Review: Joffrey Ballet

Friday, March 4, 2022 8 PM

Cal Performances: Zellerbach Auditorium

Celebration! to Excess

Jeremy Geffen, Director of Cal Performances welcomed the “masked" audience with the joyful news that the Joffrey Ballet had returned to the campus after two years away. The company, founded by Robert Joffrey and later directed by Gerald Arpino was based in New York. With sponsorship by various sources, the company moved to Chicago, which is now its home.

The dancers all move beautifully; they are technically excellent. The four large works on the program were long, complex and danced to “canned” music. Each was compelling in its own way, but this reviewer, (well trained in dance observation), found it too much.

“Birthday Variations” (1986) to music by Verdi, choreography by Arpino, began the evening.( I was told it was a tribute to a Joffrey Ballet sponsor who brought the company to Chicago.) Under a splendid chandelier and with spotlights, six women in pastel costumes, surround and are partnered by one man (Alberto Velazquez). There are six variations, a prologue, an opening, a pas de deux and the finale. Delightful!

After a pause, we are brought to “Swing Low” a 2021 work by Chanel DaSilva. Fernando Duarte is the solo figure; four men carrying large angel wings, surround and eventually ‘capture’ him, finally endowing him with wings. The scenario which may have its origins elsewhere, seems to concern emotional and physical transformation from mortal despair to angelic elevation. This reviewer worried about the feathers dropping on stage and the weight of the wings. “Swing Low” was dramatically moving.

More grand works followed Intermission. Joffrey ballet master Nicolas Blanc’s “*Under the Trees’ Voices*,” created during the pandemic, “channels the power of community in the age of social distancing.” Set under and around large leaf structures, three couples, a “corps” and a soloist (Christine Rocas) search and find contact and community in one another. Again, Blanc’s piece, to music by Ezio Bosso, demands long and attentive viewing by audience members.

Comic relief was finally performed with the ‘acrobatic’ and incredibly delightful “The Sofa,” choreography (and lighting design) by Itzik Galili to the music “Nobody” by Tom Waits. A large yellow sofa becomes the setting for acrobatic falls, slaps and tumbles. Three dancers, Valentinto Moneglia Zamora, Nicole Ciapponi and Fernando Duarte perform. During a short time, Ciapooni disappears behind the sofa and is replaced by Duarte. The surprises and skill of the performers came at just the right moment in this long evening of complex works.

“Bolero” to the familiar Ravel score has become a musical cliche for dance. Here, in the choreography by Yoshihisa Arai, a story line seems to emerge among the fifteen dancers. The soloist, Anais Bueno, costumed in a while shirt, holds center stage and seems totally concerned with self and unable to join the exotically costumed chorus.

Although the ‘bolero’ is defined as “a Spanish dance characterized by sharp turns, stamping of the feet and sudden pauses in position with one arm,” these characteristics are not seen as Bueno writhes in her dramatic isolation.

The audience, welcoming the Joffrey Ballet after the two year hiatus in schedule, nevertheless felt more than a bit overwhelmed with the programming excess. Dancers choreographers and program directors, so skilled and capable and eager to perform, might realize that the audience also needs time to return to be able to focus and applaud.

Joanna G. Harris

[bayareastringer.com](http://bayareastringer.com)

BeyoindIsadora.com