

The Concord of This Discord: Adapting the Late Romances for the Ballet Stage

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Abstract

This essay engages with Alan Brissenden's claim that Shakespeare uses dance as a metaphor in his last plays to indicate a complex interplay between concord and discord, virtue and vengeance. While Brissenden deliberately does not address the ways in which this interplay might have been embodied through movement on the early modern stage, this essay analyzes two recent ballet versions of *The Tempest* (American Ballet Theatre, 2013) and *The Winter's Tale* (Royal Ballet, 2014) to demonstrate how choreographers can realize this dramatic conjunction through dance. Choreographers Alexei Ratmansky and Christopher Wheeldon emphasize the destructive anger of Prospero and Leontes, and both ballets end on notes of sadness, longing, and loss. Yet each also incorporates harmony and hope, primarily through the redemptive relationships between the young lovers.

In *Shakespeare and the Dance*, Alan Brissenden argues that Shakespeare uses dance imagery in his last plays to symbolize both harmony and discord, bringing together the various meanings he had deployed throughout his career to illuminate the tragicomic mode. "By this connection with both concord and disorder the dance contributes to the distinctive tone of the plays, in which the apparently tragic is transmuted into a state that, while not always of serene and utter joy, nevertheless holds optimistic promise for the future" (Brissenden 1981, 76). Brissenden's book, still the only monograph to date that examines dance in Shakespeare's plays, concentrates primarily on dance as a metaphor, with analysis of the literal dances included in some of the texts that relates them to issues of theme and genre. He reads the dance of the satyrs in act 4 of *The Winter's Tale*, for example, as "the culminating preparation for Polixenes' action . . . [and] emotional wildness" (94). Similarly, he relates the performance of the nymphs and reapers in act 4 of *The Tempest* to "Prospero's anger [which] is also a destructively discordant element" (102). In both plays, Brissenden argues, dance functions as an important image and dramatic device to highlight the conjunction of order and disorder, virtue and vengeance.

Brissenden's book purposely does not engage substantively with the material reality of dance as an embodied practice. In this essay, I reveal how Brissenden's thesis can be applied to live performance. I consider two recent ballet adaptations of Shakespeare's late romances: Alexei Ratmansky's *The Tempest*, choreographed for American Ballet Theatre in 2013, and Christopher Wheeldon's *The Winter's Tale*, set for the Royal Ballet in 2014. Both choreographers create tragicomic works that bring together concord and discord. They articulate the destructive anger of their male protagonists, Prospero and Leontes, and both ballets end on notes of sadness, longing, and loss. Yet they also incorporate harmony and hope, primarily through the redemptive relationships between Miranda and Ferdinand and between Perdita and Florizel. My analysis of these ballet adaptations attempts to bridge the gap between textual and performance studies of Shakespeare and dance by showing how a thematic interpretation can be realized through the dancers' bodies and the stages on which they move.

In examining how contemporary choreographers have reimagined Shakespeare for the ballet stage, I avoid assuming that such works are clichéd poetry in motion, that they somehow "translate" verse into movement or find gestural equivalents for textual language. Nor am I interested in appraising how supposedly faithful a choreographic work is to the "original." This is particularly important to assert in the case of Shakespeare. Since his plays are so often vaunted in Anglo-American popular and literary cultures as containing timeless and universal meanings and values, adaptations of his works are usually held to a stringent standard by critics. Apollinaire Scherr, reviewing Ratmansky's *The Tempest* for the *Financial Times*, faulted his portrayal of Caliban for failing to translate the character's "most vivid verse" into anything more than physical "grunts" (Scherr 2013). Similarly, Judith Mackrell, reviewing Wheeldon's *The Winter's Tale* for *The Guardian*, was concerned with how well the choreography seemed to convey Shakespeare's verse. She wrote, "It's clear how much attention [Wheeldon] has paid to Shakespeare's language . . . In the first act, as the toxin of Leontes's jealousy gets to work, the wrenched distortions of his movement mimic the unraveling syntax of the original verse." She critiqued the final act on the same grounds, writing that "Wheeldon strains to find choreography to match the piercing drama of the simple stage direction 'Hermione comes down'" (Mackrell 2014). In responding to dance versions of Shakespeare, critics often assume that the playtext carries the ultimate authority, while the adaptation stands or falls on its presumed similitude to this putative original. Like Linda Hutcheon, I counter this tendency by viewing an adaptation as a work in its own right: as "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work . . . Therefore, an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative — a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing" (Hutcheon 2013, 8-9). In analyzing the choreographic explorations of

concord and discord in Ratmansky and Wheeldon's ballets, I emphasize the "palimpsestic" nature of these works, thinking through their relationships with Shakespeare, but not assuming that the Shakespearean texts control or dictate the transition from language to movement.

Despite what I will argue is a similar thematic focus, Ratmansky and Wheeldon made fundamentally distinct choices in adapting *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* for ballet. Ratmansky chose a play that had been done repeatedly as a dance work, most recently by Michael Smuin (1980, San Francisco Ballet), Rudolf Nureyev (1982, Royal Ballet), and Crystal Pite (2011, Kidd Pivot). Created while Ratmansky was an Artist in Residence at American Ballet Theatre, *The Tempest* is a one-act ballet, running about forty-five minutes, choreographed to incidental music written for a production of the play by Jean Sibelius in 1925. It premiered as part of a program of one-act ballets in October 2013, and ABT revived it, along with Frederick Ashton's *The Dream* (a 1964 one-act adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth in June 2014. Ratmansky's work is thus part of a longer tradition of reimagining *The Tempest* through dance. Like Ashton, he compressed the narrative into a shortened format, which demanded economy. Wheeldon, by contrast, deliberately chose a play that had never been adapted for the ballet stage. He created an evening-length work for the Royal Ballet with a prologue, three acts, and two intermissions, which allowed him to explore fully the characters and events of the play. He worked with a commissioned score by Joby Talbot, which also permitted him a greater degree of artistic control over the content of the piece than if he had been working from a previously-written piece of music. Both works are linear, conveying clear and coherent narratives (in contrast, for example, with Pite's postmodern *The Tempest Replica*, and both focus on the thematic clash of harmony and discord.

Dancing Discord: Leontes and Prospero

As in Shakespeare's plays, one of the primary ways in which these ballets introduce the element of discord is through the destructive anger and desire for control of the male protagonists, Leontes and Prospero. Brissenden rightly notes that the first image of dance in *The Winter's Tale* is negative: Leontes, in articulating his suspicion about the relationship between Hermione and Polixenes, says in an aside that his "heart dances; / But not for joy, not joy" (1.2.112-13). Dance, so often associated with romantic harmony in the comedies, is here linked with jealousy and anger; Leontes' "*tremor cordis*" (1.2.112) is an uncontrollable bodily impulse, rather than an expression of happiness, and ultimately it "extends through his court and out into the universe" (1981, 87) as Brissenden argues. Wheeldon creates a visually triangular relationship between Leontes (Edward Watson), Hermione (Lauren Cuthbertson), and Polixenes (Valeri Hristov) in the Prologue, which presents the story of

how the friendship between the two men is disrupted by the intervention of marriage. Although Hermione literally comes between Leontes and Polixenes, they work together to partner her, lifting her often between them. In both the Prologue and act 1, Polixenes seems to be unmarried; he not only dances with Hermione several times, but also with a number of Sicilian court ladies, who flirt with him openly. As he is dancing alone with the now-pregnant Hermione in act 1, Leontes watches them, turning toward the audience and revealing a disturbed and covetous look on his face. He intervenes in their dance, and the two men briefly partner her again. Hermione stops dancing abruptly as the baby kicks, a joyful expression on her face, and she places first Leontes' and then Polixenes' hands on her stomach so that they can feel it. They freeze in this formation, Hermione in the middle, Polixenes on her right, and Leontes on her left, a beautifully symmetrical image that conveys her affection for both men, which is ruptured by Leontes' paroxysms of jealousy. He breaks out of the formation to perform a solo, while the rest of the stage remains frozen and unmoving: a dance that articulates the poison of his jealousy and suspicion. He removes his hand from Hermione's belly and moves it like a spider, wriggling the fingers and moving them close to his face. Talbot's score likewise incorporates creeping sounds, with the strings skittering up and down multiple octaves, counterpointing his tortured movements. Leontes alternates hunched and elongated movements throughout his solo, contorting his body wildly. One moment he performs a sharp leap, his arms beseechingly lifted to the heavens, and the next he collapses inwards, clutching his face and manically pounding his thighs with his fists. These movement motifs, introduced in his first solo, recur throughout act 1 to further articulate his jealousy and anger.

Wheeldon highlights the fact that Leontes is the agent of discord in an otherwise contented Sicilia by having this first solo take place while the rest of the stage is immobile, emphasizing that the fears and suspicions are creations of Leontes' mind. This solo might seem comparable to Leontes' first aside in act 1, scene 2, when he finds the interaction between Hermione and Polixenes to be "too hot" (110). Yet if anything, the movement incorporates a reference to a later public speech that Leontes delivers to his lords in act 2, scene 1. Leontes' creepily wriggling fingers recall the textual Leontes' conviction that "there may be in the cup / A spider steeped" (41-42). Wheeldon is not creating a one-to-one relationship between his ballet and Shakespeare's text; rather, he takes an image associated with Leontes in the play and develops it as a visual motif for the character's movement. Similarly, he invents a non-Shakespearean scene to explore more fully Leontes' jealous fantasies about the (imagined) sexual relationship between his wife and best friend. The set includes four large statues that initially are placed to the sides of the stage, their backs turned toward the audience. Hermione takes Polixenes on a tour of the art gallery, and the statues move forward into a line across the stage. As Hermione and Polixenes move from stage right to stage left, looking at the

statues one by one, Leontes hides behind the statues, watching them intently. The audience sees a series of visions taking place in Leontes' mind during this scene. In reality, Hermione is innocently leading Polixenes through the gallery; in Leontes' frenzied fantasy, they are using the private space as an opportunity for a sexual liaison. The lights change to a sickly green every time we enter the realm of Leontes' mind, and Hermione and Polixenes begin kissing and fondling each other. Leontes watches grimly, from behind and at times on top of the statues, turning each statue to face the audience as they move across the stage, revealing that each seemingly innocuous back conceals a lascivious image. The further they traverse across the stage, the more intensely sexual Hermione and Polixenes become. She reclines against a statue with her head thrown back; he finally ends up on top of her on the ground. The lights and movements snap back to reality and they exit, leaving Leontes to perform another anguished solo, again articulated through alternations of elongated and hunched movements. As with the spidery hand, Wheeldon takes a motif from Shakespeare's play — the statue — and uses it to create an entirely new iteration of Leontes' jealousy, based in movement and striking visual imagery.

Ratmansky's Prospero is generally more benevolent than Wheeldon's Leontes; yet he, too, is often unable to control his emotional outbursts. The initial image of Prospero (Marcelo Gomes) is of a controlled and controlling magus; he enters in a lightning storm and stands center stage, feet planted wide apart in a commanding stance. Miranda (Sarah Lane) helps him into his magic robe and hands him his staff, which he raises powerfully over his head and then points at the ship to create the wreck. His relationship with Miranda is nurturing; although he refuses to yield to her supplications to spare the ship from the storm, he gently shows her that the occupants are still alive. His partnering of Miranda tends to infantilize her, as, for example, he lifts her into his arms, her knees drawn up to her chest, and spins her around. He then puts her down and pulls her into an embrace, her head on his chest, and kisses her forehead. Prospero is similarly controlling with Ariel (Daniil Simkin), albeit in a more forceful way, picking him up and throwing him around in denying Ariel's request for liberty. Prospero forces Ariel to replicate the embrace he previously performed with Miranda, taking Ariel's head and placing it on his chest, revealing that Ariel must be made to be affectionate with his master, unlike Miranda, who performs the motion voluntarily. Prospero is even more physically violent with Caliban (Herman Cornejo) than with Ariel, also lifting him and throwing him around the stage, and finally forcing him to the ground and onto his back, his body contorted into a painful, trembling arch. In these early scenes, Prospero reveals his anger at both Ariel and Caliban, and his frustration with Miranda's pleading for the ship and its occupants, but he is always in control of his emotions.

Later in the ballet, however, he loses control at several key points, most notably in his reunion with Antonio (Sascha Radetsky) and his final solo, in which he confronts mutability and loss. Ratmansky interestingly cuts the act 4 betrothal masque (the only significant portion of Shakespeare's play that includes dance) and proceeds from the "harpy" scene (act 3, scene 3, in which Ariel terrifies the lords) directly to the revelation of Prospero. As in the beginning of the ballet, Prospero appears to the lords as a strong and powerful magician, garbed in his robe and holding his staff. As the lords cower in shock at seeing him, Prospero goes directly to Gonzalo (Victor Barbee) and embraces him fondly; Gonzalo responds joyfully, slapping Prospero on the back heartily. Prospero is less effusive with Alonso (Roman Zhurbin) and Sebastian (Daniel Mantei), but does shake their hands cordially. Antonio, however, stands stiffly stage left, deliberately not looking at his brother. Prospero strides over to him and raises his fist over his head; he freezes for a moment, his fist trembling dangerously, as Antonio shrinks away. Prospero manages to regain control of himself and does not strike him; instead, he brusquely demands the ducal crown, which Antonio takes off and hands to him grudgingly. Prospero puts on the crown and turns his back on his brother; there is no further reconciliation between the two of them.

Before ushering everyone back to the ship in anticipation of their return to Milan, Prospero performs a solo, which articulates both his re-attainment of power and his sense of loss: of Miranda, of Ariel, of his life on the island, of his magic. His solo follows directly after Ariel's joyful celebration of liberty, and Prospero's movements are similar to Ariel's in that they both incorporate virtuosic leaps and turns. Yet they are also distinctive in that they combine buoyancy with heaviness. Prospero imitates Ariel's soaring jumps, but his mortal body cannot ultimately transcend the earthly plane. He lands from his turns into poses of balance and suspension, alternating allegro with adagio, communicating both his power and his burgeoning sense of frailty. Ariel has gone, Miranda is now partnered exclusively by Ferdinand (Joseph Gorak), and ultimately Prospero's body collapses as he grapples with these losses. His legs give way beneath him, and he slumps to the ground, where he remains, trying to rise but having difficulty. Although he eventually gets up and leads the company to the ship to depart the island, his solo sets the mood for the ending, which is elegiac rather than triumphant. Caliban remains behind as the rest of the characters slowly depart, climbing up on top of the huge set piece center stage, looking back at the island as they leave. Despite the union of Miranda and Ferdinand, Alonso's reunion with his son, and Prospero's attainment of his crown, their departure is tinged with sadness, indicated by their slow-motion movements and frequent contemplative gazes back at the island. Caliban adds a further note of discord to the final moments: he crosses to look at Prospero's magical book, which has been left behind. He turns the pages in frustration, as he cannot read it, and angrily tears out a page,

crumples it up, and throws it vengefully on the ground. He crosses back to the other side of the stage, watching the departing figures, and stands up straight, raising his arms over his head in a gesture of power and defiance. He is briefly triumphant, "king o'the isle" (5.1.290), but his mien is also sad, as he registers that he is left all alone. The lights come down on his solitary figure, leaving the audience with a sense of melancholy even in the seemingly harmonious resolution.

Wheeldon also chooses an elegiac ending for *The Winter's Tale* that combines both concord and discord. While Leontes and Paulina (Zenaida Yanowsky) are initially garbed in black and are continually mourning for Mamillius (Joe Parker) and Hermione, the entrance of Perdita (Sarah Lamb) and Florizel (Steven McRae) literally changes the scene. Leontes' reunion with his daughter (whom he identifies by her possession of a necklace that once belonged to Hermione,) and his blessing of her marriage, change the mood from tragic to comic and romantic. Everyone dons white and green clothing for the wedding, the scene is liberally draped with flowers, and a sense of spring-like rebirth dawns, bringing the vitality and hopefulness of Bohemia into Sicilia. Even Paulina changes her dour black dress for a pale green one, and after the wedding scene she re-awakens the "statue" of Hermione, effecting her reunion with her husband and daughter. Yet Paulina is also the character who reintroduces the tragic mode at the very end of the ballet. Although Hermione's statue has come back to life, Mamillius' statue remains, and Paulina does a formal obeisance to it, kneeling on the ground, bowing her body forward, and sweeping her arms slowly across the floor. Earlier in the act, she was the one who continually drew Leontes back toward the statue, forcing him to remember the death of his son. By the end of the act, she is the only one who is still mourning, reminding the audience of the terrible cost of Leontes' jealousy and anger. Although not overtly stated, Paulina's role as mourner is appropriate to the narrative, since her husband Antigonus (Bennet Gartside) has also died (near the end of act 1) and she is alone. Unlike in Shakespeare, Wheeldon does not have Leontes effect a marriage for Paulina at the end, partly because Camillo (Thomas Whitehead) is a less-developed character (in fact, he is unnamed, called only "Polixenes' Steward"), and partly because Wheeldon clearly wanted to end the ballet on a note of sadness and loss.

Creating Concord: The Young Lovers

The marriages of the young lovers in both ballets provide the primary means of invoking concord, harmony, and hope for the future, with which dance was conventionally associated in early modern England. As Brissenden notes, "the cosmic dance, the rhythmic movement of all things in relation to one another lasted until the eighteenth century beside the great chain of being and music itself as a commonly accepted metaphor of order" (1981, 3). Shakespeare's comedies, in

particular, for the most part "move from initial disorder to happy resolution and the dance offers . . . a strong visual image of concord" (34). *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* are not comedies, but they each present us with a pair of young lovers whose unions are initially opposed and ultimately endorsed by parental authority, their stories moving from potentially tragic to joyfully comic. (While Prospero only pretends to oppose Ferdinand's attachment to Miranda in order to test his devotion, Polixenes acts in earnest when making a violent "divorce" [4.4.405] between his son Florizel and the supposed shepherdess Perdita.) Wheeldon and Ratmansky fully articulate the redemptive nature of these characters in their ballets. Act 2 of Wheeldon's *The Winter's Tale* is devoted entirely to exploring the romance of Perdita and Florizel (roughly corresponding to a single scene of Shakespeare's play, act 4, scene 4), their mutual happiness at the shepherds' festival, their connection with the larger rustic community, and their evasion of Polixenes' anger. Because there are fewer narrative elements contained in act 2 than in act 1, this part of Wheeldon's ballet focuses more on pure movement, both *pas de deux* for Perdita and Florizel, and group dances involving a large corps de ballet. The connection between dance and concord in Bohemia is joyfully apparent, creating a strong contrast with the colder, more static Sicilia of act 1.

Just as the statues visually dominate act 1 of *The Winter's Tale*, contributing to the atmosphere of chilly repression, an enormous larger-than-life tree fills the back half of the stage in act 2, reinforcing the focus on vibrant and buoyant vitality with which Perdita and Florizel are strongly associated. The tree is stunning: a deep, jewel-toned green, with huge craggy exposed roots that spread around its base and create places for characters to climb and sit. It is decorated with hundreds of colorful ornaments that hang from the branches, denoting the festival atmosphere. The vision of this tree — at once real and fantastic — connects directly with the young lovers, who are full of life and love. Florizel is seated in the tree's roots at the top of act 2 and watches Perdita admiringly when she enters and dances by herself. Although nothing in the movement suggests it directly, the viewer might imagine Florizel's commendation of Perdita's dancing in Shakespeare's play:

When you do dance, I wish you
 A wave o' th' sea, that you might ever do
 Nothing but that, move still, still so,
 And own no other function. (4.4.140-43)

Perdita is also connected visually with the tree: first, when her adoptive Father Shepherd (Gary Avis) gives her Hermione's necklace, a deep green jewel on a green ribbon that matches the color of the tree and its ornaments; second, when her father dresses her as the "mistress o' th' feast" (4.4.68) in a crown and waistcoat covered in dangling ribbons that again evoke the tree's ornaments.

Although a good deal of act 2 consists of the joyful partnering between Perdita and Florizel, which is replete with playful jumps and romantic lifts, Wheeldon deliberately effaces eroticism from their relationship and its expression in dance. He creates a distinctive movement vocabulary for the Bohemian rustics, incorporating flexed feet, turned-in legs, and clogging-inflected steps. Perdita and Florizel employ all of these movements in their *pas de deux*, which tend to convey vivacity rather than sexuality. Even when they perform a more extravagantly romantic movement, such as a lift that they repeat several times in which she wraps her legs around his head with her face close to his and they kiss, it feels impressively acrobatic, not sensual. Wheeldon creates an essentially chaste physical relationship between Perdita and Florizel in act 2 to distinguish them from Leontes' excessive erotic fantasies of Hermione and Polixenes in act 1, and perhaps to echo Florizel's assertion that "my desires / Run not before mine honour, nor my lusts / Burn hotter than my faith" (4.4.33-35). Although they are styled to evoke these parental figures (Perdita wears a dress in the same shade of purple as Hermione; Florizel initially wears a long embroidered jacket similar to Polixenes'), the movement insists emphatically that their love is innocent and incorruptible, providing hope that their marriage will undo the destructive jealousy and anger of Leontes' marriage to Hermione.

Ratmansky creates a similarly chaste physical relationship for Miranda and Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. Ariel engineers the meeting between them, leading Ferdinand in and touching Miranda lightly with a fingertip to make her turn around and see him at the same moment that he sees her. Their attraction is immediate and mutual: they run to each other joyfully and dance together playfully and innocently. The choreography is replete with romantic lifts and swoons for Miranda, with Ferdinand mostly in the dominant position, supporting and displaying her as a prized and desired object. Yet Ratmansky also provides agency for Miranda, having her at times set the pattern of their steps and lead Ferdinand through a sequence of jumps and turns. At the end of this first *pas de deux*, they stop and face each other, holding hands and gazing in reciprocal adoration into each other's eyes. Prospero enters sternly to confront Ferdinand and separate them; yet Miranda loyally defends Ferdinand and helps him in his arduous tasks, such as shifting rocks and carrying logs. The costuming of Miranda and Ferdinand emphasizes their youth and innocence: she wears a simple, flowing white dress, while he wears a blue shirt and trousers. Their unadorned clothing contrasts sharply with the sumptuous Renaissance garb worn by the Italian lords and the glittering, otherworldly costumes of the island spirits. The simplicity and purity of the young lovers provide an opportunity for hope and redemption, even as Prospero confronts mutability and loss.

Dance adaptations of Shakespeare, like Wheeldon and Ratmansky's ballets, have no words with which to communicate their engagement with their source texts. They rely on choreography,

the visual imagery of scenery, costumes, and lighting, as well as music to create their worlds, much as Shakespeare depended primarily on his language to indicate character, narrative, and genre. The gap between words and movement might seem insurmountable; yet since dance provides a powerful recurring image of harmony and disorder in Shakespeare's plays, dance adaptations are an especially apt way of responding to and re-envisioning those plays. The last plays, in particular, are redolent of the conjunction between concord and discord, and Wheeldon and Ratmansky bring these thematic concerns to their ballets. They even go further than Shakespeare in their willingness to depict the clash between order and disorder, since the closing images of both ballets emphasize loss rather than restoration. Their works realize the plays in new ways, and rather than being derivative of the Shakespearean "originals," they make us think through their characters and narratives as products of physical and visual cultures.

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Image 1. Miranda (Sarah Lane), Prospero (Marcelo Gomes), and Caliban (Herman Cornejo) in *The Tempest*. Photo: Marty Sohl. Reproduced by permission of American Ballet Theatre.

Image 2. Miranda (Sarah Lane) and Ferdinand (Joseph Gorak) in *The Tempest*. Photo: Marty Sohl. Reproduced by permission of American Ballet Theatre.

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