



Ballet Builders 2009

TIM MARTIN catches up with a rare platform for ballet choreographers in New York

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Thank goodness for New Choreographers on Point (NCOP) and their Ballet Builders showcases. As co-founder Mike Kraus said in his opening remarks, there are myriad showcases in New York City for modern choreography, but precious few opportunities for would-be ballet makers. There's the Diamond Project at New York City Ballet, of course, but you've already heard of most of the choreographers they choose. There was, for a time, a weakly-curated showcase called To the Pointe that died out due, I suspect, to a lack of organization. This means NCOP has been the only body to fill this need which, given the competitiveness of New York City, is rather remarkable. On the other hand, it's this very same competition which makes what little funding there is for showcases so hotly contested - so in this regard, it's remarkable that this was their 19th annual concert: Kraus and co-founder Ruth Chester have done well to keep things rolling for nearly two decades. The range of works presented was broad indeed: from the Euro-flavored eye candy of Cindy Mancini's Counterpart to the country and western horseplay of Anne Mueller's Heartaches and Hotcakes - and with the other pieces filling in the gaps between these extremes, the evening offered a wide scope of styles.

Choreographer Sidra Bell's name had been coming up a lot lately so I was pleased to have a chance to see something from her. Opus Romanza starts off in an intriguing murkiness. Two women gradually come downstage into a strip of light. They're moving powerfully, disjointedly, yet they're also grounded and liquid. They're each wearing a black leotard of sorts, with those silly-looking sewn-on tutus that splay out in every direction. It's a tasty, mismatched combination of flavors - their serious dancing versus the children's-style tutus; their bare legs, looking strong and sexy, versus their deadpan expressions. As the piece unfolds, some male partners appear and a number of non-unison duets go on at the same time. There were moments when the steps themselves were not particularly inspired, but the amount of activity going on at any one time tended to keep the eye and mind occupied nonetheless.

Mueller's Heartaches and Hotcakes is set to the singing of legendary

country star Patsy Cline. Happily, she didn't try to mimic the tales told in the lyrics and therein lay much of the charm of this suite of short pieces. Mueller captures the mood without being literal and we get to enjoy her dancers being sad or playful or just wonderfully kinetic - they have good training, move well, and their faces are alive with personality, which makes it all the more alluring. I especially enjoyed the contrast in the casting: Artur Sultanov, the lone male presence, towered good-humouredly over the three women, Candace Bouchard, Daniela Deloe, and Mueller herself, who all struck me as about half his height.

My favorite on the programme was a pair of excerpts from Peter Davison's *Cirque D'Amour*. I don't have a sense of what the larger work is like, but these two snippets were a pleasure. Davison himself dances in the first section with the excellent Jennifer Aiken and a chrome ladder, which is inventively manipulated - he steadies it, she climbs it, they both tilt and counterbalance it in uncanny ways, and they trade off managing the thing in the midst of some extraordinary partnering. The section concludes with an influx of un-heretofore introduced elements. Ordinarily I would find this a bit jarring or contrived but there was a surreal beauty to it that tickled my fancy. Two dancers, from opposite sides of the stage, begin to cross, one upstage, one downstage. They're each pulling a long stretch of red fabric - we eventually see the dancers who are holding the opposite ends, and once the full swathes of material are in view, they're made to undulate like waves. Aiken is perched atop the highest rung of the ladder when a man sporting a black derby and bare-chested under his black suit strolls on from the wings holding a white umbrella. I couldn't shake the image of Magritte's *The Son of Man* or the rainy afternoon scene in the film *Diva*. He hands the umbrella to Aiken, who then perches on his hand in a high torch lift - they parade smoothly offstage as the ladder is whirled away in the other direction. The fabric waving dancers wind themselves up into red fabric cocoons before leaving as the lights fade.

The next section was a mysterious, male female duet with a nude look, illuminated by only a bulb that the dancers took turns holding as they danced. The bulb trailed a cord and at one point was whirled overhead by this wire, but that was the only pyrotechnical moment which made this somber section a bit anticlimactic after the colorful ladder/umbrella dream sequence. I couldn't say where these sections sit in relation to each other in the larger work—out of context, they were an odd pairing but both beautiful in their own ways.