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DANCE REVIEW

Ballet BC kicks off Jacob's Pillow festival with flair



CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN

Peter Smida and Emily Chessa of Ballet BC in *Twenty Eight Thousand Waves*.

By Janine Parker | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 27, 2015

BECKET — Joy upon joy: The annual international dance smorgasbord that is the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival has begun, and Ballet BC (that's British Columbia, eh?), the superb contemporary ballet company last seen here in 2013, is handling the official 83d season kickoff.

Though the program's three pieces share enough similarities that their uniquenesses are somewhat diluted when absorbed together, this company, directed by former troupe member Emily Molnar, is packed with charismatic dancers performing at full-strength.

William Forsythe's 1998 "workwithinwork" opens the program. The Forsythian trademarks are there — stabbing, flung-out legs; hyper-mobile arms; often blunted, rather than elongated, pointework for the women — but there is also an "only connect" feeling within the proceedings. A woman is lassoed about by and around her male partner; the velocity of the whole thing makes you steel yourself for her thudding return to earth, but instead she is whispered down. The tenderness is palpable.

Set to a now-plaintive, now-angst-filled duet for violins by Luciano Berio, there is also nuanced humor in the way Forsythe maneuvers the dancers within the structure of the many, often quite short, musical sections. Brief solos, duos, or trios simply begin, either subtly or explosively, from wherever the dancers happen to be. These seeming asides are commanding and necessary strands of the delicate threading that holds the piece together.

The ties that bind in Gustavo Ramírez Sansano's 2015 "Consagración," however, are conspicuous and universal: attraction, lust, sex. Sansano manages his topic not by tiptoeing but by plunging. Dancers interact with a kind of earnest creatureliness: A gorgeous male duet begins with the two sniffing each other — and somehow, while the moment is whimsical, it isn't laughable.

As curiosity builds, the dancers partially undress each other, and much of their inhibitions are stripped away too, though — these being humans — there are a few moments of shyness, and possibly hints of shame. Likewise with his topic, Sansano tempts the over-the-top gods with his chosen score, Igor

Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," whose lyricism and audacity could be turned into treacle and bombast in the wrong hands. Instead, we and the dancers are treated like adults, and are shown not something pornographic, but something metaphoric, and honest.

In Cayetano Soto's 2014 "Twenty Eight Thousand Waves" there is again lots of bare skin, but Soto's program notes indicate that this dance is less concerned with the earthier matters of the flesh than with "the rebirth of new energies after death." Aside from their now-ubiquitous calf-height socks, the men begin clad only in gray briefs, but eventually reappear wearing flouncy skirts. Conversely, the women begin with more clothing, then end up in flesh-colored leotards. Does this mean that the men are now free, "after death," to be more "feminine?" What about the women? Those leotards, though spare, aren't see-through, so they are somewhat neutered, like unclothed Barbie dolls. (Kate Burrows is credited here with costume "coordination" rather than "design.")

The way Soto uses music in "Waves" is also enigmatic. Haunting excerpts from David Lang's 2007 cantata "the little match girl passion" are followed by Bryce Dessner's comparatively jaunty, tango-like "Aheym," and to the somberness of the first, women's elbows spike, their hands and fingers tensely clawed. In the copious partnering, the women, depending on the moment, are either dragged or ferried. They are pitched, upright or upside down, their legs often paused, tucked up, before kicking back out into space. To my eye this partnering seemed to become more fluid, against expectation, with the more jagged composition. As with "Consagración," I liked that not everything was tied up in a neat package for us, but rather, we were left with the mystery of what it might mean, privately, to each of us.

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