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'Little Dancer': Big roles for women in the Susan Stroman, Tiler Peck ballet musical



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Tiler Peck, left, and Kyle Harris in the ballet musical "Little Dancer."
(Paul Kolnik)



By **Sarah Kaufman** Dance critic
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For all its glamour and luxury, the Belle Époque had an ugly side. The decorative arts and haute cuisine were flourishing in Paris in the late 19th century, but the era's booming opportunities did not extend to its

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slums — nor to the majority of Frenchwomen.

The narrowness of women’s lives at that time gets expansive treatment in [Susan Stroman](#)’s new ballet musical, “Little Dancer.” In unraveling the back story of the once-scandalous sculpture by Edgar Degas, titled “Little Dancer Aged Fourteen,” director-choreographer Stroman, collaborating with writer-lyricist Lynn Ahrens, fills their production with strong-willed and outspoken women of all ages.

Sarah Kaufman received the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism and has been The Washington Post’s dance critic since 1996. But after logging serious sit-time in opera houses, black boxes, folding chairs and dive bars, what moves her most is seeing grace happen where she least expects it. [View Archive](#)

These are sharply drawn characters, witty and wisecracking and sometimes utter messes. They evoke the little-known wretchedness of an age celebrated for its beauty. But in the optimistic and ultimately uplifting view of this show, they are survivors.

As Broadway veterans, Stroman and Ahrens are a couple of survivors themselves, and in “Little Dancer” they betray a bit of a rebellious touch. They are unafraid to address a poetical and feminized subject — the

ballet world — and make it appropriately woman-centered. In so doing, they give voice to many who have gone through history unnoticed and unsung.

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When was the last time laundresses, embittered alcoholic single moms and hard-working ballerinas got to belt out their dreams?

There are so many ways in which “Little Dancer,” finishing its world-premiere run at the Kennedy Center this week, is a corker. It features the ravishing Tiler Peck of New York City Ballet as Degas’s young model, Marie van Goethem, for one thing. The clear, open style of her dancing is a marvel, particularly the way she lingers at the height of her movements, conveying all the power and ease, authority and transcendence of a great star.

Boyd Gaines and Tiler Peck in “Little Dancer.”
(Paul Kolnik)

Then there’s
the
stagecraft,

which, while relatively simple (no explosions, no outsize costuming, no flying effects), is transporting and magical. The songs, the music by Stephen Flaherty: I could go on. But one of the most striking elements of this show, and the least talked-about, is the wide lens it focuses on women’s existence in a society where they were easily swept into the gutter.

Paris of 1881, when “Little Dancer” takes place, was bracing itself against the onrush of modernity. Grim realities — poverty, child labor, girl sex slaves — were best ignored. Nothing epitomizes this better than the

firestorm of ire Degas ignited when he exhibited his sculpture, daring to place a lowlife and potential strumpet on a pedestal.

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In Degas's day, as polite society fretted over the moral decay it saw in so many artists, ballet wasn't seen as a high-minded pursuit. Degas stepped on a lot of toes in bestowing his snub-nosed adolescent with an insolent grandeur.

He wasn't the only rebel, of course. That same year, a feminist named Hubertine Auclert published *La Citoyenne*, France's first suffragist newspaper. Going beyond voting rights, *La Citoyenne* also looked at how women were treated in primitive cultures across the world and argued that Frenchwomen's lives were not always better.

Auclert had a point. Rich wives may have had comforts, but they were essentially decorative property, without a voice. And poor women stayed

poor, or got poorer.

In “Little Dancer,” the art of ballet becomes a cruel example of how civilization and oppression were entwined. A delight for the audience, it was often harsh behind the scenes. Ballet was a last resort for poor girls, who in some cases were a step away from streetwalking. If a dancer was not already a prostitute, she had a good chance of becoming one. Leering male patrons, such as the top-hatted gents in so many of Degas’s ballet paintings, haunted the Paris Opera Ballet’s hallways.

This hard lot was surely on Degas’s mind as he created his figure in wax, with her tough, muscular neck, strong spine and faraway gaze.

Tiler Peck in “Little Dancer.” (Paul Kolnik)

In fact, the
real-life

Marie van Goethem didn’t have much of a future. Her older sister was a prostitute. Her widowed mother was an alcoholic washwoman. Marie’s little sister eventually had a dance career, but as for Marie? She made it into the Paris Opera’s lowest rank, then vanished from history.

Stroman crafts a dream ballet to propose some possibilities about what happened to Marie. We can make our own guesses from the role models around her throughout the show. There is Marie’s older

sister, whose fortunes rise and fall with the attentions of her johns. There are impoverished laundresses like her mother. There's a ballet teacher with warmth but no power in the company's male hierarchy; there's a well-married and overbearing dance mom. Degas has an elderly, humpbacked, maltreated maid, and there are other young ballerinas, all but pushed by company officials into the arms of wealthy men. A grown-up version of Marie serves as a narrator, looking back on her youth, although we never discover what kind of life she grew into.

There is but one independent, self-supporting ray of hope: painter Mary Cassatt, who was Degas's friend in real life. (She was also a noted clotheshorse, and a character ideally gift-wrapped for costume designer William Ivey Long, who dresses her as if she's just unpacked the fashions of Paris's top designers.)

At other key points in "Little Dancer," Stroman makes the bold, brave choice to tell the story in dance terms. She lets movement speak what the characters — who are mostly unschooled and unsophisticated — do not have the words to express. Peck's first solo tells us about the lighthearted joy and freedom that dancing brings to Marie; these notes only deepen and become more urgent as the story proceeds.

In the song “Laundry,” Marie’s mother and her laundress co-workers muse in the wash house about how they, too, once had dreams like Marie does, and they slip into a ballet-style reverie of roughened, weighted, wistful grace.

“C’est le ballet,” as the recurring song by that title makes clear with its quarrelsome, keening notes, takes on a sardonic meaning, along the lines of “business as usual.” The business of hustling for money, that is. This hasn’t changed much.

Nowadays, donors/sponsors are a critical force in ballet companies. Some company Web sites and printed programs list who each dancer is “sponsored by,” turning an artist into a billboard for a benefactor’s name. Dancers are expected to turn up and schmooze at parties for funders; I’ve even heard of company members being required to serve tables at donor dinners. No matter how it’s framed, this is all in the name of easing money out of bulging wallets.

“Dancers are determined and never quit,” sing Marie and her younger sister, played by Sophia Anne Caruso with the magnetism of a future CEO tucked into a little girl’s body.

It’s all so ineffably poignant. Marie’s harshest treatment is dealt by the ballet company she loves —

and by her own mother. Degas's attentions, artistic and paternal, seem to do Marie little good in her own lifetime.

Yet through him, she left a mark for posterity. And in the musical about her life, others like her get to make a mark, too. They give us a lot to think about.

'Little Dancer' continues at the Kennedy Center through Sunday, Nov. 30.