

All That Jazz

New York City Ballet
New York State Theater
Through June 27

American Ballet Theatre
Metropolitan Opera House
Through June 19

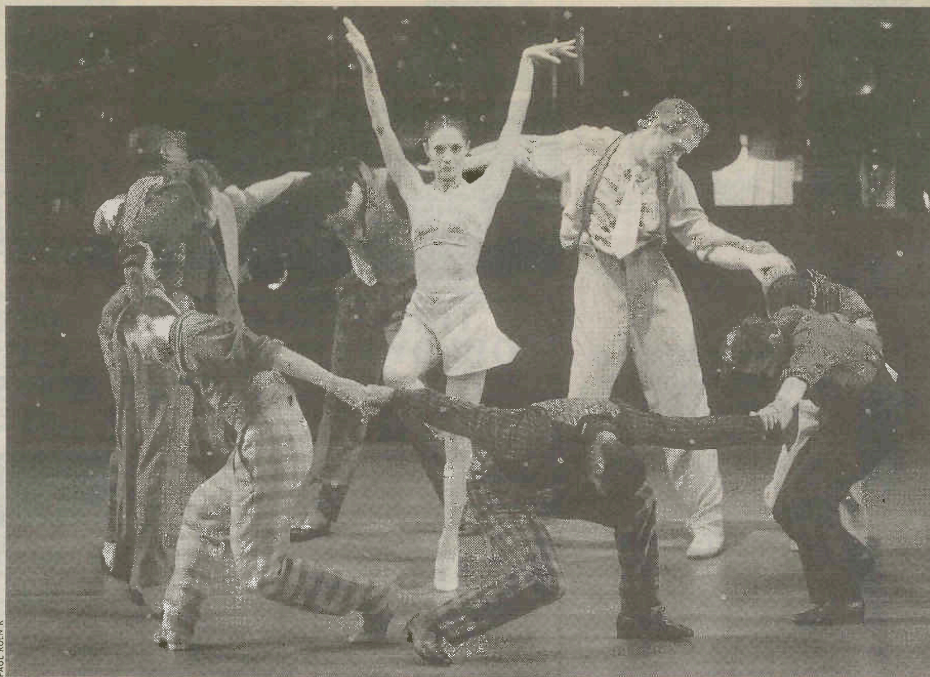
BY DEBORAH JOWITT

Jazz and ballet are uneasy partners. Getting down isn't part of the classical lexicon. On NYCB's "Tribute to Ellington" program, Wynton Marsalis blows soul out his trumpet. His score for Peter Martins's 1993 *Jazz* is as rich as a cake laced with bourbon, hot as a New Orleans Saturday night. Despite the dancers' verve, the ballet keeps them above that gorgeous heat—jabbing a foot into it here and there.

Marsalis's expert new composition for orchestra, *Them Two*, suits ballet, and Martins, better. The sound, less steamy, is allied to a variety of traditions in American music. Into the changeable scene created by Mark Stanley's lighting, Martins sends a parade of amorous duets reflecting his skill and sensitivity to the dancers. Janie Taylor and Sébastien Marcovici seek each other with time-honored ballet myopia, then excitedly get acquainted. He spins her off like a top and drops to his knees (what a girl!), hand over his heart. Miranda Weese is dreamily lovely; Nilas Martins carries her around a lot so she needn't bother touching the ground. Drums, whistles, and handclaps announce Maria Kowroski, a demanding sorceress in a long black coatdress (Alain Vaes designed the costumes). Charles Askegard offers himself to be embraced by her limbs, or she grabs him to tangle with. He's sunk. Yvonne Borree wears practically nothing, and Nikolaj Hübbe likes making her leg swing around and lash him. Darci Kistler plays muse to Jock Soto's wandering sleepwalker, bourréing ribbons around him, lying arthard his shoulders, and draping him in her long, long hair.

A choreographer working with jazz has to keep the groove going. What makes "Blossom Got Kissed" (Susan Stroman's third of the premiere *Duke!*) the hit of the evening is that she always—somehow, somewhere—honors that groove. (It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.) Broadway work has made her theatrically canny, her comedy as sharp and sweet as it gets. The opening picture tells all: six women in red perched on a bench and, at one end, Kowroski in William Ivey Long's pale blue Degas tutu. Naturally they edge this square off the bench; naturally they and their sharp-dancing guys shrug helplessly at her flat-footed attempts to nail it. Robert La Fosse to the rescue! He stops the onstage band, expertly led by David Berger, and gives the girl a friendly lesson and a kiss. Off comes that tutu!

Each of *Duke!*'s three choreographers takes a different approach. In "Rockin' in Rhythm," La Fosse affectionately creates the zesty ambience of a '40s night spent lindyng, with men flipping women head over tail and sliding them between their legs. Glamorous Hélène Alexopoulos descends



Swing time: NYCB's Alexopoulos and Askegard in La Fosse's "Rockin' in Rhythm," part of the new *Duke!*

from the bandstand to Askegard's arms, Jenifer Ringer and the irrepressible Arch Higgins have a go, Kurt and Kyle Froman tap (fuzzy acoustics undermine their duet). Garth Fagan matches suaver Ellington (from *The Far Eastern Suite*) with more sophisticated choreographic ideas. His elastic style of modern dance, with its long, off-kilter balances, hanging-in-air leaps, and soft-jointed ease, is clearly still a challenge to his splendid cast, but, hey, when *Midsummer Night's Dream* ends this anniversary season, the dancers will have managed 100 ballets! Pray for them.

TWYLA THARP understands jazz deeply—how to sink sensuously into it, pounce on

a syncopation, and, noodling about, suddenly uncoil an attack. *Push Comes to Shove* (1976) was her third adventure in meshing ballet with her own juicy style, using both a 1919 rag by Joseph Lamb, and Haydn's sunny Symphony No. 82. The ballet originally showcased ABT's uncanny new star Mikhail Baryshnikov. With bursts of cranky virtuosity, shrugs, deft games with a derby, moments that trapped him in an onrush of dancers, she gave him an onstage crash course in ABT repertoire and American jazz. Dancing boiled around him. The perky female ensemble operated in the teeth of chaos. Nothing turned out as a Russian classicist might expect, not even the bows.

No stranger to jazz, Ethan Stiefel copes superbly with *Push's* challenges. "OK, what's next?" he seems to say, even as he registers puzzlement over a wayward feat he's just spat out or a ballerina who requires manhandling. Susan Jaffe, Amanda McKerrow, Maxim Belotserkovsky, and the corps are adroit at Tharp's slippery games (maybe McKerrow overdoes the foggily romantic persona a little). The revival of Paul Taylor's beautiful *Airs* is mostly fine (especially Gil Boggs and Tamara Barden in Taylor's springy, quick-footed duet). *Airs*, of course, speaks in a different tongue, conjuring an idyllic community stirred by Handel breezes and skimming a forgiving earth. □

Dialed Down

Monte/Brown Dance
Joyce Theater
Through June 20

BY ELIZABETH ZIMMER

The company Elisa Monte started with David Brown in 1981 has finally added his name to its title, and several of his new dances to its roster. This is a good thing; his calmer style is a great counterpoint to hers. Monte launched her choreographic career in 1979 with the sensuous duet *Treading*, but has for years concentrated on blockbuster works in which strong, sleek, often nearly naked performers thrust themselves through space, picked out by dramatic lighting. Audiences love these pieces, but some have grown impatient with their lack of

real communication—between the dancers, and between them and us.

Lighting is still a factor; designer Clifton Taylor supports Monte and Brown in *Run to the Rock*, their powerful evocation of a "sinner man" for the '90s, with Fabrice Lamego inhabiting Nina Simone's jazzy interpretation of the gospel song used by Alvin Ailey in his early blockbuster, *Revelations*. And Monte's 1986 *Dreamtime* actually stars Craig Miller's lighting effects, which hover between Vegas and Lucas, light-years from the Australian aboriginal rituals the dance claims as inspiration.

The performers who race through *Dreamtime's* smoky, laser-like beams are all terrific, but they're seen to better advantage in the simpler precincts of Brown's new *Niagara*, to a Shostakovich piano trio. With its folk-dance formations and steady stream of embracing couples, *Niagara* stresses com-

munity; whether paired or in clusters, lined up or circling, huddled on the floor or strutting proudly, the dancers explore the geometries of interaction, their technical prowess allowing crystalline expression of the ties that bind the diverse ensemble. In *Maquette*, Brown allows his quintet silence, stillness, suppleness; the choreography expresses relationship rather than mere physicality, holding its own against the soupy Samuel Barber score. (Taylor's subtle lighting here—four parti-colored windowpanes high over the stage, and complementary gobos on the floor—keeps us glued to the action.) The choreographers wisely restrain their dancer in *Run to the Rock*. Working against the lyrics of the song (and against Ailey's familiar interpretation of it), Manego too plays with stillness, with moments when the only activity onstage is the rippling of his torso. □

da nce

Earth Mother

On the phone from a retreat house in northern California, Anna Halprin tries to recall the last time she set foot in Manhattan. If memory serves, it was when she staged *Parades and Changes* at Hunter College in 1965. Daring for its time, the piece was a scored improvisation in which the dancers shed their clothes.

Halprin, 78, returns to the naked city this week for a residency at the 92nd Street Y. Her work prefigured several waves of dance innovation, from Trisha Brown's al fresco stunts to Liz Lerman's community projects, Ann Carlson's anthropological studies, and the survival workshops Bill T. Jones led for *Still/Here*. She won the American Dance Festival's lifetime achievement award in 1997, but worries about how she'll go over in Gotham after 40 holistic years in the Bay Area.

Sunday she leads a workshop in her "Life/Art Approach," exercises to spark creativity. That night she performs *Grandfather Dance*, a solo on family, memory, and culture. Monday she screens videos of her work and leads a workshop for people with life-threatening illnesses, their families, and their caretakers. Called "Dance as a Healing Art," it's based on her recovery from colon cancer in the 1970s.

"I make a distinction between curing and healing. After my operation I was cured, but I wasn't healed." What saved her was finding a way to convert feelings into images and then movement, a process described in her 1995 book, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*. She teaches the process as a way not only to cope with illness, but also to bridge racial and class divisions and harmonize with the environment. "I'm curious to see whether East Coast artists will snicker about our touchy-feely culture or share my interest in bringing these modalities together." She says her visit is a rejoinder to Arlene Croce's critique of *Still/Here* (a piece Croce declined to see) as "victim art." "I challenge that. It's time for these elitist divisions between dance as an art and dance as healing to be erased."

—CHRISTOPHER REARDON