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Dance-Theater Review (NYC): 'A Rite' at BAM

By [Jon Sobel](#) | Friday, October 4, 2013

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One hundred years ago, Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes galvanized one Paris audience and irreversibly shook up Western culture with the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*. Vaslav Nijinsky's pagan-inspired choreography and Igor Stravinsky's kinetically avant-garde music created a cataclysm in the arts whose effects we are still feeling today.

The centenary has prompted a variety of observations, among them a re-release of the famous 1958 [Leonard Bernstein/New York Philharmonic recording](#) of the score, and now a muscular gloss on the original event itself featuring the mighty Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.



The new dance/theater production is welcome both in and of itself, and because nowadays most people who know the *Rite of Spring* know it only as a concert piece, which, while it remains one of the most recorded works in the repertoire and one that can still be heard in concert halls all over the world, was just one piece of the history-making event of a century ago.

A Rite endeavors to expose, explicate, and re-illuminate the original score in a decidedly non-pedantic style through dance (exciting, rough-and-tumble, precise) and recitations of texts that shed light on Stravinsky's music and his process. "What is it about that particular night, that particular riot?" asks an actor-dancer representing a wry Musicologist, who remarks at another point that "the chords are vertical, but there's nothing linear!" Other figures include a traumatized World War One veteran and the physicist Brian Greene talking about the elasticity of time. The company dances to a variety of standard orchestral recordings of the *Rite* as well as a jazzy adaptation by *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic*. Once I got past the mildly hollow feeling engendered by the absence of a live orchestra in a production centered on this great orchestral music, the overall work shook me (and much of the audience, judging from the howling response) with a powerful, thrilling grip.

With all its commentary on war and aesthetics, the production doesn't take itself too seriously. The Musicologist is funny and endearing, the minor "characters" amusing, the choreography both sensitive and strenuous, graceful and flowing but street-smart too. The opening sequence reminded me of something out of *West Side Story*. The close, in which the company exits singing music from the "Augurs of Spring" section *a capella* and leaving the Veteran alone to scramble back and forth behind a fence, is viscerally and emotionally engaging; though we can conquer adversity, it seems to say, things are not always so. The choreographic high point is a number in which a dancer strides about the stage on a row of stools sequentially placed on the floor before her just in time by one of the frenetic crowd of dancers whirling about her; then she and the stools are lifted up and she continues her now-circular "walk" in midair. It's a simple idea brought to breathlessly exciting life.

Circles, Earth worship, ritual sacrifice – elements of the themes of the original dance blink in and out of the choreography, but it's by no means necessary to know the "story" of *The Rite of Spring* to appreciate this production. The show is probably not a bad introduction to the music either, even though it appears in recorded form, for instead of hitting us with it all at once in sequence, isolated segments appear, often with verbal (and sometimes funny) explication. I know this music pretty well, yet I found my appreciation and understanding deepened by hearing it in this new context.

All in all, it's a spectacular ride I'd go on again, even in the Fall. [A Rite](#) is part of BAM's [Next Wave Festival](#). Its three-night run concludes Oct. 5.

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About Jon Sobel

Jon Sobel is an Executive Editor of Blogcritics as well as lead editor of the Culture section. As a writer he contributes most often to Culture, where he reviews NYC theater; he also covers interesting music releases and writes a semi-regular round-up of reviews of independent albums. He writes the blog [Park Odyssey](#), for which he is visiting and blogging every park in New York City—over a thousand of them. Through [Oren Hope Marketing and Copywriting](#) you can hire him to write or edit whatever marketing or journalistic materials your heart desires. By night he's a working musician: lead singer, songwriter, and bass player for [Whisperado](#), a member of other bands as well, and a [sideman](#).

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