

Review: Pacific Northwest Ballet and Three by Balanchine

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY FEB. 25, 2016

Pacific Northwest Ballet, by opening its return visit to New York on Wednesday night with a triple bill of three Balanchine ballets well known here, ran the risk of overfamiliarity — yet the opposite proved true. Works we thought we knew looked and felt novel, peculiar, arresting. More than that, the basic connection between music, space and dancers acquired a shocking immediacy and fullness.

Two vital elements help to explain this. The company has brought its orchestra — the best ballet band in America; and the season is at City Center, a theater that was home to Balanchine's New York City Ballet during its first 16 years (1948-64) and that was central to his thinking. In this space and with this accompaniment, his choreography takes off. It was often said that Balanchine never managed to make quite the same time-space impact after his company moved to the deeper and broader New York State Theater (today's David H. Koch Theater) in 1964; Wednesday's performance demonstrated how true that was.

With the first ballet, "Square Dance," there was the thrill of seeing it in the theater where it had its premiere in 1957. Even for those of us who weren't around in those days, there was an immediate "Yes, of course" sense of recognition. Among the first steps (from the six women of the corps de ballet) is a *rond de jambe en l'air*, a step that at the Koch often looks two-dimensional. Here, however, we see — and feel — how vividly it's a ring written rapidly in the air by one raised foot and how it brilliantly matches a flourish in the Vivaldi music.

This wasn't the original "Square Dance," mind you. Pacific Northwest danced the ballet in its 1976 version, with instrumentalists in the pit rather than onstage, no square-dance caller and, unforgettably, the startling start-stop-start male solo added then to music by Corelli. It's amazing how this number transforms the ballet. Most of "Square Dance" is public; here alone is an experimental, reflective soliloquy with nobody else present — as if showing us the thought process of a dancer-choreographer at work. On Wednesday, Benjamin Griffiths overemphasized its staccato aspects — the repeated stops — more than the connective flow.

This was a remarkable company performance, however, with marvelous conversational give-and-take between the bright Leta Biasucci and Mr. Griffiths in duets. On visits to the company's home city, Seattle, I've seen several of these corps dancers (notably Angelica Generosa and Matthew Renko) dance lead Balanchine roles; Wednesday, all of them projected with happy authority. The company's artistic director, Peter Boal, had staged it: he was a celebrated exponent of the male role in his years with New York City Ballet.

Although Balanchine made the second work, “Prodigal Son” (1929), in Europe during his years with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, it was only with City Ballet at City Center that he established the ballet’s tradition with successive casts, and — especially with Edward Villella in the title role — created a legend. (One of the upstairs corridors backstage at City Center has a poster photograph of Villella’s Prodigal in a famous jump, as if he remains one of its household gods.)

The Pacific Northwest staging is, again, by Mr. Boal. Jonathan Porretta danced the role with exceptional momentum and muscular force on Wednesday. Jumps sliced the air, pirouettes were mini-tornadoes, and — most striking — the ending of each movement was the preparation for the next. He exaggerated facial expressions, probably because the company’s Seattle home stage, the Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, has none of City Center’s nearness to the audience. Lesley Rausch (replacing Laura Tisserand) was wry, hard, unpredictable as the Siren: lacking the role’s cold sexiness, but always suspenseful. The groupings for the nine “goons” in the ballet’s central scene showed all their constructivist wit.

Most startling of all was the evening’s closing work, “Stravinsky Violin Concerto” (1972), staged by Paul Boos and Colleen Neary. Many of its details simply registered as never before. The four men’s flips of the wrist in the opening quintet, the jokiness of some side-to-side jumps for another male quartet, some close-partnering sequences in Aria II (the second of the ballet’s two singular duets): Had we really been watching these in all previous performances we’ve seen of this great ballet? They and much else looked disconcerting. The performance was as if we were in Balanchine’s rehearsal room; I’d love to hear what members of the ballet’s early casts have to say about it.

In the Aria I duet, Ms. Rausch was at her best: unhesitatingly bold, sardonic, calmly strange. Her partner, Jerome Tisserand, is a superb dancer: He modestly embodies casual elegance. Aria II was performed by Noelani Pantastico and Seth Orza: perfect in individual moments rather than in continuous drama. Ms. Pantastico excelled in the concerto’s outer movements, where the upward sweep of a leg or the downward tap of a toe showed her uncannily at one with Michael Jinsoo Lim’s solo violin.

This Balanchine program has two performances alone; a triple bill of Contemporary Innovators follows on Friday and Saturday. Several other ballet companies are performing in New York this week: the Mariinsky Ballet at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (four programs), New York City Ballet at the Koch (three), New York Theater Ballet at New York Live Arts (one). In this illustrious context, Pacific Northwest often looks exemplary — youthful, sunny, stylish, ideally engaged. Its orchestral players, conducted by Emil de Cou, are better yet; the violins’ mellowness of tone was an especial knockout.

Above all, in these Balanchine ballets, it’s that brilliant meeting of music and dance that galvanizes. The audience is taken to the heart of the art.