“Remember you are magical beings” and that you shine from your sides,” choreographer Alexei Ratmansky exhorted a group of dancers. They were rehearsing the fairies’ entrance in American Ballet Theatre’s new production of The Sleeping Beauty, which premiered in Costa Mesa in March, and came to New York in late May. The choreographer’s cheeks were flushed; his quiet voice vibrated with intensity. He leaned eagerly forward as he stood at the front of the studio, backed by four ballet masters and his wife, Tatiana, who assisted in the staging. “Remember to pronounce your words clearly,” Ratmansky urged the fairies, referring to the detailed mime. As they moved, he recited along with them: “From here, to here”—now the fairies gestured toward the crib—“you will be protected by us.”

No detail was too slight to escape his interest, from the height of the legs—never above 90 degrees—to the curve of the knees and the slightly less-than-typical turnout. “Relax your hands, relax your necks,” he kept reminding the fairies. Whenever a question arose about a step or an angle of the body, the Ratmanskys consulted a black binder of notes and a laptop loaded with photographs and drawings.

ABT’s new Sleeping Beauty is something of a radical undertaking. Instead of reinterpreting the ballet, Ratmansky resolved to get as close as he could to the steps imagined in 1890 by Marius Petipa. And in doing so, his Beauty and other recent reconstructions have revealed just how much the style of these ballets has evolved since they were created. As the dance historian Lynn Garafola said recently, “The notion of an original is hard to pin down, because ballets are remade in performance.” Over time, the accrued tweaks—accommodations for expanding technique, the excision or simplification of mime, changes in musical timing and dynamics—turn the ballets into something quite different from what was originally intended, divorcing the choreography from its story, affect and spirit. How many times have we seen a Sleeping Beauty or Swan Lake
and asked ourselves, “Why don’t I care?”

To rediscover the original, Ratmansky consulted a variety of late 19th- and early 20th-century sources, including first-person accounts in books, drawings by the dancer Pavel Gerdt and others, early photographs and films. But his main source was a trove of notes written out in Stepanov notation, a system invented by a dancer at the Imperial Ballet (aka the Mariinsky) at the end of the 19th century. After the Revolution in 1917, the Mariinsky’s régeur, Nicholas Sergeyev, used them to stage ballets in the West, more or less establishing the classical ballet canon.

Stepanov’s system is based on the musical staff and uses markings that look like notes, organized in measures that correspond to the score. Separated into three horizontal tracks, the markings indicate the movements of the torso and head, the arms, and the legs. As Ratmansky says, “It’s very clear when the leg is bent, flexed, how high it is, whether the foot is in passé or coupé,” as well as which way the dancer is facing and traveling, whether she is on pointe and how she is using her wrists. Many scores are incomplete, however, as though the scribes had tired of recording every detail. Though Ratmansky says he has added almost no choreography of his own to Beauty, myriad decisions had to be made about the upper body movements. Reading notations is a creative act.

“People started to consult the notations again in the 1980s,” says Doug Fullington, a dance notation expert who has helped restage several ballets. As artistic director of the Bolshoi, Ratmansky produced a version of Le Corsaire based on notes in 2007 with the help of historical reconstruction specialist Yuri Burlaka. Last year, during a rare lull in his schedule, Ratmansky and his wife taught themselves to read the Stepanov scores. With Fullington, he then reconstructed Paquita for the Bavarian State Ballet. The ballet came alive, with scintillating, witty steps and mime as clear as dinner conversation. The softer arms and lighter footwork came across as charming and vivacious rather than pedantic or museum-like.

“This isn’t a history book or a presentation for a university. It’s a live performance,” Ratmansky remarked recently of his reconstructions. For him, it’s about rediscovering the spirit of the age, dusting off forgotten sensations and colors. But despite his love for the original Petipa, Ratmansky has included some latter-day flourishes: a few lifts not seen in the original Beauty, as well as the famous fish dives in the wedding pas de deux. “They’re an iconic moment, like the balances in the Rose Adagio, and people would miss them,” he says. Likewise, the costumes and sets, by Richard Hudson, are inspired not by the 1890 Mariinsky production but by the lavish 1921 Léon Bakst designs for the Ballets Russes.

Ratmansky is aware that this new-old style is not easy for dancers to adopt. Paloma Herrera, in her final season at ABT, told the Washington Post that she pulled out of the New York performances of Beauty because she felt that the look wasn’t how she wanted to present herself in her last performance. Gillian Murphy, who is dancing the role of Aurora on opening night in New York, told me, “There is something to be said for leg extensions between 90 and 180 degrees, and a lot of clarity has been added to the use of turnout and port de bras over time. But it has been fascinating to have this insight into how ballet has changed.” She appreciates the intimacy and conversational quality of the older style. “Without the amazing technical feats to rely on, there is more emphasis on exuding charisma and inner light,” she says. Murphy, Ratmansky and Fullington all remark on the similarities to qualities in Frederick Ashton’s choreography, especially the pliancy of the torso and the liveliness of the feet. Reviews so far have been rapturous: “A newfound dancing style matches steps with music—finally” crowed the Los Angeles Times.

For Ratmansky’s part, the experience has been life-changing. “I’m glad it’s not my choreography so I don’t need to be ashamed to say I love it,” he told me recently. And he’s not finished with Stepanov; next February at Ballet Zurich, he plans to return to the notations for a reconstruction of Swan Lake.

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