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Best of the BEST 2011

THE STANDOUT PERFORMANCES OF

Dancers go to the studio every day to polish their technique, to deepen their artistry. But all those hours spent in front of the mirror have just one goal: to create something captivating onstage. These 10 performances from the past year took audiences to new places, and made them see the dancers—and dance—in a whole new light.

Lauren Cuthbertson

Only a year and a half ago, The Royal Ballet's Lauren Cuthbertson wasn't sure how she would make it back on stage. Diagnosed with glandular fever just after being promoted to principal, Cuthbertson watched her promising career stall as she battled the illness. But now she's returned, and early this year she made her comeback: as the lead in Covent Garden's first new full-length production in years, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Christopher Wheeldon tailored his Alice to Cuthbertson's English-rose looks, airy jump and unaffected stage persona. Onstage almost from start to finish, she thrived around Lewis Carroll's quirky characters. At once fresh and thoughtful, her dancing proved to be the guiding thread of the ballet, which was filmed for DVD release. Her obvious delight in the moment was an added bonus in *Wonderland*, and the buzz around the premiere said it all: a true English star was born—again. —*Laura Cappelle*

Johan Persson

**Lauren Cuthbertson made a delightfully fresh
Alice, partnered by Sergei Polunin**

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An exquisite Uliana Lopatkina in *Symphony in C*

N. Razina

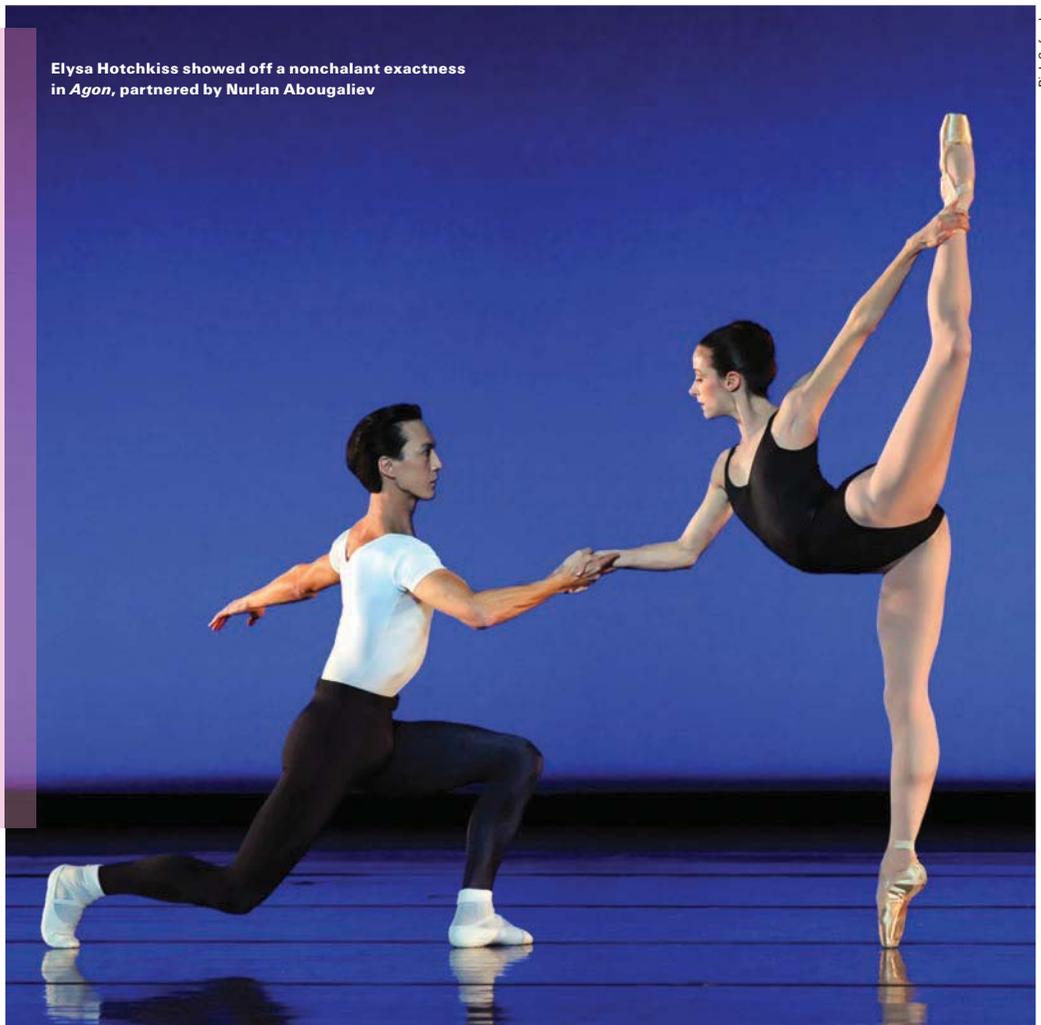
Uliana Lopatkina

Could Uliana Lopatkina be Wendy Whelan's distant Russian cousin? Now the reigning senior ballerina at the Kirov, Lopatkina has matured into a dancer of rich, judicious intelligence. In a company that sometimes seems dominated by little girls, she's a true grown-up. At the Metropolitan Opera House this summer, Lopatkina had a very un-Balanchinean take on the iconic *Symphony in C* adagio: Wild and off-balance she was not. Instead, she was thoughtful, tender and vulnerable without seeming helpless. Her laser-sharp technique can sometimes feel brittle, but in this pas that exquisite attention to detail worked to her advantage, burnishing the choreography to a high sheen and illuminating every note of the familiar Bizet score. —Margaret Fuhrer

Elysa Hotchkiss

For the past seven years, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre corps member Elysa Hotchkiss has been an up-and-comer on the precipice of true artistic maturity, constantly growing in both movement and presence. This spring, she got her career changer. In Balanchine's *Agon* pas, her technical precision and spectacularly flexible back were both on full display. Hotchkiss wore the Balanchine style like a second skin. She became creature-like and chilling, her movements taking on a sort of nonchalant exactness. It seemed as though the music played at the whim of her movement. The artistic staff must have taken note: She returned to the company for the 2012 season promoted to the rank of soloist. —Kathleen McGuire

Elysa Hotchkiss showed off a nonchalant exactness in *Agon*, partnered by Nurlan Abougaliev



Rich Sforzani

Best of the BEST 2011



Kaori Nakamura and the PNB dancers brought *Giselle's* original magic back to life

Pacific Northwest Ballet

It's hard to decide which is the greater achievement: the staging or the performance of Pacific Northwest Ballet's *Giselle*. The stagers came into the studio intent on re-creating the original ballet as closely as they could. They used the Stepanov notation of Petipa's *Giselle*, plus two rare French documents: notes from the 1860s and a much-scribbled-on score from 1842. (The scribbles revealed, among other surprises, that the original *Giselle* was rather feisty.) Painstakingly, with the help of the dancers, the stagers interpreted these old sources and stitched them together.

The performance, however, required PNB's dancers to go completely classical—to turn their backs on their neoclassical and contemporary technique. Versatile and focused, they achieved *Giselle's* essential quiet, floating magic. Principals and soloists excelled and the women's corps, after struggling for years to build a true team, danced with graceful unity. Just as the reconstruction gave us a richer version of this beloved ballet, the performance gave us a richer version of PNB. —*Rosie Gaynor*

Angela Sterling

Chase Finlay

When New York City Ballet corps member Chase Finlay danced his first performance of Balanchine's *Apollo* in May, many in the audience experienced a rush of déjà vu. With Finlay, the company had a 20-year-old, six-foot-one, sleekly muscled blond who not only looked like the kid brother of ballet master in chief Peter Martins, but already possessed the authority of presence and gesture to lay claim to the iconic 1928 ballet Martins had made his own. There were fleeting passages of roughness that needed to be sandpapered away, particularly in the intricate sections with the three muses (Sterling Hyltin, Tiler Peck, Ana Sophia Scheller). When Finlay returned to the stage for the finale, however, he burst from the wings with the power of a young god secure in his authority, before whom the muses fell back in awe. They meekly followed Apollo as he ascended to Mount Parnassus to reign as the Sun God. Finlay, now 21, rose to soloist at the end of the spring season. —*Harris Green*

Chase Finlay: a heroic Apollo



Paul Kolnik

Best of the BEST 2011

Costin Radu



Apprentice Ida Praetorius showed an innate dramatic talent in *The Lesson*

Ida Praetorius

As the eager, then terrified student in Flemming Flindt's *The Lesson*, Ida Praetorius had some advantages over more experienced dancers when she debuted in the role during the Royal Danish Ballet's U.S. tour this past summer. For one, as an apprentice with the company, Praetorius did not need to dig very deep to recall her student days. For another, despite extraordinary extensions and rock-solid balances, Praetorius still has a youthful gawkiness that made her a plausible victim for a maniacal ballet teacher with homicidal impulses. And she brought striking credibility to the otherwise macabre scenario. At first tentative, then eager to show her dedication, she gradually shifted from enthusiastic to anxious to frightened as her teacher became more demanding. Her movements were as expressive as her face, evolving from uncontrolled exuberance to ragdoll exhaustion. In ballets as over-the-top as *The Lesson*, dancers can easily slide into melodrama, but Praetorius' innate dramatic flair kept her performance completely—and frighteningly—real. —*Hanna Rubin*

Joseph Gorak

Swan Lake's Act III character dances usually pass by in something of a blur, with everyone waiting politely, and perhaps a bit sleepily, for the big fireworks of the Black Swan pas de deux. But American Ballet Theatre fans got a zing of a wake-up call this year whenever Joseph Gorak danced in the Neapolitan variation. The young corps member, who won both the Erik Bruhn Prize and a Princess Grace Award this year, is blessed with remarkable natural facility: beautiful classical proportions, unusual flexibility and crescent-moon feet that even colleague David Hallberg might envy. But it's the casual flawlessness of his technique that really hooks you. In Neapolitan, his pop-goes-the-weasel jumps and Xerox-copy pirouettes looked effortless. And Gorak, who sported an irrepressible, giddy grin for the whole variation, seemed thrilled to be in the spotlight—a place that will probably become very familiar to him soon. —*Margaret Fuhrer*

Gene Schiavone



ABT fans got a wake-up call courtesy of Joseph Gorak (shown here in Bournonville's *Flower Festival in Genzano*)

Jessica Collado: Raw yet whimsical in Christopher Bruce's *Grinning In Your Face*



Amitava Sarkar

Jessica Collado

Houston Ballet soloist Jessica Collado often shines in soulful roles. But for Christopher Bruce's *Grinning In Your Face*, inspired by Dorothea Lange's Depression-era photographs, Collado stripped away the pretty to arrive at a raw, bare-bones place in her dancing. It felt equally authentic and poetic. Collado also brought a touch of whimsy to the ballet's romantic moments—while never letting us forget that these were hard times. Trained in jazz from an early age, Collado's elastic lines and dynamic timing fit nicely within Bruce's unhinged yet lyrical movement quality; this combination of dancer and choreographer brought out new depths of expression and tenderness. —*Nancy Wozny*

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Fresh and confident,
Nicole Ciapponi
dazzled in Forsythe

Erik Tomasson

Nicole Ciapponi

It's sometimes startling to realize that Nicole Ciapponi is still a teenager. Fresh out of San Francisco Ballet's trainee program, the young corps de ballet member joined the company in 2010 at 16 and jumped almost immediately into soloist roles. At SFB's opening gala, Ciapponi dazzled in William Forsythe's formidable *The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude*, and just a week later she led the third movement of Balanchine's *Symphony in C* with the kind of poise that usually takes years to hone. Ciapponi tackled Balanchine with a youthful energy and a crystalline musicality, but surprisingly, she has none of the coltishness that one might expect given her age. She was so solid in *Symphony in C* that when a last-minute replacement was needed to lead the fourth movement, Ciapponi jumped in and turned out a fresh, utterly confident performance—an auspicious beginning for one of the most promising careers in the company. —Mary Ellen Hunt

Larissa Ponomarenko and Jeffrey Cirio

Boston Ballet is defying expectations—and getting it right. In last April's "Elo Experience," resident choreographer Jorma Elo paired the company's most lauded ballerina with one of its newest young men; the result was a blend of freshness and experience that augmented the riveting unpredictability of Elo's choreography. At the time, 18-year Boston Ballet veteran Larissa Ponomarenko was less than two months away from retiring, while second-soloist Jeffrey Cirio was only a year and a half into company life. Their partnership wove in, out and through collected highlights of Elo's works, establishing an arc to the evening. Ponomarenko countered Cirio's irresistible aliveness with mature mastery, while he set a golden standard of childlike innocence and curiosity—which she met. Both dancers embodied the diverse demands of their roles—which included speaking in English and Russian, as well as singing—through a story that read like the dark, dreamlike maze of memory. —Ashley Rivers

Larissa Ponomarenko and Jeffrey
Cirio: Maturity met innocence in
the "Elo Experience"



Gene Schiavone