

by Peter Nason October 19 <http://www.broadwayworld.com/tampa/article/BWW-Reviews-Thought-Provoking-NUREYEV'S-EYES-at-American-Stage-20141019>



Sometimes an actor inhabits the part of a famous person so well that we swear it's the real person in the film or play. In cinema, make sure to watch [George C. Scott](#) as General Patton, or [Phillip Seymour Hoffman](#) as [Truman Capote](#), or [Helen Mirren](#) as Queen Elizabeth II. Onstage, it's even more miraculous, that long lost celebrity or historical figure alive for a moment right in front of you: [Robert Morse](#) as Capote in *Tru*, Audra MacDonald as [Billie Holiday](#) in *Lady Day* and [Bryan Cranston](#) as LBJ in *All the Way*, to give just a few examples.

Add [Jed Peterson](#) as [Rudolf Nureyev](#) in NUREYEV'S EYES to that very impressive list.

Peterson is uncannily like Nureyev in looks and demeanor, so much so that we swear he is being haunted by the spirit of the late ballet great. His Nureyev is arrogant, unpredictable, conceited, puckish, volatile, full of secrets and masked insecurities, and limited only by too much pride and passion. He is a mesmerizing figure, someone who is a standout at parties but has much more to offer in more intimate surroundings. It's one of the great tragedies that he died too young.

Peterson is a revelation in NUREYEV'S EYES, one of those performances where not just any actor can accomplish what he does onstage. It doesn't hurt that Peterson trained at the Moscow [Art Theatre](#) School and at the High School for the Performing Arts in New York City. He was also part of the New York City Ballet where he made his stage debut in [George Balanchine's](#) *The Nutcracker*. These credentials are the key to this phenomenal performance. I don't know what the percentage is of actors with this sort of background--plus a look similar to Nureyev's--but my bet is that it's extremely minute. Maybe a handful of other actors around the county, but more than likely very few can use their education, both in acting and dance (and in Russia!), and their natural Nureyev looks to create this portrayal. At one point, Nureyev shows some of his ballet moves, and Peterson's training obviously comes in quite handy. I think it's safe to say that we are watching the ultimate characterization of Nureyev, and it's not to be missed.

A two person show, NUREYEV'S EYES follows the years-long friendship between Nureyev and the famous American artist, Jamie Wyeth, son of Andrew and grandson of N.C. (as he is quick to remind us). [The show itself is a special addition to the performance calendar brought to us by American Stage. In a way, it's a gift, to the arts, to our community and to the theatre patrons who get to see two fine actors grab hold of these famous personas and breathe life into them (although, to be fair, Wyeth is still living).] The show is also a debate on the differences between the performing arts and the visual arts, and asks the question: How can one truly show movement on a still canvas? Artists have tried, and some have come close to capturing it, but really, can it compete with the actual leaps and fluidity of a live ballet performance? Jamie Wyeth wants to try--to have the attitudinal Nureyev sit for a portrait and see if he can capture that magic in painting.

As Wyeth, Hughston Walkinshaw has the far more difficult role than Peterson; he's the straight man, Abbot to Nureyev's demanding Costello, the more down-to-earth but potential unexciting "other" role for the livelier personality to play off of. To understand what I mean by more difficult, watch *Rain Man* where [Dustin Hoffman](#) won the Oscar playing an autistic man, but [Tom Cruise](#), as an Ordinary Joe, had the more difficult part. How do you make the everyday not ordinary or boring? Walkinshaw need not be concerned with that because he more than holds his own with Peterson's revelatory performance (and Walkinshaw even looks a bit like Wyeth). I liked him more and more as the show kept moving, and by the end, I thought he was equal to Peterson. He is very passionate, and we understand why Nureyev finally accepts his offer to be painted. He's so persistent and well-spoken, how do you say no? I cannot imagine NUREYEV'S EYES without either of these two extraordinary performers.

[David Rush](#)'s script is quite strong and extremely moving. We follow Nureyev's life, as seen through his friendship with Wyeth, from the early 1970's to the 1990's, when Nureyev is succumbing to AIDS. It's performed without intermission and builds to the perfect ending point. The dialogue is spot on; I particularly like Nureyev's answer to the question that asks him what was the happiest day of his life: "Tomorrow...Any tomorrow."

As directed by Darin Anthony, NUREYEV'S EYES starts off slow--a little too slow for my tastes--but then picks up the pace and we, the audience, are on the edge of our seats. Jerid Fox's set and [Megan Byrne](#)'s lighting design are appropriately simple. Saidah Ben-Judah's costumes capture the differences of the two men and showcase Nureyev's more fashionable and flamboyant nature without overdoing it.

Nine framed screens are mounted on the upstage wall where lighting designs and the various dates ("1974," etc.) are projected. The art is meant for our imagination, so when Wyeth shows his sketches they are on blank paper. When he paints, it is shown on a blank canvas. This is all fine, but I wanted the payoff of seeing the actual paintings by the show's ending. I wanted to see what they looked like, what all of the arguments were about. In the end, I went home and saw them online, where I realized this splendid show carries on past the proscenium, and into my living room, and onto the laptop screen after googling those two names: "Wyeth...Nureyev." There I got to see all of the wondrous Wyeth renditions of Nureyev discussed in the play.

But I'm not done. Because the play meant so much to me, I may also head over to the St. Petersburg Museum of Fine Arts where I can see the actual works. Running the same time as NUREYEV'S EYES is "Jamie Wyeth's Portraits of [Rudolf Nureyev](#): Images of the Dancer from the Brandywine River Museum of Art" (the exhibit runs through January). And then I can get both experiences--first the theatrical, then the visual. I can carry this play inside of me, remembering all of the marvelous exchanges, as I see what it was all about, those grand Jamie Wyeth paintings of one of the Twentieth Century's most mercurial figures.

*NUREYEV'S EYES runs through October 26th. For tickets, please call 727-823-PLAY (7529).*

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