Antony Tudor (b. William John Cook, 1908-1987)  
by Christopher Caines

Antony Tudor, together with his compatriot Frederick Ashton and George Balanchine, is one of the three indisputable master choreographers of twentieth-century ballet. During the nearly fifty years of his career in the United States, Tudor exerted a decisive influence as both choreographer and teacher. Although he created only a small number of masterworks, Tudor is not only a true American dance treasure but an artist of worldwide historical importance.

“Poet’s Eyes”: Tudor’s Early Career

When Lucia Chase and Richard Pleasant, the founders of Ballet Theatre (known since 1956 as American Ballet Theatre, and fondly, of course, as ABT), decided in 1939 to invite a British choreographer to provide repertory for the company’s inaugural season, Antony Tudor was not their first choice. But Frederick Ashton—Tudor’s slightly older peer, colleague, friend, and rival in London’s nascent ballet scene—declined, graciously suggesting Tudor and Andrée Howard, another young English choreographer, instead. Agnes de Mille, who had collaborated with Tudor extensively in England, seconded both choices. Tudor accepted a ten-week contract, expecting to return to England immediately to continue working with the London Ballet, the chamber-size troupe he had founded only a year before. At the end of Ballet Theatre’s January 1940 season, Howard sailed for home, while Tudor decided to stay a while longer—for a few months that were to stretch into the rest of his life.

Although he was only thirty-one years old when he joined Ballet Theatre and had been dancing only since age twenty, Tudor had already earned a reputation as one of Britain’s leading choreographers. Born a butcher’s son in London’s East End, Tudor had found his way to ballet through amateur theater, arriving eventually—perhaps inevitably, given her prominence in London’s then tiny dance scene—on the doorstep of Marie Rambert, who accepted him as a student because he had “poet’s eyes.” Rambert soon recognized Tudor’s gift for composition and, as she had already done for Ashton, mentored the young artist, presenting his earliest efforts through her subscription-based company, the Ballet Club. Tudor thrived in the milieu’s jovial bohemianism amid what ballerina Tamara Karsavina called its “blessed poverty”; these early years may well have been his happiest. Becoming an artist entailed for Tudor an act not only of self-discovery but of self-invention: in short order, he changed his name (from Will Cook to the posh-sounding Antony Tudor), his accent (from Cockney to “received pronunciation”), and, one might say, his destiny.

By the time he set sail for the United States, Tudor had created nineteen ballets, as well as dances for ten plays, musicals, and revues, for fifteen operas, and for two dozen television broadcasts (including a pioneering split-screen experiment, Fugue for Four Cameras, in 1931). He had, with de Mille, cofounded a company, Dance Theatre (which lasted only one season), prior to setting out on his own with the enthusiastically received London Ballet in 1938. Most importantly, he had created the two masterpieces that defined his mature style, Jardin aux Lilas (1936) and Dark Elegies (1937), both of which Ballet Theatre presented in its first season.

Lilac Garden and Dark Elegies: A Young Man’s Masterpieces

Jardin aux Lilas, which has usually been performed in the United States since its American premiere under the translated title Lilac Garden, remains for many lovers of Tudor’s work his finest achievement, a peak he never quite reached again. The ballet presents not so much a story as a situation—rooted in socially and historically real and specific circumstances—a moment of irresolvable emotional conflict immediately defined by the names of the four principal characters as they are always given in the printed program:
Caroline, Her Lover, The Man She Must Marry (one of Tudor’s own signature roles), and An Episode in His Past. The dancing proceeds as a series of hushed, rushed, fleeting encounters in the shadowy garden among these four principal characters, continually interrupted by the other guests.

Caroline, the protagonist, is the daughter of an aristocratic family of declining fortune about to be married off by her parents to an older wealthy bourgeois for purely mercenary reasons (a melancholy fate she shares with many real young women in Great Britain during the Edwardian period in which the costumes tell us the work is set). The occasion is a party celebrating the match, shortly before the wedding. The action takes place in a garden overhung by lilac boughs heavily laden with perfumed blossoms (for the London premiere, Tudor and his dancers even sprayed the theater with lilac eau de cologne). The garden is adjacent to a grand house (presumably Caroline’s family home); light from a drawing room or terrace pours onto the scene upstage right. It is late spring or early summer; a full moon has risen halfway up the sky. As the veiled opening chords of Ernest Chausson’s Poème, (1896), a single-movement, concerto-like work for orchestra and solo violin, slowly unfold, the curtain rises on Caroline standing arm-in-arm beside her soon-to-be husband, whose stiff posture immediately establishes both his arrogant self-possession and his possessive sense of entitlement to his bride.

Soon Caroline’s lover, a handsome young cadet (a role created on Hugh Laing, Tudor’s leading male dancer from 1933 to 1952), enters. In Tudor’s conception, he arrives uninvited, having slipped away from his military academy to climb over the garden wall—like Romeo—desperate to see Caroline one last time. (Tudor also sometimes told his dancers that Caroline and her cadet have been friends from early childhood and have always believed they would marry.) Next, the Episode (again, in Tudor’s mind, uninvited) appears, seeking the bridegroom. Tudor said that she has come to persuade her paramour that there is no reason to discontinue their liaison after the wedding. Such Stanislavskian refinements of background motivation well exemplify Tudor’s nuanced, novelistic conception of dance characters. Although few audience members might ever intuit such details—which no choreography could convey per se—the dancers in Tudor’s ballets must understand them if they are to incarnate their characters with the depth and three-dimensionality for which Tudor became famous.

In Lilac Garden Tudor discovered for dance theater a unique poignancy and potency in unexpressed emotion—or more precisely, in emotions revealed to the audience by virtue of the characters’ efforts to conceal them from one another. Likewise, Tudor uncovered an eerie power in focusing his dancing action not on what happens but on what does not: their friends never succeed in comforting either of the thwarted young lovers; the Episode never manages to openly confront her paramour; Caroline and Her Lover never share the last kiss they long for desperately. Tudor breaches convention most boldly at the music’s surging climax, in one of the most justly famous moments in all of modern ballet, when the entire company swirls, not into more active motion, but into a still tableau, and Caroline, overcome, swoons in her fiancé’s arms. As the solo violin reprises one of the score’s main melodies, she walks hesitantly forward in a small arc, making tiny gestures as if appealing hopelessly to the other characters one by one. We seem to be suspended in a moment outside time, and inside Caroline’s anguished heart. Then, as in a scrap of film run backward, she retraces her steps into the fainting pose. Time starts again; the Lover rushes on to press a sprig of lilac into Caroline’s trembling fingers; her fiancé drops a small cape round her shoulders and leads her offstage, into a romantically barren married life Tudor leaves us to imagine all too well.
Lilac Garden casts a unique spell; even a merely respectable performance can be almost unbearably piercing. Despite its brevity and chamber scale, the ballet is arguably one of the greatest theatrical dances ever made; both Ashton and Balanchine are reported to have remarked that each wished he had himself created it. It is a perfect work.

Although it is a very different ballet, Dark Elegies rivals Lilac Garden in the esteem of Tudor’s devotees, for whom it creates onstage an austere, harrowing, and unfailingly cathartic ceremony of communal mourning, and is simply one of the greatest dances of all time; the choreographer considered it his finest work. While its score, Gustav Mahler’s morbidly titled song cycle setting five poems by Friedrich Rückert, Kindertotenlieder (literally, Children’s Death Songs), expresses an individual parental grief (Rückert’s own struggle to accept the loss of his children to scarlet fever), Tudor amplifies the cycle’s theme to encompass an entire idealized seaside peasant community that has lost all its children—to drowning, abduction, fever, famine, or war, we never know. Four soloists and one couple emerge from the villagers’ shifting ritualistic formations as if channeling their collective agony by concentrating it through tense, fraught passages of expressionistic dance declamation.

While never ceasing to be a Tudor ballet, Elegies is Tudor’s least classical major work, and his closest approach to the modern dance idioms of the 1930s and ‘40s (of which he was well aware: Tudor had seen, among other ensembles, the Ballets Jooss on tour in London). Certainly the costumes (insistently drab skirts and head scarves for the women, pants and sleeveless tunics over smock-like shirts for the men, designed by Nadia Benois) directly appropriate modern-dance conventions of the era. The movement sends weight down into the floor; feet are often in parallel positions; the step patterns appear to derive from the folk dances of a yet-to-be-discovered corner of Europe. Only the three female soloists wear pointe shoes (usually painted brown, with no ribbons), and their pointe steps—in Tudor, inventive sometimes to the point of idiosyncrasy—are spare and chaste. Elegies is also the sole work in Tudor’s oeuvre to have been danced by modern-dance ensembles, having been first staged for the Limón Company in 1999, with the pointe work omitted.

“I am Ballet Theatre!”: Triumphs in New York
Tudor’s first masterwork made for Ballet Theatre was Pillar of Fire (1942), which the choreographer had conceived before leaving England, set to Arnold Schönberg’s Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night, opus 4, 1899), arranged for string orchestra, the apex of the composer’s early style, a lush and turbulent late Romanticism. Inspired by a short poem by Richard Dehmel (which Schönberg originally had printed in the score), in the manner of Richard Strauss’s symphonic poems, the single-movement work is program music (an instrumental score that depicts, at least ostensibly, an extramusical narrative): A couple walks through a forest at night; the woman confesses that she is pregnant by another; the man forgives her unfaithfulness. Through the power of their renewed love, the night itself seems to be transformed, and the man promises that their shared “inner warmth” will transfigure the child, making it his. As Tudor had with Rückert’s poetry (and with all the literary sources that often inspired his ballets), he wove his own dramatic text from this slender narrative thread.

Like Lilac Garden, Pillar has a named female protagonist (Hagar) who focuses the audience’s empathy as if in perpetual close-up; all the other characters, identified by descriptive tags, recede from her in the degree of detail of their portraiture. As in Lilac Garden and Elegies, the set and costume designs (originally by Jo Mieliinner) seem to evoke some particular place but refrain from specifying one—a deft artistic sleight of hand: Pillar’s setting suggests a small town or suburb, perhaps in Southern England, New England, or the American South, circa
1900. Hagar lives with a domineering spinster Eldest Sister and a heedlessly flirtatious Youngest Sister; she loves her reserved and dignified Friend, but, fearing that her younger sister has seduced him, Hagar yields herself in desperation to a louche Young Man from the House Opposite, where the Lovers in Experience write and couple (it could be a family of Latin immigrants, or even a bordello). Lovers in Innocence, who are assigned the most purely classical steps in the work, represent the conventional (disapproving or oblivious) townsfolk. The viewer must surmise that Hagar becomes pregnant as a result of her impulsive affair; Tudor does not try to indicate this. The emotional logic that leads to Hagar’s reconciliation with her Friend is also enigmatic.

_Pillar_ affirms and extends the manner and means of _Lilac Garden_, but with less economy and momentum and with great stress on frustrated sexual, rather than more inclusively romantic, desire, and with greater emphasis on the surreal and symbolic elements of Tudor’s dramaturgy. While Caroline is heartsick and helpless, the ostracized Hagar, with her ticks and self-lacerating spasms, has always read as “repressed” and “neurotic.” The ballet, greeted with thirty curtain calls on opening night, was a triumph, for the choreographer, for the company, and for the ballerina Tudor plucked from the corps de ballet and made a star, Nora Kaye. Meeting De Mille after the show, Tudor exulted: “Agnes, I am Ballet Theatre!”

_Pillar_ includes some of Tudor’s most ingenious inventions, but it has proven ever more difficult to revive successfully as the hothouse atmosphere of the so-called “psychoanalytic forties” recedes in cultural memory. Perhaps the ballet merely awaits the right ballerina to translate it into contemporary terms and make it blaze as brightly as once it did.

Tudor’s greatest work at Ballet Theatre in the 1940s may be, as Arlene Croce speculates, _The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet_ (1943)—“a return to the delicate characterization and mute pathos” of _Lilac Garden_. Set to several scores by Frederick Delius arranged and linked together for Tudor by conductor Antal Dorati—somewhat in the manner of John Lanchbery’s arrangements for Ashton—Tudor’s _Romeo_ is, as Edwin Denby memorably wrote, “a personal version of the story, a reverie” and a “meditation” on Shakespeare’s play as much as it is a translation of the drama into dance terms (108, 110). _Romeo_ was admired particularly for its richly textured Italian Renaissance décor and costumes by Eugene Berhmann—designs “unparalleled in our time” according to Denby (119)—which made the dancers look like paintings and tapestries come to life. Berhmann’s ingenious set enabled Tudor to create overlapping and simultaneous action, with an effect of intense poetic compression. Unlike any ballet set to the familiar Prokofiev score, with its hooky leitmotivs, its cinematic grandeur and bombast, Tudor’s _Romeo_ maintained a warm, human-scale intimacy with its star-crossed lovers. Those who knew it at ABT recall the ballet with intense, aching love. Indeed, David Vaughan has called Tudor’s ballet “the finest of all on that overworked subject.” Nonetheless, the company has not revived the work in its entirety since 1976, shortly before acquiring Kenneth Macmillan’s popular, nearly ubiquitous, version. Perhaps it would be hard today to find a ballerina who could so perfectly incarnate Tudor’s Juliet as the original production’s Alicia Markova (cast successfully against type, and dancing in a red wig). Still, so long as Tudor’s _Romeo_ remains absent from the stage, our view of his work remains tragically truncated, incomplete.

_Bitter Laughter, Bitter Tears: Comedies and Experiments_

Not all of Tudor’s best works are tragedies. _Gala Performance_ (1938), made for the London Ballet and successfully remounted by Ballet Theatre several times, is a deviously hilarious send-up of diva ballerina behavior in three national flavors (Russian, French, Italian), both backstage and onstage. While its fusion of robust classical dancing with sardonic comic
understatement may be difficult for today’s dancers to achieve, the ballet is another whose long exile from the theater is lamentable. Similar in tone, but with less detailed caricature owing to its large array of minor characters, is Offenbach in the Underworld, a satire of Massine’s once ubiquitous Gaîté Parisienne and set to the same score. The ballet was created in 1954 for the Philadelphia Ballet, and revised the following year into its definitive form for the National Ballet of Canada, where it became an enduring audience favorite. Offenbach has been frequently restaged; ABT most recent revived the ballet in 2002. Another comic work often restaged is The Judgment of Paris (1938), set to an orchestral suite drawn from Kurt Weill’s score for Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera). Tudor casts the Trojan prince as a slumming flâneur and the goddesses Juno, Venus, and Minerva as jaded, clapped-out whores in a seedy brothel who try to seduce him with their increasingly pathetic solo routines; when the client passes out drunk, they rob him. Although the piece is favored especially by smaller companies on account of its minimal set and cast of five, it is funniest when played, as it has been at ABT, by real star dancers a trifle past their athletic prime. In and outside the studio Tudor was notorious for his dry sarcasm; more than any other of his extant works, Judgment reveals the bitter depths of his irony, especially to viewers who know Brecht’s lyrics (unheard in the ballet) well enough to sing along in their heads with the music.

None of Tudor’s other major works of the 1940s created for Ballet Theatre was wholly successful. Dim Lustre (1943) is the choreographer’s most comprehensive experiment in adapting cinematic techniques to the stage, and the only fruit of a long-planned but never realized ballet on the theme of involuntary memory in Marcel Proust’s À la Recherche du Temps Perdu (Looking for Lost Time). Meeting in an Edwardian ballroom, a man and a woman are reminded of the romances of their youth. The jump-cut, split-screen, and flashback techniques Tudor assayed all prove awkward theatrically; they might be more successfully realized today with prerecorded and projected digital video—a heretical suggestion perhaps, but then Tudor never adhered to any orthodoxy, not even his own. Undertow (1945) is the ballet that most nearly justifies the fatigued cliché that Tudor fathered a genre of “psychological ballet” (his only real legacy, I would contend, is in fact the Tudor ballet). Set to Tudor’s only commissioned score, by American composer William Schuman, Undertow presents a rather lurid fusion of true-crime thriller and case study in psychopathology, in which a young man (Laing) raised in dire circumstances and possibly a “repressed homosexual,” commits a sex murder when he loses his virginity. The tale is not so much overdetermined as high-mindedly overburdened by a thick layer of abstruse Greek mythology. Similarly, Shadow of the Wind (1948), to Mahler’s Song of the Earth, failed to find a clear dance energy in its rendering of motifs derived from poems of the great T’ang dynasty poet Li Bai. Nonetheless, each of these, and all of Tudor’s lesser works, contain exquisitely realized motifs, phrases, passages bearing the choreographer’s inimitable signature. For example, no one who saw Shadow (never revived after its premiere season and considered entirely lost) could forget the image of the Abandoned Wife gathering and eating, one by one, her own tears. Such “failures,” for another choreographer, might well be termed success.

**Tudor’s Influence as Artist and Teacher; His Later Works**

Throughout the 1940s, Tudor’s influence was palpable and pervasive—his lilac garden perfumed the whole atmosphere. Tudor’s importance to dance in the United States could not be overestimated; his ballets set the standard by which other new dramatic narrative dances were judged.11 As Denby remarked in 1947, “The stimulus that Tudor’s work here has given our native choreographers and dancers is obvious” (511). Tudor’s influence
was also to be seen clearly in works by Agnes de Mille (with whom Tudor had worked closely in England, and who originated roles in Elegies and Judgment)—especially her Fall River Legend—and even Massine. Major works by Jerome Robbins, Robert Joffrey, Eliot Feld, and Jiří Kylián revealed close attention to Tudor’s idiom and choreographic devices as late as the 1970s. Tudor’s influence on Ashton is harder to ascertain; at the very least, one could say that the latter’s Enigma Variations and A Month in the Country converge with Tudor’s aesthetic. Similarly, Martha Graham’s portraits of conflicted heroines may owe a debt to Tudor, or simply share the same zeitgeist.

Most decisive was Tudor’s contribution to Ballet Theatre in its crucial formative period, where his ballets defined the company’s public profile and effectively guaranteed its artistic seriousness. Nonetheless, the behind-the-scenes atmosphere at Ballet Theatre was perhaps even more fraught than is usual at a large dance company, and Tudor left in 1950, not to return to create a new ballet for a quarter century. Premieres have come and gone for decades, but since his departure, ABT has seldom again offered shelter to a choreographer of Tudor’s caliber. In any case, there have been few such.

Although he never found another long-term home for his work, Tudor did contribute to several other companies during his lifetime, mostly by restaging his early masterpieces, though he declined more invitations than he accepted. For the 1949/50 season Tudor directed the Royal Swedish Ballet, leaving what was at the time a very provincial ensemble much transformed. Tudor returned to Stockholm several times thereafter, and in 1963 created for the Swedish dancers Echoing of Trumpets, a dramatic ballet based on the Nazi massacre of the citizens of the Czech town of Lidice in reprisal for the assassination of local Nazi commissar Reinhard Heydrich in 1942. Although the work has its detractors, commentators have universally marveled at Tudor’s deft avoidance of sensationalism or exploitation in handing such potentially incendiary material—as is true also of Pillar and Undertow. Tudor’s career proves, if nothing else, that refined taste is necessary, if not sufficient, to the creation of works of lasting value.

From 1949 to 1964 Tudor maintained an intermittent and mostly unsatisfactory association with the New York City Ballet, where he staged a new production (with designs he thought excessively luxe) of Lilac Garden and created two minor works. Although he accepted no commissions for new ballets from them, Tudor enjoyed more fruitful relationships with the Royal Danish Ballet and the National Ballet of Canada, among others. Shadowplay, created to showcase Anthony Dowell at the Royal Ballet in London in 1967 and restaged for Mikhail Baryshnikov at ABT in 1975, suffers from the same detachment of intellectual conception from dance impulse that marred Tudor’s later works at ABT in the forties, awkwardly yoking a coming-of-age story derived from Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book to an esoteric Buddhist allegory of spiritual progress and rather bluntly rendered themes of sexual ambivalence (a 2011 revival at ABT left audiences disoriented). The Divine Horsemen, created in 1969 for the Australian Ballet, was even less successful.

For most his career after leaving Ballet Theatre Tudor was much more active as a pedagogue than as a choreographer. During his tenure at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet school (from its founding in 1950–51 as a collaborative-venture joint school with Ballet Theatre until its closing in 1966; Tudor also directed the Met’s ballet company from 1950 to 1962), at Jacob’s Pillow (where Tudor worked in various ways circa 1941 to 1960), as a founding faculty member of the Juilliard School (1950–71), and at the University of California at Irvine (1971–86), Tudor became one of the country’s most influential teachers of ballet technique, composition, and stagecraft. Tudor trained an entire generation of dancers;
his students—to choose only a very few prominent names—include Pina Bausch, Carolyn Brown, Judith Jamison, Bruce Marks, Paul Taylor, Glen Tetley, and James Waring. Some of Tudor’s little ballets, created as teaching pieces at Juilliard, have latterly enjoyed considerable success in restagings both for student and professional ensembles, particularly Continua (1971), a rhapsodic gem for three couples set to Johann Pachelbel’s Canon in D, and an extraordinarily resourceful reading of a piece of music so drastically overexposed as to constitute a kind an instant cliché.

Tudor returned to ABT in 1975 to create his last major work, The Leaves Are Fading, inspired by the febrile intensity of the young Gelsey Kirkland, to an array of little-known chamber pieces for strings by Antonin Dvořák. Leaves is one of Tudor’s most exquisitely crafted ballets and includes some of his most sublimely wrought partnering inventions, with achingly beautiful lifts. The ballet begins and ends with a woman in a long gown—a dress somehow at once old-fashioned and timeless—wandering across the stage, a device that frames the dance itself as her memories of youthful romance and renders the ballet Tudor’s most explicitly nostalgic work. Leaves was gratefully received as a belated return to form for the choreographer, and has been widely restaged.

As its title suggests, Leaves is an autumnal ballet, a backward gaze. It would not be farfetched to regard its lady in the spring-green gown as Lilac Garden’s Caroline in her mature years, tenderly cherishing, with regret and acceptance mingled, her lost love, and perhaps even to imagine Tudor himself looking back to his own first passionate romance (with Laing, who first danced the role of Caroline’s Lover). Indeed, to grasp the singularity of Tudor’s achievement and his contradictions, we must always return to that garden, in which Tudor’s lifework took root.

**Tudor’s Style Reconsidered: Returning to His Lilac Garden**

Like many great and truly original artworks in any medium, Lilac Garden seems so inevitable onstage that we may easily overlook its strangeness. While the rhetoric of Tudor’s mimesis—the means by which he persuades us of the truth of his representation of reality—is not wholly without precedent in the Romantic ballet, Tudor is unique in the synthesis of expressive impulses that before him were conventionally separated into pantomime and dancing. The steps and gestures in Lilac Garden represent, by turns and sometimes even simultaneously, the characters’ social behavior, whispered dialogue, layers of conscious and unconscious emotion and intent—and perhaps even, as in Virginia Woolf’s novels, their mingling streams of consciousness. Yet, weirdly, the dancing never represents dancing itself: Caroline’s party includes no social dances, as I imagine it might have if Balanchine or Ashton had addressed Tudor’s scenario; when Chausson glides into an urgent, hypnotic waltz rhythm in Poème, no one waltzes.

Moreover, Tudor seems—most drastically in Lilac Garden, and in many of his later ballets—simultaneously to compress and to expand our sense of passing time. Lilac Garden’s dramatic structure of recurring intimacies sought and cut short yields a continually interrupted dance impulse, yet the whole ballet pours across the stage in a single lyric flow. Lasting only sixteen or eighteen minutes, the work is so rich in detail that as it ends you think it must surely have lasted twice that long; at the same time, the ballet seems to pass in the blink of an eye, and the amount of naturalistic time that it is supposed to represent is impossible to gauge. Mere moments? An entire evening? We feel that we have seen revealed the essence of its characters’ entire lives. Theater works that rely on a sense of fragmentation are often discursive, but Lilac Garden is taut as heartstrings. Moreover, the ballet seems different at every viewing—an effect I have only
encountered elsewhere in the work of a very different artist, **Merce Cunningham**.

**Lilac Garden** also presents Tudor’s dance style in its quintessential, even its ideal form. From the waist down, the dancing consists almost entirely of steps drawn from the classical lexicon, the *danse d’école*—but steps linked together in phrases free of academic convention, of formulas inherited from classroom or stage. Tudor’s step vocabulary is classical, but his grammar and syntax are uniquely his. Categories of steps that ballet traditionally keeps separate—poses, *terre à terre* work (steps that stay on the ground), *adagio* (slowly unfolding balances), *petit allegro* (fast little jumps), *grand allegro* (big jumps)—are joined together with an eloquent poetic rightness that conceals its startling originality. There is no meretricious bravura: the most difficult steps must be danced without a trace of self-presentation or self-congratulation. Dancers often find the coordination of Tudor’s long phrases intricate, even tricky or awkward, but they appear to unfurl seamlessly. Preparations for even the hardest jumps, turns, and balances are rigorously concealed, elided. Show-off-y balancing stunts are replaced by eloquent stillness—variously poised, or perched, or weighted and resolved; brief breath-caught tableaux or cinematic freeze-frames.

From the waist up, Tudor is equally unorthodox. As in Ashton, *épaulement*, the twisting force that counterbalances upper body against lower, is in Tudor rich and deeply rooted in the torso. Likewise, arm movements are never merely decorative. Tudor uncovers a gestural power latent in classical *port de bras* drawn from the Cecchetti syllabus—the system upon which English ballet was founded—infusing familiar positions with mysterious yearning. Other gestures range from limpid, even naive naturalism (Caroline’s finger to her lips following her Lover’s entrance—*Hush! We are overheard!*!) to surreal abstraction (the weirdly tilted diamond shape that the female guests make at one moment with their arms, as if holding a second ghostly head above their own and bearing it in a rush offstage). In between these poles, Tudor invents a protean array of expressive gestures that the available literary tropes—metonym, metaphor, simile, symbol—cannot adequately name. (A whole essay remains to be written on Tudor’s gestures, for which a new analytical terminology might have to be invented.) Moreover, in Tudor steps themselves—footwork, legwork—may have the emotive force of gestures too. This aspect of his originality is all the more remarkable in that Tudor almost never in his career (except for comic purpose) had recourse to either traditional ballet pantomime (the coded hand language with which dancers can “say” things such as “Let’s dance now!” or “Her heart is weak; if she dances, she will die and become a Wili!”) or Marcel Marceau–type representational pantomime (drinking from an imaginary glass, smoking an invisible cigarette).

**Lilac Garden** also encapsulates Tudor’s unusual approach to a musical score. Tudor was a much more highly trained musician than most choreographers; he studied piano throughout his youth, achieving sufficient mastery to work his way through Beethoven’s piano sonatas—a rite of passage for any professional pianist. Throughout his career, Tudor played well enough to accompany for classes (which he did a great deal at Rambert’s school) and rehearsals—even, in a pinch, his own. For intuitive musicality and refined taste, Tudor’s only rivals in twentieth-century ballet are Ashton and Balanchine; for analytical mastery of the score, Balanchine alone. Also like Balanchine, Tudor often chose works of high caliber composed for the concert hall, not the stage. However, Tudor avoided the *musique dansante* that drew Balanchine like a lodestar, and seemed almost allergic to dance-friendly music with a strong pulse and sectional architectures of sustained tempi. Tudor wanted his dancers to “sing” his kinetic melodies with their bodies, and to dance with a breath-based phrasing. His principal roles depend at least as
much on an actorly sense of timing as on dancerly rhythm. Tudor hated counting in rehearsal and often forbade his dancers to do it—which makes his ballets, in his own lifetime and even more so since his death, almost perversely difficult to learn right. (Tudor’s resistance to counted rhythm also made it impossible for him to work with a large corps de ballet—a challenge he never assayed.) Tudor furthermore eschewed any mechanical illustration of music; no recurrent musical motif is ever assigned to one character or dance idea. In this, Tudor may in his early years have been consciously reacting—even overreacting—against Léonide Massine’s ballets, which he detested, and, after initial exposure, avoided.\(^19\)

Although he studied and even more or less memorized his chosen scores thoroughly, Tudor’s ballets do not, as Balanchine’s sometimes do (sublimely), reconstitute the choreographer’s analysis onstage. Nonetheless, as has often been remarked, *Lilac Garden* fits the shifting contours of Chausson’s music so ideally that it is easy to imagine that Tudor must have commissioned the score to his minute specifications after composing the ballet. Tudor responded intuitively to music while at work, and did not consult the score in the studio. His dance phrase often launches from an offbeat, and flows through a cadence; dancers feel that they have too many steps, or too few, to fit within the arc of the musical slur. In dancer slang, Tudor is typically said to have composed “through the music,”\(^20\) but I believe this impression to be to a great extent illusory. Tudor was in intuitive contrapuntist; as Edwin Denby makes clear, the right conductor, with great effort, can elicit the layer of rhythm within a score to which Tudor’s ear in any given passage responded.\(^21\) The relationship of dancing to music in his work is not, as so often claimed, an art of magically arbitrary correspondence, however elusive it may too often, both onstage and in the studio, appear.

The Enigma of Tudor’s Career

The perennial, perplexing question of why Tudor failed to fulfill abundantly the promise of *Lilac Garden* will never be answered satisfactorily. Many commentators have noted the choreographer’s debilitating perfectionism, self-doubt, extreme sensitivity to criticism, and typically slow, even agonizing, compositional process (*Jardin aux Lilas*, however, was made very quickly, under the pressure of a looming premiere deadline and Rambert’s pre-emptively disapproving interference; Perlmutter, 66–70). The English critic P. W. Manchester suggested that, after coming of age as an artist on the tiny stage of London’s Mercury Theatre\(^22\) (and in the nurturing all-hands-on-deck intimacy of Rambert’s close-knit artistic family, one might add), Tudor never felt at ease with larger stages and casts (though his larger-scale works surely reveal no lack of command of stage space per se). Tudor biographer Judith Chazin Bennahum notes that, after a single season with his London Ballet, Tudor never again tried to found his own company, which might have freed him from the competition for studio time and dancers that attends working in repertory companies such as ABT, and which Tudor found especially onerous. (However, Bennahum rightly adds that Tudor was not remotely suited to the political game playing and courtship of the wealthy to which American choreographers must submit in order to maintain their own companies.) Many have proposed that after 1948 Tudor felt unable to compete with Balanchine, whose athletic, abstract neoclassicism more and more defined American ballet. Agnes De Mille believed that the brief marriage (1947 to 1953) of ballerina Diana Adams and Laing, hitherto Tudor’s leading man both on- and offstage, threw Tudor permanently off his game. (Donna Perlmutter, one of Tudor’s biographers, disagrees, believing that the relationship between Tudor and Laing was so tempestuous and mutually destructive that Tudor was better off without his former lover. Howbeit, Tudor, Laing, and Adams all worked together throughout the marriage, first at ABT, then at New York City Ballet.) Others have contended that Tudor confined his
imagination with an excessively literary conception of dance. Perhaps his susceptibility to music from which dance impulses could be squeezed only under great pressure, and to dramatic ideas that tended to work against the grain of dancing itself as a theatrical art form, swamped and ultimately shipwrecked his genius.

Tudor also often said that his output was so small—maybe “ten percent” of other choreographers’—because he never wanted to repeat himself. While there may be an element of self-excuse or rationalization in this claim, it is true: Tudor never did repeat himself, at least not in the sense of ever composing the same dance more than once under different titles, as many choreographers essentially do. Yet the spectacle of Tudor traveling the world to restage Lilac Garden and Dark Elegies repeatedly, as if he had adopted a curatorial, almost posthumous attitude to his own oeuvre, is melancholy. Tudor was not silent in this period; his output of pieces for his students was steady and varied. He seems not so much to have renounced his vocation as to have contented himself with dissipating his gifts in minor efforts.

Tudor Today, and Tomorrow
To its great credit, ABT has remained the most consistent home for Tudor’s work since his death, in general reviving or maintaining in repertory at least one of his ballets annually. However, critics and audience members who witnessed productions the choreographer himself supervised have often complained of a lack of precision in rhythm and gesture, or a superficial dramatic approach, and not only at ABT. The ballets are said to be difficult to stage because they demand subtleties of character development and musicianship that require more rehearsal time than can be allocated to them, and because today’s dancers lack the appropriate training or aptitude or spirit for Tudor’s style. Surely, the general eclipse, both in the United States and abroad, of Cecchetti training, without which Tudor’s style (and Ashton’s too) can never entirely make sense, has made dancing Tudor’s work for many dancers today almost like learning a foreign language.

Tudor’s ballets have been “stigmatized as passé, especially in New York” (Bennauhm, 241) at least since the early 1960s, and some audiences (and, more distressingly, some dancers) consider them old-fashioned—an inevitable fate for most artists in the years immediately following their death (and a fate that Ashton, for example, predicted for his own work). Nonetheless, the status quo of so-called contemporary ballet choreography since 1980 in fact represents enormous artistic regression from Tudor’s achievements and ideals, and from his lucid craft, musicianship, and integrity of conception. Choreographers today could learn enormously from close study of Tudor’s work; few appear moved to do so.

Almost a quarter century after his death, Tudor’s place in dance is equivocal, even paradoxical. No choreographer supported by the international producing system publicly acknowledges Tudor’s example, and many young dance artists do not even recognize his name. Compared to Ashton and Balanchine, his only real peers, Tudor’s presence onstage is modest. All choreographers must ultimately be judged on the evidence of a fraction of their output, given the fugitive nature of the art, yet Tudor’s case is extreme, since his oeuvre is so small and the number of his indisputably great works smaller still. Yet despite his failure to build a catalogue on the scale of Ashton’s or Balanchine’s, no knowledgeable commentator could deny that Tudor’s place in the history books and in the archives is secure. Happily, the place of at least some of his ballets onstage appears, for the foreseeable future at least, not less so.

Since Tudor’s death, the Antony Tudor Ballet Trust, under the directorship of Sally Brayley Bliss, the sole trustee of Tudor’s works, has licensed them to professional companies and
student ensembles worldwide (mainly in North America, Western Europe, and Australia); indeed, Tudor’s ballets have been performed far more frequently since his death in 1987 than they were during the last decades of his life. According to the trust, interest in the ballets has remained steady; if the 2010/11 season is typical, there have been perhaps a dozen productions annually, with a surge of revivals in 2008, the centennial of the choreographer’s birth, which was also celebrated by a two-day colloquium at the Juilliard School, and a single (sold-out and rapturously received) all-Tudor evening during ABT’s autumn season at City Center.

The Trust trains Tudor répétiteurs, and undertakes to restore and preserve as many of his works as possible via notation and video. Still, although the Trust currently lists twenty-seven ballets as available for production, only two clearly dominate the roster of those actually produced: Lilac Garden and Dark Elegies—the pair of ballets that made Tudor’s reputation and defined his ambition, both created in London before he turned thirty, and before he emigrated to become, despite his lifelong imperishable Englishness, an American choreographer.

It would be a shame if, some years from now, Tudor’s extant repertory were to have been reduced to these two works only—a not unimaginable fate. In truth, Tudor’s ballets remain to be entirely rediscovered by dancers of today and of the future, as does the choreographer himself—for his exemplary integrity, but above all for the only thing that ultimately matters about any artist: his work.

---

NOTES


References below and in the text are to first editions, in short form by author’s last name and title where appropriate, except for the International Encyclopedia of Dance, which is cited by volume and page number as IED. Complete references may be found in the annotated list of sources below the notes and in Selected Resources for Further Research.

1. Marie Rambert, as quoted in Helen Dzermolinska, “The Days of a Choreographer’s Years,” American Dancer, June 1941, quoted in Perlmutter, 17. Other sources, such as Mary Clarke, (in “Rambert, Marie,” IED 4:296), quote Rambert’s phrase as “poetic eyes.” Perlmutter includes a beautiful photographic portrait of Tudor as a young man that entirely justifies Rambert’s remark. Back to essay.

2. Karsavina’s quip is quoted by Mary Clarke in “The Ballet Club,” from her Dancers of Mercury (1962), reprinted in Reading Dance, 756–61. Of the Ballet Club before the war, Clarke observes further: “A spirit existed which was to breed in artists and spectators in years to come an intense longing for those halcyon years, an emotion which Ashley Dukes called nostalgie de coterie.” Back to essay.

3. Some of Tudor’s early works remained for decades in the repertory of Ballet Rambert, the company that evolved from the Ballet Club, until the company abandoned its classical repertory to become a modern-dance ensemble in the 1960s. Bennahum provides some of the details in her account of Tudor’s London years, chapters 2–4. Back to essay.
4. The guests were originally identified as The Sister, The Sailor, The Young Cousin, The Soldier, and A Friend of the Family. However, “Very soon after the opening, Tudor eliminated the identities of the people at the wedding party; as of February 9, 1936, they were called simply ‘Guests.’ When Tudor mounted the ballet in New York for Ballet Theatre, he increased the number of Guests to eight, and the revised production has remained the basis for subsequent stagings” (Bennahum, 67). The Guests have also often since been listed in programs as “Friends and Relations” or some such. Back to essay.

5. Much is often made of the emotional and physical restraint or constraint said to characterize Tudor’s style—and Tudor himself sometimes emphasized this aspect of his art in his remarks. However, archival film shot by Ann Barzel in the 1940s (available for viewing in the NYPL–JRDD), with Tudor and Laing in their original roles, reveals Ballet Theatre dancing Lilac Garden with barely controlled physical risk and wild emotional abandon, in comparison to which recent stagings sometimes look like marking. Like all of Barzel’s footage, the film, MGZHB 20-2532/MGZIC 9-3607 [Ballet Theatre and Others], is a compilation. The two passages to which I refer are described as follows: “Jardin aux lilas (approx. 2 min.). Chor: Tudor. Filmed in rehearsal, in rehearsal clothes, at Lewisohn Stadium, 1940. Perf. by Annabelle Lyon (Caroline), Laing (her lover), Tudor (the man she must marry), Conrad (an episode in his past), others.”; “Jardin aux lilas . . . Rehearsal and candid footage (approx. 1 1/2 min.). Filmed at Lewisohn Stadium, 1940.” The library’s Barzel collection includes footage of several other Tudor ballets as well. Back to essay.

6. Edwin Denby thought that the dances of Elegies looked like “Northeast European” or “Nordic” folk dances (115, 223); to others’ eyes, they have appeared to evoke folk traditions of Eastern or Central Europe, the Baltic, or the Balkans. The chilly skies depicted in the Nadia Benois’s backcloths for each of the ballet’s two scenes probably suggest to most a northern rather than a southern clime. Nonetheless, according to ABT tradition, one signature step motif is in fact adapted from traditional Japanese dance. Back to essay.

7. Tudor always exerted a transformative force upon his dancers (sometimes at the cost of considerable suffering), and none more so than Kaye in Pillar. “It would be difficult to say,” writes Doris Hering, whether Tudor “created the ballet for her or created her for the ballet” (Doris Hering, in “American Ballet Theatre,” IED 1:67). Kaye remained the most important Tudor ballerina in the United States until her retirement from the stage in 1961. Among the other prominent ballerinas who contributed definitive and celebrated incarnations of Tudor’s characters are Maude Lloyd, Sally Gilmour, Celia Franca, Alicia Alonso, Toni Lander, Elizabeth Schooling, Sallie Wilson, Evelyn Hart, Gelsey Kirkland, and Amanda McKerrow. Back to essay.


11. On ABT’s avowed desire to revive Tudor’s Romeo and the financial barrier to such an enterprise, which is estimated to cost at least $2 million, see Joan Acocella, “Tudor Reign,” The New Yorker, November 17, 2008; available at www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/dancing/2008/11/17/081117crda_dancing_acocella?currentPage=all. According to Sally Brayley Bliss (personal communication, October 2011), all the original set elements except one still exist; all but a few minutes of the choreography are also preserved either on film or in notation. The ballet could, in principle, be revived. Back to essay.
12. The music for the ballet is by Sergei Prokofiev: the first movement of his Piano Concerto no. 3 in C, op. 26, for the opening backstage scene of hysterical last-minute rehearsal, and the Symphony no. 1 in D, op. 25, (“Classical”) for the second scene, the subsequent performance. The first scene is played facing a backdrop (originally by Hugh Laing, who designed many of Tudor’s sets and costumes in the 1930s and ’40s; and for the ABT premiere by Nicholas de Molas) that represents the rear, onstage side of a grand theater’s front curtain; part of the humor derives from the incongruous sustained rear view of familiar ballet steps. Back to essay.

13. To choose but one example among several in Denby’s writing, see his remarks on the premiere of Edward Caton’s long-forgotten Sebastian (1944) at Ballet Theatre (Denby, 242). (Caton was a dancer with the company at the time.) Back to essay.

14. Indeed, Tudor infamously accused de Mille of stealing his ideas for this ballet from Pillar of Fire, precipitating a break in their friendship that lasted for years. Back to essay.

15. See Denby, 98, on Massine’s Aleko. Back to essay.

16. Bennahum, 243, adds that these choreographers in particular “have often acknowledged their indebtedness” to Tudor “as mentor and master.” Back to essay.

17. The reasons for Tudor’s break with Ballet Theatre seem to have been complex and ultimately indeterminable. Bennahum and Tudor’s two biographers review the contradictory evidence (Bennahum, 160; Perlmutter, 198–209; and Topaz, chapters 3–4). Back to essay.


19. See Topaz, 60; she reports that Tudor shunned Massine’s work to avoid being, as he said, “infected” by it. The example of Massine’s ambitious musical choices may have influenced Tudor despite himself, however, and Massine encouraged Tudor’s early efforts generously (see Perlmutter, 33–34). Back to essay.

20. As, for example, David Vaughan says (IED 6:196). Back to essay.

21. Denby writes about the effects of Thomas Beecham’s conducting on Tudor’s The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet (1943) in its 1944 performances in two reviews: “Beecham at the Ballet” (212–13) and “Ballet Conducting: Beecham and Bernstein” (235–36). At first, writes Denby, Beecham’s legato obliterated accents the dancers needed to hear—a failed experiment. Only by the work’s eighth and last performance of the season did the audience witness

the most brilliant and the most exact performance the ballet ever had. . . . One heard distinctly the variety of impetus the interwoven musical phrases have, their devious and delicate qualities of motion, as they rise to the surface and shift and overlap and get lost again in a sort of harmonic undertow. The dancers not only recognized their cues, they could find in the musical phrase they were cued to the exact impetus which suited their momentary phrase of dancing. Tudor had counted on these correspondences of impetus from the first. But only Sir Thomas understood completely on the stage and in the orchestra what aspect of the score it was that Tudor had counted on, and he made this aspect musically plausible and expressive. Back to essay.

22. See Bennahum, 238. The Mercury stage, where the Ballet Club mainly performed in Tudor’s era, and where Jardin aux Lilas was premiered, was only eighteen feet wide and the same deep. Back to essay.
Christopher Caines was born and raised in Canada, earned an A.B. *summa cum laude* in Literature at Harvard College in 1986, and has worked as a choreographer, dancer, director, composer for dance and theater, lighting designer, and writer in New York City since then. He is the artistic director of Christopher Caines Dance, founded in 2000. His recent commissions include *The Human Countdown* (2009), one of the largest public artworks ever presented in Central Park; a ballet for the closing ceremonies of the USA International Ballet Competition (2010); and dances for the Feast of St. Francis at New York’s Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine (2011). His essays have appeared in *Reading Dance*, the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, the *International Dictionary of Modern Dance*, and *The Village Voice*, among other publications. He was a 2006 Guggenheim Fellow in Choreography.

Selected Resources for Further Research

Books and Articles

The one indispensable study of Tudor’s work for the general or scholarly reader is Judith Chazin-Bennahum’s *The Ballets of Antony Tudor: Studies in Psyche and Satire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), which is out of print, but readily available from internet retailers and at libraries. Clearly modeled, wisely and honorably, on David Vaughan’s exemplary *Frederick Ashton and His Ballets*, Bennahum’s account offers a ballet-by-ballet analysis of Tudor’s career, meticulously researched, sympathetic and objective; the book includes a detailed choreology and a useful bibliography. Equally objective are Vaughan’s concise articles on Tudor and his major works in the *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; currently also available in both paperback and online editions).

Tudor’s most insightful critic by far is Edwin Denby; his reviews, essays, and parenthetical remarks on Tudor’s choreography are indispensable, and are all available in Denby’s collected *Dance Writings*, superbly edited by Robert Cornfield and William MacKay (New York: Knopf, 1986), and recently reissued in a paperback second edition (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). Arlene Croce’s terse synopsis of Tudor’s career, in a review titled “Zeitgeist,” is a revealing view from the perspective of 1987, and available in her selected *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in The New Yorker* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). The three collections from which Croce’s selected volume draws, *Afterimages, Going to the Dance*, and *Sightlines*, are out of print but easy to acquire online, and although Croce is ultimately too unsympathetic to Tudor’s aesthetic to illuminate his work as brilliantly she does Balanchine’s, all three volumes gleam nonetheless with perceptive apercus on every one of Tudor’s major ballets, their cultural contexts, and their reception across the decades.

Tudor is also the subject of two very different but perhaps complementary biographies: Donna Perlmutter’s *Shadowplay: The Life of Antony Tudor* (New York: Viking, 1991; also reissued in paperback, New York: Limelight, 1995) and Muriel Topaz’s *Undimmed Lustre: The Life of Antony Tudor* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

Web Resources
An invaluable internet source for all things Tudor is the website of The Antony Tudor Ballet Trust, www.antonytudor.org. Short excerpts from interviews with Tudor and from his ballets may be found on YouTube; some of the performances do not perhaps represent the ballets ideally.

**Moving Image**

Tudor’s ballets are currently very poorly represented on commercial DVD; the only available release seems to be the documentary *Antony Tudor* (in English; Viola Aberlè and Gerd Andersson, directors; Dance Horizons, 2008), featuring interviews with Tudor and others, all filmed in 1983–84. In 1953, Tudor collaborated with Maya Deren on a 15-minute experimental film, *The Very Eye of Night*, in which a sleepwalker travels across the night sky, viewing the constellations. Tudor adapted movement for the film from his early ballet *The Planets* (1934); the dancers were shot in negative against a white background, wearing black body paint. The film is included on the DVD *Maya Deren: Experimental Films* (Mystic Fire Video, 2007), and on other anthology releases. Worth seeking out secondhand or at libraries with performing arts collections—especially for Martine Van Hamel’s icy, haughtily wronged portrayal of An Episode in his Past in *Lilac Garden*—is *A Tudor Evening with American Ballet Theatre*, an hour-long VHS release originally telecast by WNET/Thirteen in New York on the *Great Performances: Dance in America* series in 1990, which includes complete soundstage performances of *Lilac Garden* and *Dark Elegies*, as well as interviews, and documentary material written by David Vaughan.

**Archives**

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library (NYPL–JRDD), the largest and most comprehensive archive in the world devoted to the documentation of dance, is a treasure trove for researchers on Tudor’s work. Among the most precious items in the collection are the dance films of Ann Barzel, which include invaluable footage of Tudor’s work with Ballet Theatre in the 1940s.