

ARTS BEAT

Ballet BC reaches dizzying heights in three-piece contemporary ballet

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Illustrating once again that ballet in Vancouver is reborn with a revitalized devotion to exciting contemporary aesthetics, Ballet BC combines incredible dance talent and compelling choreography in *Songs of a Wayfarer* + other works for an evening of impressive contemporary ballet.

The opening piece, Artistic Director Emily Molnar's *Songs of a Wayfarer*, is a lovely start. 10 dancers are cast in this pleasant work, with the women en pointe, and all are costumed in bright colours, with much sparkle and sheen. With set design by Scott Reid, the dance floor is framed by pale, leafless trees and a low, asymmetrical set of stairs running across the back of the stage. Above the stairs, an oversized gilded frame hangs,

almost like a window. Lit beautifully by Pierre Lavoie, the ambiance shifts dramatically from deep dusks to bright sunshine, following the songs of Mahler, sung by mezzo soprano Susan Platts.

The strength of this work lies in the technical prowess of the dancers. They are truly phenomenal, and Molnar features their strengths to great effect. Complex and often idiosyncratic, the choreography investigates the human condition and our connections to each other. Tightly rehearsed unison sections and pas de deux work feature prominently, with light hearted and playful sections of dance playing off more emotional and moody moments. Dancers Connor Gnam, Makaila Wallace and Alexis Fletcher are standouts in this piece. Wallace and Fletcher attack their movement with gusto while remaining ultra feminine and fluid. It's a beguiling mix of interpretive qualities, reminiscent of Molnar's own glorious power as a Ballet BC dancer in seasons past.

The second piece, *Face to Face*, choreographed by Ballet Mannheim's Kevin O'Day perhaps suffers from its 'middle child' position on the program. Without question, Vancouver is privileged to enjoy the work of a choreographer who creates primarily in Europe. There is a cool factor, and in O'Day's case he brings with him a unique movement vocabulary and a more edgy, abstract aesthetic. However, the elements of the piece, when brought together, are not entirely cohesive. Low, solid, geometric set pieces line the back of the stage. Occasionally dancers hide from view or lean, slide or dance upon the angular shapes. Underused, however, the set could have been cut entirely. The costumes are sleek but overly layered, with garments that are removed one by one as the piece progresses. It's questionable whether the disrobing is necessary when the costumes are most successful at their simplest, with the women in sexy, black backless leotards and the men in simple black trunks. With live electric guitar music performed by Jeff Younger, the juxtaposition of ballet aesthetic with stream-of-consciousness sounding new music is interesting but again, not altogether successful. The music and dance seem somewhat unconnected. When the percussive elements of John King's recorded music ramp up half way through the work, this grounding rhythm further anchors the choreography.

The cast of six dance hard and well, pushed to their technical limits and extraordinarily committed to the choreography. Danced in socks, there is lots of super cool movement and sliding about -- maybe a little too much,

to be honest, but that's a small quibble. Donald Sales is especially strong, approaching the movement vocabulary in an organic, personal way. He has a way of drawing the eye whenever he takes the stage. The title of the work suggests a dialogue, and O'Day fully illustrates this theme in pure, unabashed physicality. Unfortunately, the overall attitude expressed is one of anger, confrontation and aggression, and in the end, it feels slightly one dimensional.

The final work on the program, *The bliss that from their limbs all movement takes*, is fall-on-the-floor brilliance. Created by renowned contemporary choreographer José Navas, this dancework features the entire 15 member company. The curtain opens in silence, revealing a fiery red, textured cyclorama, with several dancers standing still in silhouette. Front fluorescent lights blink on, blasting the dancers with bright light. The image lasts only for a moment, and then the lights subside and the dance begins in earnest. The women are en pointe, dressed simply in blue leotards, the men in blue trunks. The choreography is at first cool and serene, abstract and movement driven. The influences of Cunningham and Balanchine are present, but not overwhelming. Groupings of dancers are introduced in overlapping sections of duets, trios, quartets and quintets, with the choreography unfolding and refolding like intricate, elegant origami. The vocabulary is surprisingly balletic, relying on simple lines, extensions and elegant turns. Utilizing the incredible movement sensibilities of the dancers, Navas has fashioned a sophisticated dancework custom made for this company.

One of the most challenging aspects of creating dance is crafting transitions -- transitions between sections of dance, between individual movements, between emotional moments – how one thing moves to another is paramount. Navas is a master craftsman. Beautiful, seamless transitions abound, with beginnings and endings ebbing and flowing in graceful waves. As the piece progresses the choreography gets more dense and the speed intensifies with clear, centrifugal force. A choreography has never seen so many turns. It is literally dizzying, and gorgeous to watch. Refreshingly, women partner women, and dancers dance to the floor, rolling, sliding and recovering to spin yet again.

About half way through the piece, a more intense rhythm drives the music (by Philip Glass and Ravi Shankar) and the dancers enter suddenly in bright, solid coloured costumes, dresses over their leotards for the

women and new trunks for the men. Lighting Designer Marc Parent's exquisite lighting comes to the forefront, almost a catalyst for the dancing itself. The textured backdrop changes colour often; from blue, to purple, to red, all of which reflect off the pale dance floor, and highlight the bodies of the dancers.

The groupings continue to build until the entire company is spinning, leaping and dancing with remarkable stamina and precision. The speed and pacing increase and the dancers stay on top of it, completely energized. The anticipation is immense and it's incredibly exciting, thanks to Navas' accomplished artistry and talent for dance making. Finally, as the spinning, jumping and the incredible dancing come to a climax, in one bold leap the entire company disappears from the stage, the lights snap to black and the music ends on a hung note, the sudden silence thick in the air. Best ending ever. Absolutely appropriately, the entire audience jumps to its feet in a deafening standing ovation.

Now that's art.




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