

Dance Review

# Ballet BC's 25th Anniversary: Ambitious, but not perfect

PAULA CITRON

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That Ballet BC is even around to celebrate its 25th anniversary is a miracle, given that the company declared bankruptcy in 2008.

Clearly, Vancouver dance fans are responding to the strong vision of artistic director Emily Molnar. She has fashioned Ballet BC into a 15-member, lean, mean, contemporary ballet repertory company specializing in Eurocentric and Canadian choreography. The company dancers look well-schooled, and, what is more, they seem to have an appetite to perform ballet on the edge.

This celebratory concert features new work by four Canadian choreographers, performed to scores by Canadian composers. There is even a live orchestra, namely Vancouver's excellent new-music group, the Turning Point Ensemble under conductor Owen Underhill.

That being said, four productions of abstract work to new music can develop the hint of sameness over time. I also think that the order of the works would flow better had the program ended with Serge Bennathan's piece, which is the most dynamic of the four.

What follows are capsule reviews in the order that the dances are presented.

## **Wen Wei Wang's In Motion (music by Owen Underhill)**

Wang places the orchestra on stage to underscore the inspiration the choreography takes from Underhill's music. Wang's is the only piece that is performed on point. It's a good opener because it is also the most classical.

Wang's movement is a clear response to the score. For two of the sections, there is even direct contact, as flutist Brenda Fedoruk and violinist Mary Sokol Brown have one-to-one encounters with individual dancers.

The music is made up of many moods, and Wang's attractive choreography, performed on point, captures them all. At times all 15 dancers are on stage, but Wang also makes good use of smaller combinations, both as individuals and partners.

Much of the dance has a canon effect, or dancers performing the same moves, but a few beats behind each other. Wang also likes singling out one or two dancers to be a counterpoint to the maelstrom of movement.

Wang's deft eye for geometric patterns, and his lyrical choreography, makes the body soar.

## **Serge Bennathan's *Les chercheurs de dieu* (music by Michael Oesterle)**

The translation of the title is “seekers of god,” and for Bennathan that seeking is synonymous with dance. He asks the dancers to reach into themselves to find the essence that illuminates them as artists.

This compelling work has 14 dancers perched on their toes, arms raised overhead, fingers waving in the air, as they fight to hold their balance. The dancers do break away, but always come back to this formation.

Bennathan's trademark athleticism is on display as the dancers hurl themselves through space with sideways twists, forward lunges, body rolls, hand springs and jumps in the air. Oesterle's music is on the moody side and punctuated with trombone blasts from Jeremy Berkman, which helps define this work's introspective and at times, desperate nature. James Proudfoot, who designed the lights for all four works, is especially effective here, with his sudden shifts of direction.

## **Donald Sales's *Moth* (music by David Lang and Owen Underhill)**

Sales is a Ballet BC dancer so he well knows the strengths of his colleagues. *Moth* is an intimate work for five women and one man (Peter Smida). It is an examination of grief and acceptance.

The work comes from the heart. In 1999, Sales's brother died, and Smida represents the physical manifestation of the choreographer's struggle to come to terms with the loss. The music is both restless and dramatic.

The stage is set with shimmering candles and exposed brick walls. When the dancers emerge from this gloom, they seem to come from another world.

The choreographic leitmotif is contractions, shudders, clenched fists and silent screams. Dancers' bodies are rounded and pinched, and they fight for balance.

At one supremely beautiful moment, Maggie Forcheron sits on her knees, and uses sign language to convey silent words, while Smida and Delphine Leroux execute a pas de deux of high lifts. Acceptance is at hand.

## **Gioconda Barbuto's *Touch* (music by Anthony Genge)**

Barbuto was initially inspired by both the emotional and kinetic response to nature photography. The interconnectedness of the outside world leads one to look at the interdependence of human nature.

Her choreography is a flow of lyrical movement and makes good use of Genge's lyrical score: The physicality for her four men and three women is made up of long, broad sweeps. By having one more man, she has also strengthened the force of the ensemble. And it is the ensemble that is the main emphasis. Individual dancers may be doing their own patterns, but it is as part of the whole – there is always a connection.

The physicality seems to travel horizontally across the stage like a passing parade.

The clever final image has the dancers physically touching each other. The connected group freezes, and then there is a collective breath, and one woman collapses backward, clinging to the group for support.

## **Ballet BC 25th Anniversary Celebration**

- Choreography by Wen Wei Wang, Serge Bennathan, Donald Sales and Gioconda Barbuto

- Turning Point Ensemble
- conducted by Owen Underhill
- At the Queen Elizabeth Theatre
- In Vancouver on Thursday

*Ballet BC's 25th Anniversary Celebration continues in Vancouver until April 16.*

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