

# What's In A Review?

By Robert Johnson

Reviews wouldn't exist without those passionate observers of the art form—dance critics. By describing and interpreting what they see on stage, they allow us to relive performances and to appreciate dance more fully.

Dance reviews emerge in three stages. First, the work must be seen—really seen—in detail. Dances of great complexity pass quickly, challenging critics to capture images and retain them in memory. Second, critics analyze what they have seen and how it made them feel. They must discern an order—if not the artists' actual intent—in the spectacle. Elements they consider include dance vocabulary, use of space, movement dynamics and musicality. The third stage is crafting a taut response, usually on deadline.

Veteran critics bring to their opinions the perspective acquired during hundreds of evenings spent watching alertly in the theater. Experience is a fundamental tool. That experience might include performing as a dancer, but more often—and at the very least—it must involve conscientious study and skillful writing.

Making value judgments is a critic's essential duty. Assigning value and making comparisons place the latest creations and performances within a grand panorama of artistic endeavor, linking them to current—or past—trends. The passion with which critics write reflects the intensity of their experience. Criticism honors dancers and choreographers when it holds them to the highest standards.

Ultimately, critics are mediators trying to assist in dancers' and choreographers' communication with the audience. Art is all about empathy and human connections, yet the same qualities that make dance powerfully expressive—its wordless physicality and its separation from the ordinary—can interfere with its ability to be understood.

The dance reviews that appear in the following pages are short: no more than 500 words apiece. Yet each of these articles has been written and edited painstakingly by well-informed people who care mightily about the art of dance. The goal, always, is to bring artist and public closer together.

*Robert Johnson is Pointe magazine's reviews editor and dance critic for The Star-Ledger.*

# Reviews

Sacramento Ballet • Morphoses/  
The Wheeldon Company



Jack Hansen and Ilana Goldman of Sacramento Ballet in Ron Cunningham's *A Woman's Journey: The Tamsen Donner Story*

Hector Navajas

## Sacramento Ballet Recalls A Gruesome History

By Jocelyn Anderson

*Jocelyn Anderson is managing editor of Pointe.*

Sacramento Ballet opened its season in October with a well-rounded program at the Community Center Theater. Celebrating Artistic Director Ron Cunningham's 20th anniversary at the helm, the evening featured the premiere of his *A Woman's Journey: The Tamsen Donner Story*.

The subject immediately conjures gruesome images associated with the ill-fated 1846 Donner Party expedition: Trapped in a mountain pass in winter, on their way to California, some settlers froze to death while others starved or resorted to cannibalism. Cunningham wisely avoids a literal retelling, opting instead for a "tribute to

the pioneering spirit of American women." Unfortunately, without a clear narrative, the ballet becomes vague and meanders.

Based on a fictional journal by poet Ruth Whitman, *Journey* is set to music by Aaron Copland, including his score for *Appalachian Spring*. As the ballet starts, a recorded voice introduces dancer Ilana Goldman as Tamsen Donner, a widow engaged to be married. Although such information provides context, it also seems like an afterthought.

The first section, at home on the prairie, features cheerful characters dancing variations reminiscent of peasant dances in more classical ballets. More than 20 children complete the familial tableaux. Goldman, the only dancer on pointe, excels at Cunningham's lively choreography.

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As the characters travel from the prairie to the desert to the mountains—represented by photos projected on a scrim—the choreography becomes more intense. Fiery Alexandra Cunningham performs in a modern red dress unlike the period costumes worn by everyone else. Perhaps her emotional floor work signifies that something sinister is coming. Goldman and Jack Hansen, as Tamsen Donner's husband, have some nice partnering, first portraying love and then despair. Hansen's character dies, as snow begins to fall and the curtain comes down.

Even in a fictionalized account, a little more detail would have been welcome. This difficult topic resonates in Sacramento, the Donner Party's destination, and the ballet had the potential to be quite moving.

The rest of the program showed the company at its best. In George Balanchine's *Serenade*, the dancers proved that a corps de ballet of different shapes and sizes can still come together and look exquisite. Dancers Amanda Peet and Annali Rose Lülebas stood out among the leads. Peet has elegant arms and beautiful feet. The final moments, when the men lifted Lülebas and she arched back as the lights went down, was truly breathtaking.

Septime Webre's *Fluctuating Hemlines* ended the evening on a playful note. A satire of social conventions and fashion trends, the piece featured athletic combinations, intricate partnering and live accompaniment by the Tigger Benford Percussion Ensemble. Longtime principal Kirsten Bloom was an impressive partner for Stefan Calka in a complicated pas de deux that included quick and constant maneuvering, with many développés and penchés. Bloom perfected the sultry look for the ballet, while showing her skill as a highly technical dancer. Peet shone again, making the ballet look effortless.

### Morphoses: Ballet In A Clever, New Package

By Tai Jimenez

*Tai Jimenez was a principal dancer with Boston Ballet and Dance Theatre of Harlem.*

Unveiling his new company, Morphoses, at New York City Center in October, choreographer Christopher Wheeldon appealed to a young audience with the