

ARTS BEAT

Ballet BC's 25th anniversary celebration surprises with refreshingly contemporary dances

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Ballet BC's "In Motion", choreographed by Wen Wei Wang. Photo by Michael Slobodian

Ballet BC offers yet another high calibre evening of dance with their 25th Anniversary Celebration. Featuring fantastic live music performed by The Turning Point Ensemble (also celebrating their fifth anniversary) and the memorable world premieres of four renowned choreographers, the evening was decidedly *au courant* and refreshingly contemporary. Ballet BC with an edge, if you will.

Wen Wei Wang's contemporary ballet *In Motion* opened the show. The Turning Point Ensemble shared the stage with the dancers, adding an interesting dimension to the piece. Arranged behind a transparent scrim, occasionally a musician entered the dancing area to perform in close proximity to the dancers. The men's duet, accompanied by a violinist standing nearby, was particularly stunning.

Wang is an outstanding craftsman of partnering work. His duets and pas de deux are always incredibly liquid. I loved the way dancers tumbled into each other with abandon, flow and beauty. The lift work was gravity-defying, and seemed to laugh in the face of human mechanics. The inventiveness of the holds, the lifts themselves, the transitions and in between places, all spoke to the curiosity that Wang must have for the way people connect with each other.

The lighting design incorporated rectangles of light which reflected off the white floor. Sometimes, the dancers played in the light; sometimes they played in silhouette or semi-shadow. The lighting further revealed the three dimensionality of the choreography - the delicate sculptural arms, the dynamic jumps and extensions and the unexpected flicks of the feet and picked up knees that punctuated the piece's graceful lines and lyrical overtones. Dressed in simple shorts, tunics and gauzy short dresses with pointe shoes for the women, the choreography was expertly executed and beautiful to watch. The dancers of Ballet BC are remarkable technicians and athletes, and Wang brought out their strengths in spades.

Les chercheurs de dieu, choreographed by Serge Bennathan, was a foray into the contemporary dance world Proper. The dancers were dressed simply in t-shirts and cargo pants in shades of rust. The lights were warm and ambient, with effective silhouette and top lighting elements. On the Ballet BC stage we are used to seeing an aspiration for perfection, and what was so compelling about this work was the imperfection, the individuality, the gusto and the rawness. There was no making things look easy -- instead, there was visible exertion and honesty about the difficulty of the movement. I loved watching the company wrestle Bennathan's choreography to the floor, quite literally at times. It was wonderful to hear the dancers breathing hard and together. I loved that the arms were sometimes out of sync or personalized by the dancers, I loved that it wasn't clean-looking. It looked real; it looked human.

And the choreography was the classic Bennathan I have appreciated over the years; the extreme physicality, the desperately huge lunges, the leaps, the jumps, the endurance, and the pushing to see how far you can go. Bennathan has a way with theatricality that is unparalleled. He has a way with movement that is dangerously physical. He is also unafraid of the quiet moment.

Ballet BC dancer Donald Sales offered *Moth*, a choreography for six dancers. The curtain rose to reveal countless candles surrounding the playing area, and a large naked bulb hanging from above. The effect was moody and soulful, a feeling that must have inspired the opening solo by Alyson Fretz. Her dancing was passionate and accomplished. The piece was about grief and you felt it in her, and later in the entire sextet. Sales skilfully expressed, in a physical dance vocabulary, the idea of grief. The juxtaposition of out-of-control force and the attempt to regain control felt like grief itself: you feel like you can't go on, but you must go on. You fight the pain for as long as you have to, but ultimately you must accept the loss and grieve.

Dancers appeared and danced under the lights and then disappeared back to the shadows. Eventually more bulbs appeared, flown in to various heights. A scrim was raised to reveal dancers against the naked back wall of the theatre. The choreography flowed organically, from solos to duets to quintets, and it was incredibly well rehearsed. The five women created a strong female voice, and Peter Smida, the lone male dancer, met them with his own powerful dancing and partnering work. With blaring horns and exciting rhythms, the score was one of the most dramatic of the evening. Of special note was the final pas de deux danced by Peter



Smida and Makaila Wallace. The confidence, sensuality and soulfulness of these two together was an absolute knockout.

The final piece of the program was Gioconda Barbuto's *Touch*. An abstract contemporary dance work, the choreography, patterning and partnering had an uncomplicated feeling that was refreshing after the intensity of the previous pieces. It was danced in socks, costumed in red. Four lighting pipes were flown into the space to reveal the lighting instruments above the dancers at ever increasing heights. The lighting worked as a sculptural element and punctuated choreographic moments to great effect.

The piece moved well with overlapping entrances and exits, and there were first-rate moments of partnering and original contemporary movement accents. *Touch* might have suffered from being at the end of an extremely full evening of dance. It was hard to make mental and emotional space for anything else at that point. However, the piece was well danced, well choreographed and enjoyed a contemporary score that was lyrical, melodic and pleasant to listen to. And with its charming ending and the audible appreciation it inspired in the audience, the work was a success, and concluded a mighty fine evening of dance.

Congratulations to Ballet BC for 25 years of excellence. Here's to many more!

Ballet BC
25th Anniversary Celebration
April 14-16, 2011
Queen Elizabeth Theatre

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