

Ana LAGUNA + Dance Salad

MAGGIE FOYER meets the extraordinary Spanish dancer in between performances at Houston's innovative dance festival

Ana Laguna received her early training from Maria de Avila in her native Zaragoza in Spain. She was dancing in Madrid with a small ballet company of eight dancers when she saw the Cullberg Ballet on tour. "It opened my eyes. I thought this is what I want to see in dance. It had drama that passed through the movements. I saw them every night and asked if it would be possible to train with them, not even thinking to ask for an audition. However, they said I should try. So I asked Birgit (Cullberg) and was accepted for the next season."

Coming to Stockholm was a shock for the 19 year-old. It was the first time she had been abroad, or even in a plane. "It was like coming to the moon – empty, empty, empty and so very different from Spain. Somehow Swedish people are very shy and if you laugh too loud, it's very disturbing." Cullberg Ballet was a repertoire company which included works by Cunningham, Flemming Flindt and Maurice Béjart. Among her first roles were Béjart's *Firebird* and Inez in his *Sonate à Trois*. She danced in Mats Ek's first creation, *The Officer's Servant* (based on *Woyzeck*), and the maiden in *St George and the Dragon* (both 1976). She also danced the title role in Cullberg's *Miss Julie* with Rudolf Nureyev. The ballet had been out of the repertoire for some time. "It was quite a shock for me to learn the piece for the premiere and it was Nureyev. But with all respect – he was a great dancer at the time – you cannot dance with someone if you are afraid of meeting that person at the same level. It has to be a partnership between two human beings. I went to Rudolf and said, 'You know I am young, I have never danced this ballet, and I haven't danced on pointe for five years, so please, take care of me.' And he was wonderful. Not at all the difficult person we had heard about. It was a great relationship."

On joining Cullberg, Laguna had to learn to dance in a contemporary style. "It was extremely hard, but very interesting ... it was another language for me." Not so the dramatic quality, "this I had learnt from my teacher, but at that time I had only learnt classical dance. In dance we communicate through feeling and we are helped by technique. It should be a help, but more often it is a hindrance. You can have a Stradivarius but you must know how to play it and to make the wonderful sounds; not only technically, but to find the deeper feelings. Our body is our instrument. To try and achieve what the choreographer wants, and not what you or your body wants; that is something I respect very much. One has to find the essence of what the choreographer wants



Ana Laguna in *O Sole Mio* at Dance Salad. Photo: Amitava Sarkar

BORN:

16 May 1955, Zaragoza, Spain.

DANCE STUDIES:

Maria de Avila in Zaragoza.

JOINED:

Cullberg Ballet in 1974.

CREATED ROLES IN: St George and the Dragon, 1976; Soweto 1977; The House of Bernarda Alba, 1978; Giselle, 1982; Rite of Spring, 1984; Swan Lake, 1987; Memory, 2007; O Sole Mio, 2009 - all choreographed by Mats Ek.

PERFORMED WITH

Nederlands Dans Theater 1980-1981.

CREATED ROLES IN BALLETS by Kylián, Béjart, Duato, Naharin, Perrault and Forsythe.

LEFT Cullberg in 1993 to work in dance and drama productions.

AWARDS:

Premio Nacional de Danza (Spain);
Emmy Award for Carmen (1995);
Best interpretation of Giselle
(Video Danse France);
Carina Ari Medal (Sweden);
Honorary professor by the Swedish
Ministry of Culture (2000);
Named "Zaragoza's Daughter"
by her native city of Zaragoza.



to say and put it through your body - not imitating, because that would not be true, but you cannot avoid interpreting the movement through your body because you are the one standing on stage. It is very important to have that relationship with the choreographer."

Laguna is probably best known for her creations, but she stressed that there were many other works in the Cullberg repertoire. "I liked all of them and one learns from all of them." Her *Giselle*, choreographed by Ek in 1982, was formidable. "Dancing *Giselle* empties your soul completely. She is so naked and unprotected. There are many people like this in society and we have a tendency not to respect them." Her cigar-smoking *Carmen* was also a very singular interpretation. "I had given up smoking by that time but, while rehearsing, I would keep smoking to get used to it. The first time was really tough. I also had to try to hold it the way a man holds the cigar. These things are important. I saw Peter Brook's *Carmen*, and what touched

Pina (Bausch) asked me if I had a solo for her gala. 'Can't you tell Mats to make something for you?' I will never ask him to do something for me. Why should I? If he wants to he will, otherwise no."



Ana Laguna and Mats Ek in *Memory* at Dance Salad. Photo: Amitava Sarkar

me most was her fragility. She was not the 'sex-bomb' as Carmen is always portrayed. I think that is the wrong image. Carmen has fragility because she is fighting for her human rights as a woman. She is a very attractive woman and uses sex to show them, 'I can choose like a man who I want to make love with. Why should only men choose?' But is that all of Carmen? I think she has much more complicated feelings than just that. She is a victim of her own freedom and you have to pay for your freedom."

Family is central to Laguna's life. "I always wanted to have children, but it is not so easy for women dancers. I danced for a while when I was pregnant with Reuben (her first son) but one cannot work until very late. Then after the child is born your body must recover. For a dancer there is a period of time when you don't actively work

and that can be very precious. It also depends where you are in your development, so the timing is hard to decide. But once I chose to have the child, he was the most important." As Cullberg was a touring company, Laguna faced further problems. "In the few hours between performances and in the morning I want to be with my children. If I am away, I don't see them at all so it is important they come with me." The company relented and the family toured together.

Although Mats Ek, her husband, often casts her, his brother Niklas and sister Malin in leading roles, Laguna was annoyed that people should read this in a negative way. "We work professionally, not as family. We have known each other for a long time but that doesn't mean that we mix our privacy as a couple. In the studio you have to work completely separately. I think one can also misuse being

otherwise no."

For the 40th Anniversary of Cullberg Ballet in 2007, Laguna and Ek were asked if they could perform something. This presented a challenge. They had not been dancing for 11 years, and Ek had had a hip operation. "Then we thought of that pas de deux from a theatre piece that Mats had made for two actors. We took it out, arranged things, made small changes and it became *Memory*." Laguna has recently sustained the first injury in her long professional life, a torn meniscus. Three months later, she is back on stage, "But I have been taking it very easy. I don't take normal class. I have had to learn to warm up in other ways. One never stops learning, which is great. I love to try and do new things. If you get in a rut, things close up. But it's not always easy. For people losing their jobs and that sort of thing, it must be terribly difficult to find that curiosity."

Laguna is forging a new career as an actress. As a dancer she was never afraid of vocalising on stage. In 2000 she had a speaking role in Ohad Naharin's *LOL*: "it was fun to do. I really liked it." More recently she has enjoyed success as Andromache in Mats Ek's production at the National Theatre in Stockholm. "In Racine's version, the main character has the least to say and even that text Mats took away. He changed it around so that I did not talk. I had to search for a non-understandable language so I created a sort of Arabic!"

For Laguna, the drama is intrinsic to her work. "From other choreographers I have had non-dramatic roles but not Mats, he can't really do without it. But I think all pieces have drama." She made a comparison with abstract art: "even if the artist throws the paint at the canvas, when he throws, he is feeling a certain way, maybe anger or happiness. His feeling sticks there and I try always to find a link to it."

"I had to search for a non-understandable language so I created a sort of Arabic!"

audience can read it."

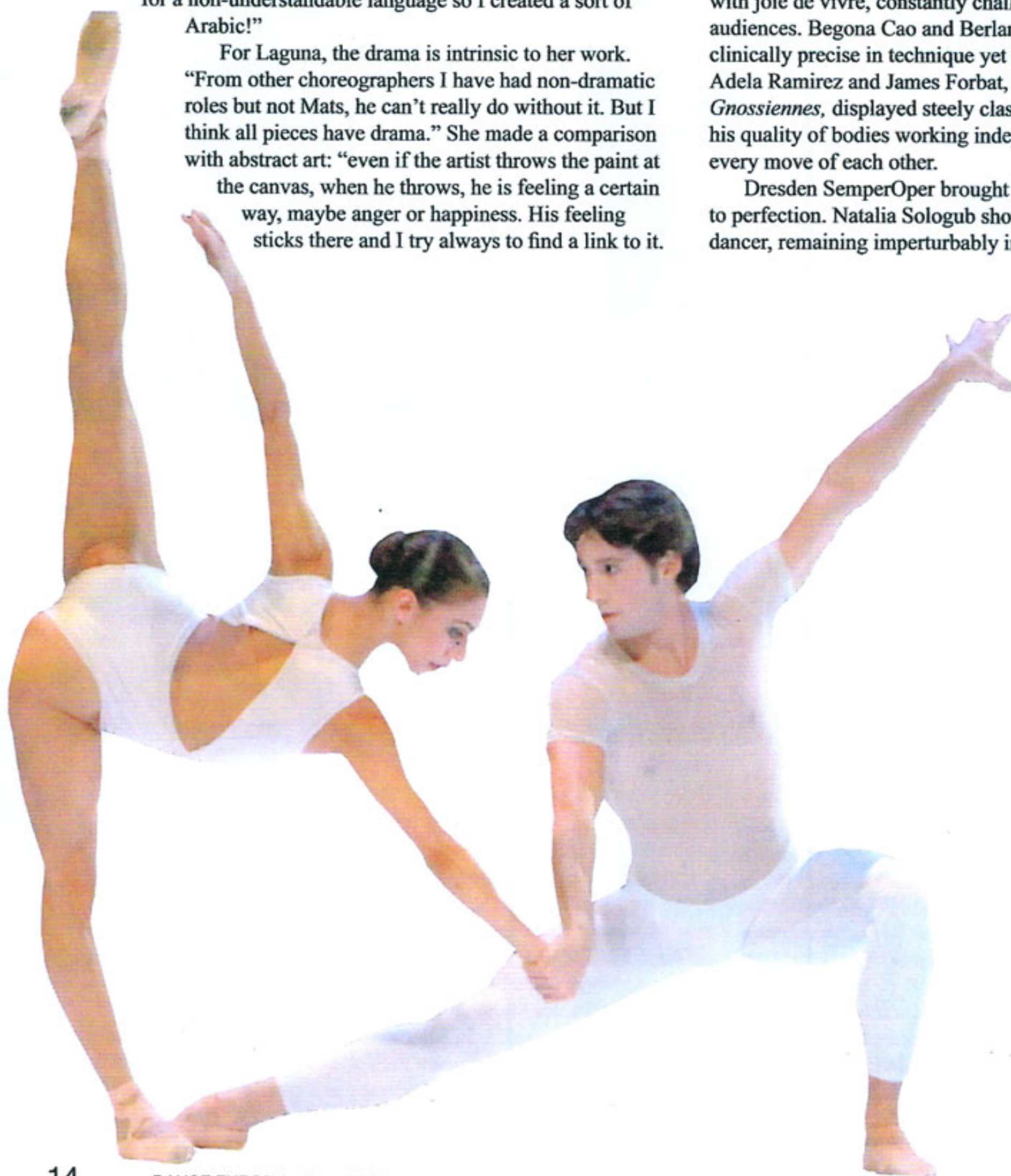
Texas prides itself on size - bigger is better. But Houston's Dance Salad is not big as festivals go - it's small, perfectly formed and ablaze with talent. Over three days in April you could catch stars of the Paris Opéra, English National Ballet, the Royal Danish and Swedish ballet companies and Dresden SemperOper. In contemporary dance there were performances from Carte Blanche, Gothenburg Ballet, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Hong Kong's City Contemporary Dance Company, a world premiere from William Forsythe and, to crown it all, Mats Ek and Ana Laguna dancing together. This is dance lover's heaven!

Dance Salad gives a unique insight into the dance world, proving - if proof were needed - that dance talent at all ages, performing and choreographing in all manner of styles, is in rude health. Of the youngsters, Esteban Berlanga and Claudio Cangialosi have to be among the most exciting young dancers on the planet, while veteran

Ana Laguna won the hearts of the audience and fellow dancers with her infectious humour and magnificent presence.

The ENB presented David Dawson's *A Million Kisses to my Skin*. The company fielded a top rate cast working seamlessly together while never losing their individuality. This finely crafted work bubbles with joie de vivre, constantly challenging the dancers and invigorating audiences. Begonia Cao and Berlanga took on the central roles, clinically precise in technique yet delivered with throwaway ease. Adela Ramirez and James Forbat, dancing Hans van Manen's *Trois Gnossiennes*, displayed steely classical lines and successfully captured his quality of bodies working independently while absolutely aware of every move of each other.

Dresden SemperOper brought Forsythe's *Steptext* and danced it to perfection. Natalia Sologub showed her pedigree as a fine classical dancer, remaining imperturbably in charge while being thrown around



Begonia Cao and Esteban Berlanga in *A Million Kisses to My Skin* at Dance Salad. Photo: Amitava Sarkar

and strength. Sologub teamed up with Coumes-Marquet in Dawson's *On the Nature of Daylight*. Dawson's choreographic voice is clear in the circular patterns of the opening; rapturous lifts swirl to high arching shapes and achingly beautiful moments frozen in time. But this is also a very original piece, simpler in structure and austere in the monochrome design; the plainness countered by the richness of the emotion. The fully extended lines highlighted the elegance of Coumes-Marquet's limbs while Sologub looked heartbreakingly vulnerable in the tenderly curled positions.

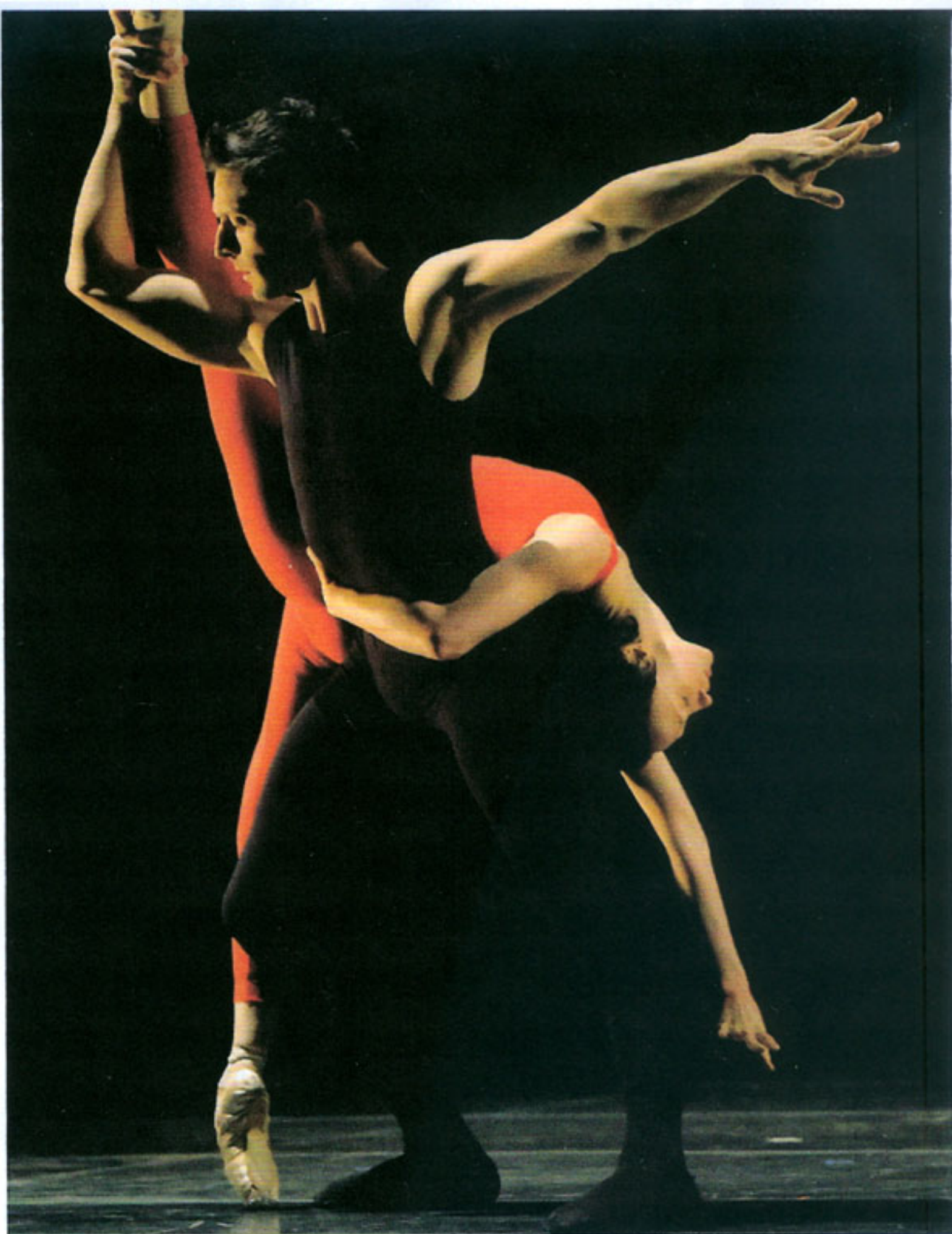
Noah D. Gelber gave a stylish rendition of *Two Part Invention* hot off the press from Forsythe. This is Forsythe in classy, classical mode, rummaging through the ballet toy box, remoulding each step to suit his needs. Gelber, supremely versed in the style, stamps his own mark on the interpretation with clarity in every move and each pause pulled into sharp focus.

From Brussels, Cherkaoui presented a compacted *Myth and Origine*. I loved Daisy Phillips' nonchalant contortions, as her arms and legs seemed to sprout from nowhere and wrap everywhere. When she teamed up with Kazutomi Kozuki, who also seems to defy all natural laws of human physiognomy, the effects were wondrous. He becomes all manner of accessories, her coat, her bath towel or her necklace. As she walks on high demi-pointe his index fingers form her heels and then her cigarette which she discards and brutally stubs out. There is nothing quite like it on the dance scene: a unique celebration of creativity and invention.

Jorma Elo's *Lost on Slow*, written for the Royal Danish, is a hugely entertaining bit of balletic fun. The tutus, tiaras and bare legs set the rebellious tone for the strangely bird-like woman; a more wicked breed than your regimented swans. The men enjoy plenty of flashy male virtuoso stuff, but always at a tangent as Elo wickedly deconstructs the expected. With ballet grandeur successfully debunked, the duets moved on into the world of emotions. Marie-Agnès Gillot is the essence of romanticism. She has only to wrap an arm around her partner for a glow of sensual warmth to pervade the theatre and when her leg stretches to one of those glorious développés – whew! In Carolyn Carlson's *Signes: L'Esprit du Bleu*, partnered by Kader Belarbi, she was by turn tender, passionate and joyous. In *Recontre*, co-choreographed with Jiri Bubenicek, a romantic pas was lifted out of the ordinary by touches of originality in the fluid movements and light-hearted moments of play.

Mats Ek's duets reach into the deepest recesses of the soul. His 'door' duet from *Apartement*, tinged with uncertainty, longing and partial fulfilment, was given full emotional expression by Jeanette Diaz-Barboza and Andrey Leonovitch. *Memory*, which Ek performs with his wife, muse and dance partner, Ana Laguna, is searingly honest, by turns eccentric and funny; a tribute to a long, loving relationship. Having experienced the warmth of its reception in Stockholm, I wondered how an audience who barely know the choreographer or his heritage would react. It translated perfectly and the audience were spellbound.

Carte Blanche from Norway brought Hofesh Schechter's ever popular *Uprising*, an ode to male aggression. This diverse company were on good form and seemed to relish the high velocity, uptempo workout. From Gothenburg, Kenneth Kvarnström's *OreloB* has interesting content, ambiguous relationships and two powerful interpreters in Micol Mantini and Erik Johansson; for the students who came to see the dress rehearsal it was their hot favourite. They loved the extraordinary costumes and found the choreography had "an excellent vibe" and the dancers "awesome". Some of these students



Raphael Coumes-Marquet and Natalia Sologub in *Steptext* at Dance Salad. Photo: Amitava Sarkar

were studying dance but some were total newcomers. They had enjoyed a morning theatre tour after which Ayman Aaron Harper and Armando Silva, two local boys who have made careers for themselves in dance, chatted to the youngsters – and showed them some good moves. After watching the dress run, they went home brimming with enthusiasm for dance.

Beijing-born Xing Liang, now working with CCDC in Hong Kong, wrote and performed *Existence*. It had the simplicity of form and conceptual depth that we admire so much in Eastern art, structured in amazingly fluid movements punctuated by finely detailed gestures. And Laguna's *Solo Mio*; with the heart of a 16 year-old and the wisdom of experience, she visualised Luciano Pavarotti's legendary voice; literally winding up to the top notes and wiggling her hips on the tremolos. She even had teams of men waiting the wings to ferry her across the stage: a wonderful vehicle for her formidable comic talents.

All credit to Nancy Henderek, the artistic director and power house of energy who, even in these tough times, has managed to again raise the finance for the festival. The US, mostly reliant on private funding, is much more vulnerable to the financial crisis than we are in Europe. Ben Stevenson, who was teaching company class, runs Texas Ballet Theatre. He proudly told me how his dancers had raised \$250,000 to get them through the season. Company class was a great opportunity to meet old friends and make new in the midst of so much diversity and talent. Dance Salad? Well, yes, it was fresh and delicious, but this was also haute cuisine of gargantuan richness.