

Dance International

Review of Dance Salad Festival 2010

Houston

After Houston's extravagant three-day Dance Salad festival at the Cullen Theatre, I came away with a wide range of thrilling new ideas about contemporary European dance. The foremost of these, surprisingly, is that ballet is funny. Additionally, many choreographers have expanded their movement vocabulary in response to yoga invading mainstream Western culture.

Jirí Kylián's influence remains enormously widespread in Europe, and he and other male choreographers still dominate the ballet world. Hungary appears to be the land that time (at least in terms of ballet) forgot, and not much is going on in Texas or Mexico, either. This is what director and producer Nancy Henderik showed viewers, intentionally or unintentionally, after inviting to Texas 13 dance companies representing Belgium, Hungary, Norway, Switzerland, England, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Amsterdam and the United States. Her programme notes characterized the stunning event simply as "a fusion of East

Kaori Nakamura and Jonathan Porretta in Pacific Northwest Ballet's *Coppélia*
Photo: © Angela Sterling

and West contemporary and classical dance, tossed with modern and classical music, seasoned with the poetic sensitivity of beautiful choreography," but to my eyes it was far more complicated and surprising than that.

At every important festival there is a "buzz" work, the dance everyone talks about and nearly all adore. This year it was without a doubt the excerpts from Christian Spuck's multi-layered *The Return of Ulysses*, set to recorded music by Henry Purcell and Burt Bacharach, danced by the Royal Ballet of Flanders. At a choreographers' forum the night preceding the festival, Spuck explained that humour is a common strategy in his skilful work, to the extent that critics have characterized him more recently as a "sunny-boy," in his own words. He said also that his *Ulysses* is centered more on Penelope's patient 20-year wait for her husband after only one year of marriage, and how she man-

ages the constant onslaught of zealous suitors during his absence. Eva Dewaele interpreted the role with a rare blend of slapstick and scary compulsion, engaging each of her seven suitors with a fascinating mix of imperial force and personal vulnerability. Spuck's choreography is a dense traffic of clockwork precision and comic timing. He likes, as well, strange anachronisms and extreme juxtapositions. The only sets were a pair of metal tables and a small model sailboat. After a few movements from Purcell, suddenly the music changes to (I believe) Rina Ketty singing *J'attendrai*, and then Perry Como crooning *Magic Moments*. Spuck deals out intelligent paraphrases as well — each suitor presented Penelope with a flower, in a brilliant quote from the *Rose Adagio* in Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty*.

Sophisticated humour continued in Paul Lightfoot and Sol León's vivid *Skew Whiff* from Norwegian National Ballet, and Montreal-born Eric Gauthier's ironic *Orchestra of Wolves*, performed by his own small talented company Gauthier Dance, based in Stuttgart. Both dances employ iconic scores, the former Rossini's beloved *The Thieving Magpie* and the latter Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, as a backdrop to the physically extreme life of a dancer. In each, laughter is the first response, which is



then followed by a more philosophical sense of wonder, particularly in the case of Gauthier's game of musical chairs gone badly. The late Dominique Bagouet's rare 1988 *Les Petites pièces de Berlin* from Ballet de Lorraine could be a likely precedent for the current fashion combining virtuosity and blatant humour, a seemingly fragmented work at first glance, but more delicately poignant on second view.

There were more than a few works of profound lyricism and introspection, and they demonstrated an intriguing attitude toward classical technique, one that allows the spine to twist and bend like it might during yoga class. Chief among them were Kylián's *Toss of a Dice* and *Blackbird*, from, respectively, Netherlands Dance Theater and Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève. The latter company also brought Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's gorgeous *Loin*, with its stunning opening duets solely for the hands and shoulders, and its closing quintet where one dancer drags and lifts the other four into strange passing sculptures. David Dawson's elegant *Faun(e)* by English National Ballet demonstrated the most striking stance toward legacy, with one man being replaced by the other, who taking his movement and imbuing it with a sharper, futuristic energy.

Only two women choreographers were represented among the 13 companies. Éva Duda's *Carneval* from Hungary's Central Europe Dance Theatre was an uncertain, start-and-stop event with three men exchanging or posing self-consciously with pistols, a largely unsuccessful borrowing from the style of film noir.

Hungarian National Ballet brought an excerpt from Lilla Pártay's overwrought *Anna Karenina*. The latter company showed even more old-fashioned work, namely Boris Eifman's *The Karamazovs* and Levente Bajári's cinematic *Way of Words*, making them the festival's biggest anachronisms. Mark Godden's excerpted *Miroirs* was danced impeccably by Mexico's La Compañía Nacional de Danza, but was filled with extraneous jumps and other ballet "filler," as well as a too-literal attempt at representation.

And one wonders why, in the middle of such a contemporary festival, appeared Ben Stevenson's bland *From the Corner* pas de deux from Texas Ballet Theatre. It's one of those pieces where each dancer is constantly beckoning to the other, then there are some dramatic lifts, and then they disappear. The New York/Amsterdam duo of Drew Jacoby and Rubinald Pronk showed that the pas de deux has come so much further, as evidenced in their emphatic interpretation of Lightfoot and León's athletic *Softly as I Leave You*. In a somewhat obvious but nonetheless effective metaphor, they performed at least half of it trapped in a plywood coffin-like box.

If every festival has its buzz work, it also has its flop. Cesc Gelabert's *Conquassabit* for his own Spanish company Gelabert-Azzopardi Companyia de Dansa featured overlapping Handel arias, an instigating figure resembling Captain Picard who banged a rain stick on the stage floor and kept losing his hat and glasses, and an enormous silver curtain that dominated all the action and was constantly repositioned by the nine dancers, who screamed and grimaced intermittently. An unfitting finale on Dance Salad's last evening, it was the only piece I just couldn't force myself to watch again.

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