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by Michael Crabb

Costa Mesa, CA

The Royal Danish Ballet — one of the world's oldest ballet companies, made its grandest tour to America in half a century this spring. Two California cities, Washington, D.C. and New York City were the fortunate few to receive them.

The first honour went to Segerstrom Auditorium in Costa Mesa, California. Spectators from all over Southern California drew in to see this rare performance of the *Nordic Choreography Project* on May 24.

The programme featured five repertory works by four acclaimed Nordic choreographers. The most celebrated name in Danish ballet to date belongs to August Bournonville, the Royal Danish ballet master/choreographer from 1830 to 1877. Immortalized for his distinct style, Bournonville technique places emphasis on the areas of mime, facial expression, body alignment, ballon and speed of movement.

Historically, the company is known for its exclusive programme dedicated to developing strong, young, male dancers. For the first performance, *Bournonville Variations*, Artistic Director Nikolaj Hübbe and principal dancer Thomas Lund staged a piece based around the danseur programme, to honour the Bournonville legacy.

Music selections were by Martin Akerwall. Costumes by Annette Nørgaard. Abstract paintings by Helmut Schober, shown through rotating slides, dressed up the stage as 12 dancers, including principals, soloists and members of the corps de ballet, demonstrated the progression from student to professional.

Young men in stylish blue trench coats entered and quickly joined a group of dancers preparing for ballet class. Trench coats were removed and class exercises began. Rond de jambe en l'air sauté, enchaînement and various allegro variations were presented. It's understandable why such a piece was created, but for this particular opening night, its simplicity lessened the initial grandeur of the occasion. Though intentions were good, it was a slow start to the evening.

The next piece, *Lost on Slow* from 2008, by Finnish choreographer Jorma Elo, was set in an abstract world of mime, puppetry and classical/contemporary movement. Shadowy mysterious stage lighting by Thomas Bek created just the right effect for this surrealistic ballet performed to the recorded music of Vivaldi.

Wearing costumes by Nørgaard, three

men appeared slick in dark solid satin pants with matching vests as they performed complex fast and slow manoeuvres with varying geometric and loose undulating moves. Fashioned in opulent tapestry-inspired corsets and classical bell tutus, three female marionettes performed precisely controlled doll-like movements as they promenaded about the stage in soft ballet shoes. This was an exciting and highly engaging piece from start to finish.

After the first intermission, the 2011 classical piece *Alumnus* by Johan Kobborg was performed in two parts; music by Henryk Wieniawski, Antonio Bazzini and Hans Christian Lumbye; costume and set design by Natalia Stewart.

Part I: *Les Lutins* started with all eyes fixed on the enormous Bournonville head that hovered over the right side of the stage. Violinist Lars Bjørnkjær and pianist Julian Thurber took the stage and the focus changed. Bjørnkjær announced the composition they would perform, then they began to play.

The perfect compliment to the live music — virtuoso dancer Tim Matiakis, smartly dressed in black trousers with suspenders and a white shirt. Like an instrument, Matiakis emulated — identically — every luscious note of music. As he danced for solo piano, his movements became more pronounced. As he danced for solo violin, his movements became more fluid. Particularly memorable were his el-

egant pirouettes in coupé. During these turns, one could imagine what an unravelling sound created by a violin looked like. It was extraordinary.

Principal dancer Marcin Kupinski made a suave aristocratic entrance. As Matiakis took notice, his instinctive male defence mechanism followed suit. Neither one impressed with the other as they both showed off their moves; Matiakis poured on the smooth attitude while the demure Kupinski remained unfazed. Fuelling the competition — principal dancer Gudrun Bojesen came onto the scene. During the tug of war over who gets the girl, Bojesen took turns performing with each suitor. But to the danseurs' dismay, the girl rejected both and choose the violinist instead. Brief, but fantastically entertaining and exquisitely performed by all.

Salute, Part II of Kobborg's classical piece *Alumnus*, depicted the enchanting story of courtship. Thirteen sprightly dancers — with swooning girls and their soldier sweethearts to be — spread giddiness with their irresistible Bournonville-inspired charm. Sweet with their hair in pigtailed, these female dancers were graceful and light as they performed en pointe in their Romantic-era tutu's with old country-style bodices. The young soldier lads in blue military jackets and black boots dazzled as they demonstrated great strength and agility. At the finish, the



smitten couples rushed centre stage for an impromptu group photo. Beaming as they waited for their closeup, the camera flashed, the audience laughed, and the curtain fell. It was picture perfect.

For the finale, choreographer Jorma Uotinen took the audience to a land far, far away from Bournonville with his 2005 piece *Earth*. Quite fittingly for this piece, the recorded music of Finnish cello rock band Apocalyptica was used. Recognized for its orchestral transformation of rock music, songs such as Metallica's *The Unforgiven* from 1991 was played, along with other selections.

Like Vikings, 14 barefoot, bare-chested danseurs in red kilts by Erika Turunen commanded the red earth covered stage as the cello-driven music played. Invigorating at every turn, this fast-moving modern piece with forceful masculine kicks, drops, rolls and turns rocked. The crowning moment arrived about halfway through during the sudden increase in music tempo. Furiously fast flickering lights synchronizing with pounding heavy drum beats and electric guitar turned this quiet auditorium into a rave scene. Intensified dance moves followed until the music suddenly stopped and a penetrating dead silence pierced throughout. But that was momentary. Pulling viewers deeper into the moment, the fast metal music resumed and more red earth flew as it would on a battleground. For this crowd, it was a revelation. *Earth* reigned victorious on this royal evening and the standing ovation proved it.

Jasmine Rios

San Diego

New York-based powerhouse dance company **Complexions Contemporary Ballet** made quite a stir at the Birch North Park Theatre on May 7. Five years ago, one had to travel north of San Diego to see most touring dance companies. For decades it was the Hollywood Bowl, the Ford Theatre in West Hollywood, UCLA's Royce Hall and Santa Barbara's Lobero Theatre steering the way for a majority of dance productions. While each of these venues, along with the 25-year strong Segerstrom Auditorium in Costa Mesa, remain among Southern California's primary hubs for year-round dance, now San Diego fits among these majors.

Since 2008, La Jolla Music Society has been bringing some of the world's foremost dance companies to San Diego's doorstep. Venues have included the downtown Civic Theatre and the Birch North Park Theatre. Christopher Beach, president/artistic director of the society, is a chief advocate in further enlivening the local performing arts scene. He says, "When I first arrived in San Diego and saw that many of the major American and great international dance companies were not performing here, I knew we had to begin doing just that. But it was not until I met Danah Fayman that I knew we could. Her great success presenting the world's best companies emboldened me with the knowledge that there was clearly a dance audience in San Diego; it was just our job to find them. I think we have."

Over the last four years, the society has hosted such companies as Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, the José Limón Dance Company, Ballet Preljocaj, Pilobolus, Momix and Paul Taylor Dance Company. Most recently to come on the local

Rhoden has been called "a dancers' choreographer" — for his intuition in knowing what movements flatter and inspire his dancers. Richardson, also an active principal dancer with Complexions, is a Tony Award nominee for his work in the 1999 production of *Fosse* and an accomplished screen actor/dancer for films such as *Chicago*.

To showcase the company's broad choreographic range, the directors created a programme consisting of five, theme-based audience favourites from Rhoden's repertoire.

Seated comfortably mid-theatre at the near sold-out 8 p.m. performance, the lights went dim around a quarter after. A female voice overhead made the announcement: "Please be advised that hearing devices may not be needed during this performance." People laughed. Some braced themselves for a sudden sound burst — but that was to come later.

The programme began with the love-inspired neoclassical ballet from 2010, *Moon Over Jupiter*, featuring all 16 company dancers. To the recorded music of Rachmaninov, female dancers in sheer black leotards stood bare-legged and poised in a forward lunge with one foot en pointe. The men wearing only black briefs, were in a crouched position with their legs wrapped around their supporting arms. Slowly with the music, they extended their legs outward to form a V-shape, then contracted their legs back inward to their original position. Exuberant energy, superior technical skills and unequivocal precision was demonstrated by all. During this half-hour performance, every calculated movement was like geometry in motion — simply spellbinding.

Following the first intermission was Rhoden's 2006 piece, *Moody Booty Blues*.

Contemporary classical sounding at first, the music by Roy Buchanan soon transitioned into a slow, sexy bluesy kind of riff. Three danseurs in skin tight T-shirts and painted-on blue jeans commanded the stage with their sly, self-assured masculine movements.

Dressed pretty in purple with hair in ponytails, two female dancers with radiant smiles entered. Beautiful as they were, their presence seemed somewhat of an afterthought, as if they were added last minute just to show off a little pointe



scene, include the Joffrey Ballet, Trey McIntyre Project and Complexions Contemporary Ballet.

Co-founders Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson formed Complexions Contemporary Ballet in 1994, with clearcut objectives to establish an exemplary multicultural company devoted to dynamic innovative choreography and superior dance talent. Quite successfully — the two former principal dancers of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater — have lived up to this model.

work. Pointe taken — it was unnecessary; the audience seemed to agree during one of the dancer's fouetté turns. Beautiful execution — but — no applause; not a typical reaction from a seasoned dance audience, which this was. This piece was all about the men — letting them shine in all their glory.

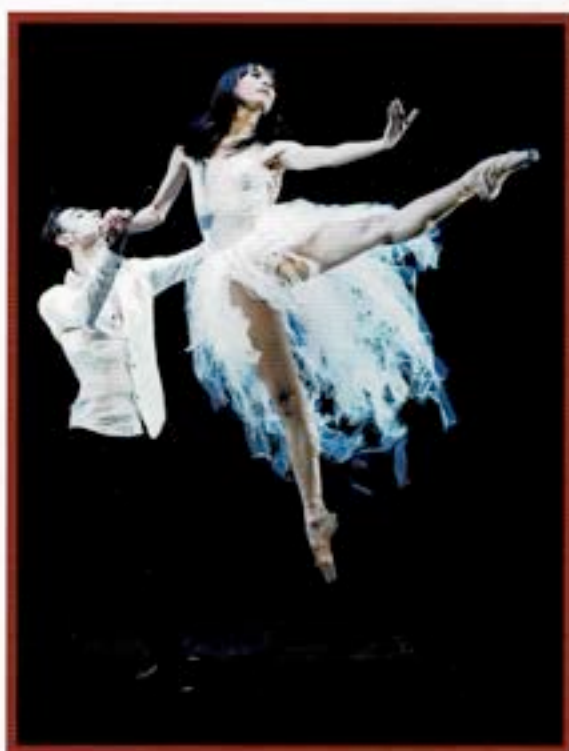
The third piece of the evening, an excerpt from *Moonlight* from 1991, was performed by co-artistic director Desmond Richardson, with music written by Dwight Rhoden. In this melancholy modern piece, Richardson danced soulfully in the spotlight with a red flower bouquet alongside a single chair. Particularly momentous was Richardson's flawless 180-degree penché arabesque in relevé; as he stood solid, holding this position for several seconds, he made this move look effortless. Deservedly, Richardson received a standing ovation for this dexterous and deeply heartfelt solo.

Rhoden's 2010 piece *On Holiday* — a tribute to the music of Billy Holiday and sung by Billy Porter — was performed by four couples portraying various stages of love. Women wore provocative solid-coloured dresses with ballroom dance shoes, while the danseurs, also dressed monochromatically to match their partners, wore pants with open shirts. The first couple in head-to-toe purple performed a fun flirty piece to the well-known tune *Come Rain or Come Shine*. Letting their hair down even further was a sexy performance given by the couple in electric blue. Scorching was the red-hot couple during its sassy, playful duet. And, in serious black, this passionate couple, dancing quite heatedly at times, demonstrated supreme control during their Apache dance-inspired moves.

A second intermission helped segue into the most anticipated piece of the evening — *Rise* — a full company signature work from 2008 with the music of U2. Setting this piece in motion was *Where the Streets Have No Name* from the 1987 Grammy Award winning album *The Joshua Tree*. With the help of spotlights, a basic black backdrop and a bit of cool smoke effects, the Birch North Park Theatre was quickly transformed into an intimate rock concert-like setting.

Audience enthusiasm was unprecedented. On this night, no one was in a hurry to leave or withdraw from their boisterous applause and ovation. Complexions came to San Diego to test the waters. And so they did — and swimmingly."

Jasmine Rios



Spain

Barcelona-based Ballet David Campos — Santa Coloma de Gramenet may be a small company populated by young, as of yet unknown, dancers, but it also happens to be one of Spain's few ballet companies and certainly the most innovative of the bunch. Campos' goal as a choreographer and director is to bring classical ballet into the 21st century. Ballet doesn't have to be elitist or antiquated, and for Campos that means that the classics have to be modernized. Changes to the music, choreography and even the storyline of timeless classical ballets are a small price to pay to create something fresh, unique and, most importantly, appealing to contemporary audiences.

His company's latest creation, *Giselle*, is probably the largest departure that Campos has made from the original score and storyline of any of the ballets that he has adapted. As the theatre darkens, the images of beautiful water nymphs are projected onto a scrim. A woman's voice recounts the story of the "ladies of the water," who are the dark souls of women who have been murdered by men. These supernatural beings exact their revenge on any men that they encounter, including those that wronged them. The theme is timely. It has only been a handful of years since Spain began speaking publicly and campaigning against domestic violence.

As the last projected wili flutters off the scrim, the lights go up on a disco, where dancers clad in red and black tutus or

black bondage pants gather to dance and drink. Snippets of Adolphe Adam's classical score are edited to include modern electronic mixes, which Campos has done in other ballets more effectively, likely because the different styles of music were used for different scenes rather than jumbled together in one long dance sequence.

At the disco, the audience is introduced to a nerdy, somewhat clumsy Giselle danced by Aileen Gallinera, who is very expressive, yet a bit rough technically. It's not long before a super suave Albrecht, played by ex-American Ballet Theatre soloist Jesus Pastor, walks into the club and chooses Giselle out of a throng of other possible conquests. It was Pastor's collaboration in Campos' phenom-

enally whimsical and beautifully choreographed *Sleeping Beauty of the Forest* that inspired the choreographer and director to create *Giselle*. Campos saw in Pastor the theatricality and style of movement that he was looking for to tackle his vision of Albrecht and tailor-made the production for this impressive and technically potent dancer.

Situating the ballet in modern times is the least of Campos' tweaks to this hallowed classic. The character of Hilarion has been completely removed, with Campos admitting that he saw no real use for him. Giselle's descent into madness didn't seem to convince Campos either, and it is an attack that she and Albrecht suffer at the hands of a couple of thugs that lead to her death. The world of Campos' wilis is more or less the same as in the original ballet, but far more menacing. Taking a cue from recent Japanese ghost films, the ladies of the water are dressed in white gowns with long black wigs that hide their faces. They are malignant yet elegant creatures, and some of the production's most beautiful and fluid choreographies are danced by the tremendously dramatic corps of female dancers.

It is easy to imagine staunch classicists having a writhing fit over this adaptation, but that doesn't seem to bother Campos, as there are more than enough ballets to cater to that type of limited audience. Campos' *Giselle* is thoroughly entertaining, and if maintaining a pace necessary to prevent monotony means cutting long scenes and updating the libretto, so be it.

Justine Bayod Espoz