more coming back at me than I put forth for them; that something has been imbued with their own depth, their own imagination. It speaks more loudly, more clearly, more poetically than what I had intended.

What is musicality?

It is often defined incorrectly. Often, critics mistake musicality when they describe certain choreographers as musical or what they consider musical. My opinion of musicality is capturing in movement the essence that the music represents; it's not necessarily dancing to the beat of the music or the notes, but it is painting a picture of the essence of the music. Creating movement that embodies what the music sounds like and creating time the way the music takes its time. And within that, you can dance to the beats and to the notes if that's what you choose to do—it's not that it's unmusical, it's just that it is a very superficial quality of what musicality is.

When did you change the structure of your company?

It was actually in 1998 that we had our last formal tour. I didn't really disband the company: what I decided was to stop being a touring company. What I've done in the intervening years is I've maintained a company—a nucleus of three or four people—and devoted myself to a variety of projects that I could not undertake because of the difficulties of constant touring. We toured a lot and what I found after a number of years was that almost all of our resources, both in energy and economics, were spent getting ready for tour, recovering from tour, maintaining repertory and replacing dancers, and I had a very strong notion that creatively I was standing still. I disbanded touring, but I thought of the company as a creative production center where I could do a variety of projects and challenge myself creatively only within my own measure. There have always been many choreographers far in advance of me, but that wasn't the measure of what I was doing. I was working in my own voice and trying to have the integrity to remain on that particular page and I needed to further myself creatively and for many years that has been my effort. And within my own value system I have and the works that happened during that time have been enough of an advance that I could go out on the road again and take a new body of work with me and so we're touring again.

What is the future of the dance company?

I think it's going to have to be reinvented. I think the form is somewhat archaic and, in a way, I think I have a right to say that, because I am from another time and when I started dancing there was a form that had been created by people like Martha Graham and Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. This was the American form of a dance company and modern dance, which, to be used correctly, denotes dance of an earlier time; the idea of a dance company is much more associated with modern dance. I think there's a struggle afoot to rediscover what that means, but there is a very entrenched nationwide system of maintaining that form given the definition of touring and sponsors and theaters and curtains and prosceniums and all the things that dictate a form that we call a dance company. I don't think there's anything essentially wrong with the form. I try to use it as well as I can. I'm an heir to that form, but reforming the idea of company is a puzzle. I can't say where it's going. It's very difficult for artists of any stripe to break away from the entrenched economic system that dictates how you can show your work, or the form that the idea of "company" takes. I have, in my own small way, tried to rethink that idea a little bit in terms of my own creative development, but if it's created an idea or suggestion of how else to think of a company then perhaps there's been a small contribution.

What do you call contemporary dance if modern dance refers to an earlier time? What do you do?

I make dances. I don't mean that ironically. I care about dancing itself as a bottom line and all of my work is about dancing. I can't tell you exactly why, but it's a fact of dancing that draws me in and perpetually keeps me wanting to create another dance. Name it if I must, it's dance. And I make dances.

You were an early choreographer to combine ballet and modern dance. Are they still at war? What has the merging done for the form?

To be quite specific about it, the word *war* is correct. That word was in the air when I started dancing. There was modern dance and there was ballet and it was widely held belief that you could not do both. That if you were a modern dancer, ballet would ruin your abilities, your technique, your sense of gravity and vice-versa. It was poison for ballet dancers to even attempt this, but there was a natural fusion; there were young dancers and there were people, in a positive way, not knowing the history of dance in the same way that we don't know it now. So many young people entered the field of dance with no real appreciation for the war. And at Juilliard, for instance, I studied many dance forms; I had no training. The day I walked into Juilliard, I studied ballet, modern dance, jazz, Afro-Haitian, and to me it was just dance. I didn't have the sense that they were different worlds. Without

thinking or planning, I drew from all of those sources—probably out of ignorance more than anything else. There was a war, but it had no real meaning to me.

How has dance evolved positively and negatively?

In the practical sense, dance is more highly recognized than it used to be. The world of dance was extremely small when I began. There were a handful of choreographers and it was very sub-form and then there was what was called the “dance boom,” which had a lot to do with the National Endowment for the Arts being created and a funding a dance touring program that suddenly created the possibility of taking dance to universities all over America. And that created an enormous upsurge in the amount of people dancing or choreographing or seeing dance.

When I started dancing, you didn’t have any notion that you’d actually make money at dance or have a so-called career. The notion of supporting yourself as a dancer was kind of unheard of. There’s been enormous change in what dance is expected to be or capable of being in terms of supporting a person’s life. People seem to think that right now there’s a terrible threat to the arts because of the economy. Well, that’s all fine and good, but it’s been true every year in my 40 years of having a company. There’s never been a year in which dance hasn’t been economically threatened. The focus has shifted away from being an *artist* as a dancer or a choreographer to being a *professional* dancer or choreographer. Being an artist has greater depth. Being an artist is where we began; certainly people do that now.

But there’s a whole area of dance in which “artist” is not the be-all and end-all. It’s more about being a professional and having a career. You get a lot of shallow work, or work that is designed for attracting grants or for pleasing bookers. There will always be a group of great artists making dance, but while that group remains consistent in number, the numbers of people in a dance world creating dance with a different frame of reference has grown much larger in the business of dance. I sat on panels and I did it just enough to decide to never do it again, because there were too many grants that I was reviewing that I felt were written by a company manager or someone who was practiced in how to write a grant that could get accepted. I didn’t often feel I was reading the artist’s voice. People were making dances in order to fulfill the agenda of a grant application, rather than making it from their own sense of creativity, their belief, their own need, their own obsession.

What are the traits of the American dancer?

When I work with the typical American dancer in the concert dance field, you can get a dancer who comes to you with nothing and they can become material for you to create upon, and this is in a way very American. Whereas it’s very hard to find European dancers, for instance, who don’t bring with them a lot of movement baggage and attitude that is hard to peel away. They glom it on to what they do, and what you do is very difficult—it does lose something in the essence. But the best American concert dancers are highly trained, plain-speaking movers.

How have you been able to sustain a dance career for 40 years?

I guess I must be very tenacious. I’m not willing to be told to stop; for one reason or another, I want to get it right, and I probably never really feel I have gotten it right. The only way to satisfy that deep urge is to try it again. It’s hard for me to understand, myself, how I’ve sustained through this time, except that I have. And I do know that, when I began this, I said that I would do it unless something stopped me. [Laughs] Nothing has stopped me yet.

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