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Dance review

Ballet B.C.: Tutu-free and full of eclectic surprises

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Songs of a Wayfarer + other works

Ballet British Columbia

At the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver on Thursday

There was something for everyone in the mixed bill that launched Emily Molnar's first full season as artistic director of Ballet British Columbia on Thursday. Well, everyone except the city's much maligned tutu-lovers, who have been repeatedly told they will have to get their classical-ballet fix elsewhere. But within contemporary parameters, the bill ranged from romantic to wacky to a properly explosive finale.

The romantic was the opening *Songs of a Wayfarer*, a work for 10 dancers that Molnar created for Alberta Ballet earlier this year. In contrast to the solemn, very rich Mahler song cycle to which it's set – German lieder inspired by an unhappy love affair – the movement is gentle, even delicate. It's also in a familiar neoclassical ballet mode, lightly spiced with a contemporary accent: Torsos and arms stretch and twist, creating as many angles as curves. The set design by Scott Reid features an upstage, sloped ramp/staircase, which Molnar uses for dramatic entrances.

Then came wacky, with *Face to Face*, an eccentric, inventive work with international cachet: Choreographer Kevin O'Day is an American who has run the ballet company at the Nationaltheater Mannheim in Germany since 2002, after a career performing with the likes of American Ballet Theatre and Twyla Tharp.

Face to Face is also cool and fun and surprising – as surprising as it was at the premiere last summer at the Banff Centre, where O'Day created it as the inaugural recipient of the Koerner Foundation Distinguished Guest Artist in Choreography award. The movement is such a crazy quilt of the virtuosic and the fantastic or just plain weird: gorgeous feet beating midair; slow, juicy stretches through space that make the air seem thick as water; and low-to-the-ground, long-armed monkey walks.

The computer-mediated electric guitar score by O'Day's long-time collaborator, John King, was played live by Jeff Younger. It's the kind of crashing and rumbling music that is usually over-amplified but thankfully wasn't.

Maggie Forgeron, Alexis Fletcher, Delphine Leroux, Donald Sales, Gilbert Small and Peter Smida (who were also the first cast in Banff where the company was in residence for the summer dance program) gave tense, compelling performances. There was considerable galumphing going on in *Face to Face* – rules were being broken!

Order was restored for the driving finale, the premiere of Jose Navas's *The bliss that from their limbs all movement takes*. The Montreal choreographer had the company's 15 dancers twisting and turning, running on and off to create different configurations to the fast, urban score by Philip Glass and Ravi Shankar. In the more serene opening, the men wore brief blue trunks and the women were in spare blue leotards, but by the busy final moments, everyone had changed so the stage was a whirl of colour.

While the evening was as tutu-free as promised, pink pointe shoes did adorn the feet of the women for Navas's and Molnar's works. O'Day, in a more egalitarian vein, had everyone looking quite comfortable in socks.

The variety on offer should help fill the Queen Elizabeth Theatre over the three-day run, although these days the task of selling tickets is less daunting: One smart move of Molnar's has been to close off the Queen E.'s upper reaches. It's much cozier with everyone crowded together in the 1,600 or so seats of the orchestra and mezzanine.

Songs of a Wayfarer & other works has a final performance in Vancouver Saturday (Nov. 20)
(www.ticketmaster.ca or 604-280-3311).

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