



## Ballet review: Anne Mueller a must-see in OBT's "Lambarena"

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Andy Batt

Alison Roper and Ilir Shtylla in Val Caniparoli's "Lambarena."

**Oregon Ballet Theatre's** winter program moves from neoclassical formalism (Peter Martin's complex, plotless *Ash*) to fusion (Val Caniparoli's J.S. Bach-meets-Africa ballet, "**Lambarena**"), but it's artistic director Christopher Stowell's world premiere of "The Rite of Spring" that makes this program not to be missed.

On Saturday's opening night at Keller Auditorium, Anne Mueller's fearless central performance was an exquisite interpretation of shape-shifting duality, serpentine and robotic at once, the intensity of her presence injecting every angle of elbow and stab of leg with an almost feral distress. A must-see.

### "Lambarena"

**When:**

**Where:** Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St.

**Tickets:** \$13.50-\$122, 503-222-5538 or

**Ticketmaster**

**Web site:** [obt.org](http://obt.org)

The dissonant chords of Stravinsky's colossal score (a two-piano version performed live by soloists Carol Rich and Susan DeWitt Smith) tumble over one another before the curtain even rises, and Stowell's set delivers on the music's promise: dancers in tank tops and shorts inch forward from exposed

wings as three panels slowly lower to the stage to form an open box that shifts throughout, from claustrophobic tunnel to a shadowy chamber housing a pyramid of writhing bodies to a trap with walls literally closing in. Notions of outside and inside constantly shift with dancers lurking in the wings, emptying and filling the stage with flurries of motion and stillness.

Michael Mazzola's blood-amber lighting and Stowell's choreography layer the space still further. There's an

unrelenting gravity to the atmosphere, and Anne Mueller, crouching and stabbing in a red swimsuit-like leotard, dances the mood with fearless attack, angular and fluid, harsh and circumspect. In a dance that hints at dark ritualism, she's the mysterious protagonist, combatively partnered by the equally focused Adrian Fry.

Even when Mueller is off stage, her presence imbues the action. While the dance drags a bit in unison partnerings, Stowell's choreography with which Mueller assisted is flawless in its complex transitions and use of space. A mass of seated dancers, heads whipping back and forth and propelled backward by their legs, look like staccato insects. There's a cryptic story-within-a-story in his Rite; aside from an overt crucifixion scene, we see two Doppelgangers replace Mueller and Fry, who reemerge in new roles. But the underlying mood of entrapment and the non-narrative arc do justice to Stravinsky's score.

Score is also central to Martin's "Ash," but here it's ultimately a double-edged sword. Michael Torke's orchestral score blazes out of the gates and never slackens. It's a tricky ride for the dancers. Martin's choreography demands silken arms in extreme curves and a simultaneous sharpness in the legs. Wrists and knees point akimbo, torsos tilt off-axis, and space-eating patterns crisscross the stage, at driving speeds. Principals Yuka Iino and Chauncey Parsons crisply execute Martin's strict phrasing, their uncanny lightness nicely offset by Steven Houser's daredevil recklessness and Brennan Boyer's wide-open speed. But technical command among the corps is uneven, most noticeable as Martin's kinetic whirlwind cycles from canons to solos for each dancer.

"Lambarena," with its quotes of African dance forms welded onto classical ballet technique, presents a similar problem for the men, ricocheting between extremes: jerky arms and heads, awkward arches and over-the-top seductive shimmies. The women fare better, sending their long dresses dancing with subdued hip rolls and pulsing torsos, but the dance as a whole never gels. Technique isn't the only sticking point. Caniparoli's choreography lifts and settles, but it's largely imbued with a dreamy sameness. The scores mix of familiar Bach cantatas with traditional African polyrhythms and chanting, interlaced with forest sounds and clapping, is too episodic and fragmented to succeed as fusion.

-- Catherine Thomas

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