Review: San Francisco Ballet

Program 5: “The Fifth Season”: “Harmony”: Margrittomania”

Saturday, April 2, 2022 San Francisco Opera House

A DELIGHTFUL, ChALLEGING EVENT!

Program 5 of this season, celebrating the departure of director Helgi Tomasson, brought delightful levels of performance and choreography to the Opera House stage. Opening with “The Fifth Season”, a work Tomasson premiered in 2006, the evening continued with the director’s new work, “Harmony.” There are echoes of the earlier work in the latter; easy lyrical dance moves, pleasing, pleasant solos and duets in both and light costumes, primarily leotards, tights and simple ‘shifts’, which display the gorgeous bodies and the dancers lines.

“The Fifth Season bring almost all of the principles of the company into focus.

Dores André and Benjamin Freemantle lead off with an ensemble of eight. There follows ” Waltz by Yuan Yuan Tan, Sarah Van Patten, Tiit Helimets and Luke Ingham, all tightly skilled and thrilling to watch as the “Romance” by Dores André and Benjamin Freemantle. Some of the principles return to do “Tango”, (Sarah Van Patten Benjamin Freemantle, Tiit Helimets Luke Ingham), followed by a sultry “Largo” (Yuan Yuan Tan and Tiit Helimets). The finale “Bits” is danced by the entire ensemble. It is a joyful reminiscence of Tomasson’s former work and a lead in to this next, his final work.

The music for “The Fifth Season” “String Quartet No. 2”, Karl Jenkins, composer.

 “Harmony” (2022) was choreographed during the pandemic in 2020 when the dancers first returned to the studio. Tomasson decided to choreograph the work as a “celebration of dance and dancers…the result of that time in the studios-a hopeful look forward in an uncertain moment.”…”it’s more the emotion and feeling in the music that I’m going with.”

The dance is accompanied by Natal’ya Feygina on the piano.

There are several sections to “Harmony”: each is danced with corps members of the company except for Wona Park, Max Cauthorn, Misa Kuranaga and Angelo Greco,who are principles. To music by Jean Pjillipe Rameau, (1683-1764), we are entertained by classic forms: Gavotte; Entrée de Polimnie;L’Eygyptienne ;Tambourin; Musette en rondeau; Rigaudon; Les Sauvages; Les Cupis and Les Cyclops.

Kuranaga and Greco are outstanding performers but all the dancers were charming and seemingly delighted to perform this work. They were costumed again in light simple dance clothes by Emma Kingsbury, lighting by Jim French. Tomasson took a bow.

“Magrittomania” a work by former SFB dancer Yuri Passokhov (premiered March 30, 2000) provides a well-needed, delightful opportunity to laugh…certainly not at the dancers, but with them as they create various romps to selected pieces by Beethoven!, surrounded by decor images from the work of the Belgian surrealist, Rene Magritte.

The hats, clouds, chimneys and other visual. ‘quotes’ in the background provide the dancers with the opportunity to ‘play’ with the images and realize the humor. For example, Jennifer Stahl, dressed in red, dances a solo with one hand behind her back; in the pas de deux she wears a shroud. Luke Ingham loses, and finally regains the bowler hat so dominant in Magritte’s paintings; all the men wear bowlers while dancing. Max Cauthorn, Esteban Hernandez and Wei Wang also play important roles.There are nine excellent dancers with them. Follow the fast movement throughout.

Yuri Krasavin, composer has selected familiar Beethoven works and added some of his own contemporary music which includes”some Jewish folk melodies.” The whole presentation, including the decor (by Thyra Hartshorn) encourages laughter at recognition of the images (including green apples) but also the delightful playful dance energy of the soloists and group. Don’t leave before the last moment!

Program 5 of this 2022 season not only celebrates the tenure of Helgi Tomasson, but it has brought the company to a new level of choreographic, technical and dance presentation skill. For this reviewer, It is the best event so far. Bravo to all!

Ming Luke was the conductor for the Beethoven/Krasavin score

Program 5 continues April 5, 8,13,14, and 15; evening performances. Do go for the fun!

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Review: SF Ballet Program 6

April 6, 2 2022 7:30 PM

SF Opera House

Tributes to Tomasson

Program 6, the next to last for the 2022 season and the final for director Helgi Tomasson, was primarily dedicated to him, presenting a revival of his work, (2000)

and two by choreographers of his choice well known to SFB audiences.

“Prism” to Beethoven’s “Piano Concerto No.1” involves three sections, each providing the enthusiastic SFB audience to see soloists, duets and a trio in action. Section 1 was danced by principles Max Cauthorn, Shah de Sola and Lonnie Weeks. The movement flowed lyrically among the three; a small chorus echoed their movements. Section 2 was graced by Yuan Yuan Tan and Tiit Helmets as a glorious ‘pas de duet”. Tan, a soloist for many years with SFB, showed a dramatic maturity and skill wonderfully realized. This reviewer especially noted her arms, back and general projection which, with tall Helmets support, achieved superb technical and dynamic expression. The final section, 3, is dominated by Julian Mackay who seems to challenge the entire ensemble into action. “Prism” is a lively work, an opportunity to see earlier Tomasson choreography originally done at his former dance home, the NYCity Ballet.

“Finale Finale” to the delightful “Le Boeuf sur le Toit, Op. 58, music by Darius Milhaud, was the hit of the evening. It resonants with images of ‘Commedia del Arte”, those lively actors of earlier centuries whose playing is the basis of theater comedy today.

In delightful spotted and patched costumes, (by Reid Bartelme and Harriet Jung), the dancers were light hearted, their movements full of physical ‘jokes” (wiggles, bumps, etc.) Choreographer Christopher Wheeldon says, “…I wanted a piece that felt celebratory and captured a light spirit…”. He accomplished his wish. “Finale Finale” includes (as Milhaud notes), “popular tunes, maxis, sambas and even a Portuguese fado.” Today’s audiences may not recognize those dance rhythms, but the dancers played and romped with the rhythms, giving us great pleasure iwith their skill, humor and beats. The seven dancers are: Doris André, Joseph Walsh, Isabel Devivo,Benjamin Freemantle, Cavan Conley, Elizabeth Powell and Esteban Hernandez. Bravo all!

“The Promised Land”, a new work by choreographer Dwight Rhoden whose work had been seen previously in SFB’s Unbound Festival. Rhoden has assembled various music piece by Rodrigo Sigal, Luke Howard, Philip Glass, Kirill Richter and Hans Zimmer. The work is also a collection of short dance pieces, dancers constantly entering and leaving the stage. Led by Esteban Hernandez, “The Promised Land” has six sections, all moving very fast. The men dominate each section; there are many lifts, tosses and almost acrobatic work for the duets and complex floor work for the men and ensembles. Performers include: Frances Chung, Angelo Greco, Wanting Zhao, Benjamin Freemantle, Joseph Walsh, Isabella Devivo, Sasha de Sola and Wei Wong with eight others joining them in the frantic event. For this reviewer, lively as it all was, the lights were focussed directly at the audience, the constant change of stage events and the curious, but uncertain dramatic intentions of the soloist, Esteban Hernandez, made “The Promised Land” less than satisfactory. It is a complex work with remarkable technical feats throughout the choreography, but as a closing work on a complex program, it did not leave the audience content, although most cheered.

Program 6 will be repeated through April 12. Check with [SFBallet.org](http://SFBallet.org) for dates and times. Audiences are looking forward to the classic “Swan Lake” which will end the season.

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