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As the crowd at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre rose to their feet to show their support for Ballet BC's performance Thursday, I thought to myself that my main challenge as a reviewer was going to be trying to figure out which of the four works on the program I liked the most. It's not an unpleasant job and fairly easy when the dancers are so good and the works they perform are at the same high level. But of course while I can't help but recognize that my personal likes and dislikes influence my writing, it's not about me. It's about the quality of the work and coming up with justifiable explanations about why *VOLO* was so good. Whatever the next level is, Ballet BC has reached it.

Was my favorite *Petite Ceremonie*? Certainly it grabbed me right from the start. As we came into the theatre after the second intermission, the stage was completely bare. It was clear that this was going to be a world premiere of a distinctive dance work. All the wings and the backdrop had been removed to reveal masses of horizontal pipes and vertical props against the back wall. It looked huge: it felt like I was looking behind the curtain at the world beyond the performance space. One male dancer came to about the centre of the stage wearing a dark suit jacket shirt and long pants and started this monotonous repetitive movement with his feet, a kind of rocking from side to side. Then the rest of the company broke the fourth wall by walking down the aisles and climbing onto the stage. As they did that, the set built itself: the black wings dropped down on the sides and the backdrop fell into place. As the box of the set was created, the 15 company dancers stood in a line with the lone dancer repeating his movement in unison. I was hooked from that moment onwards.

Choreographed by Medhi Walerski from the Netherlands Dance Theatre, *Petite Ceremonie* was built by asking the dancers to imagine what 'life in a box' meant to them. The piece explored confinement as both restriction

and freedom, the difference between men and women and how a group of people work together to create balance and movement.

After the opening, the first section included the entire company in what was more movement than dance which sounds like a criticism but it's not at all. At times, they all moved like a hive brain until a dancer broke the spell and they morphed into a new variation. It included mostly group repetitive movements: spaced like pieces on a checkerboard, they sat on the stage floor, their legs in front of them and rocked side to side over and over again - and kept going just long enough to make it absurdly hilarious. They all laid down on the floor feet toward the audience - and then raised their heads and upper torso just barely, like they were peeking at us in the audience. Who knew that something so slight could be so funny? And sometimes they all stopped and didn't move at all. It's amazing how powerful stillness can be for such a high-powered group of dancers.

Throughout *Petite Ceremonie* I kept wondering what was coming next. I felt a constant sense of surprise and discovery. Even when there were parts that didn't work for me such as the spoken word section on the battle of the sexes, it didn't bother me all that much. I just kept marveling at how Dario Denuzzi managed to juggle, move laterally across the stage and speak - all at the same time.

Maybe my favorite was *1st Flash*, the third work on the program. More of a work of pure virtuosity, it was a contemporary work danced to the classical-style music of *Violin Concerto in D minor* by Jean Sibelius. It was a piece of music I had never heard before but enjoyed immensely. Created by Jorma Elo for NDT in 2003, the dancing was very classic with the dancers moving for the most part with upright torsos. It also required nimble foot work from the six dancers. The work begins and ends in silence which was particularly evocative as the piece came to a close. Having nothing but the sounds of the dancer's bodies as they moved for a soundscape torqued up the contrast to what preceded it to an extraordinary degree: it established the primacy of movement with a punch. And then it ended - with the first flash of the lights.

1st Flash had a unique lighting design by Jordan Tuinman. It included a floating rectangle of light on house left and six groups of lights at the back of the stage facing front. It was a such a strong element in the work that it was almost a seventh presence on stage.

Or was it *Toss of a Dice*? This was an excerpt from the full work which was also created for NDT in 2005. It was danced by Walerski and Lesley Telford, who was originally from Vancouver and has danced until recently with NDT. They were unbelievably great dancers. I looked down at my notes afterwards and saw there was none because I was completely transfixed by their dancing. The choreography combined very fast sections with very slow and deliberate movements - the two working together to accentuate the other. Both Walerski and Telford danced with the kind of control that wasn't restricting so much as liberating. It looked as if their dancing was channelling a vast power that could easily destroy lesser mortals. But just as it got interesting, it was over. The excerpt was far too short: it made me want to see the full work.

That leaves *sweet*, the opening work by Shawn Hounsell. Another world premiere, it was a little slower to work on me even though I thought the dancers performed without any opening night tentativeness. What did it for me was a section danced, if I'm not mistaken, by five of the men that repeated an earlier section. What was different was that they did so without any music but by making their own sound effects similar to slightly cartoonish karate grunts and noises. It made their movements much more comical and fit in perfectly with the idea of how a single event can change depending on the different angles or ways it is seen.

Earlier, artistic director Emily Molnar told me that she was going to be creating programs with works by different choreographers for the next few years in part to see which ones resonate with Vancouver audiences. Of the four works in VOLO, three had strong connections with Jiri Kylian and the Netherlands Dance Theatre. The program also makes a point of thanking Telford and Walerski along with Kylian for giving Ballet BC the opportunity to perform an excerpt from *Toss of a Dice*. Judging from the early results and all the evidence, I'd say Kylian and anyone associated with NDT are among the leaders when it comes to resonating with Vancouver dance fans.

VOLO continues Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m.

*Dario Dinuzzi in VOLO. Photo: Ballet BC

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