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From Memphis to Arizona to Seattle, Navigating Dreams and Blues

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WASHINGTON — The questions often arise: “What is American about American ballet? What is peculiar to American ballet?” They arose formally at the [Kennedy Center Opera House](#) on Thursday evening in a post-performance discussion after [Ballet Memphis](#), [Ballet Arizona](#) and [Pacific Northwest Ballet](#) each presented a ballet as part of the Ballet Across America season.

[Peter Boal](#), artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet, could not attend because of an injury, but Dorothy Gunther Pugh and Ib Andersen, artistic directors of the Memphis and Arizona companies, both spoke, admirably. Coming from different backgrounds, they were complementary.

Ms. Pugh, who spoke modestly and objectively, concentrated on the Memphis musical traditions from which she was drawing. While acknowledging ballet’s European origins, she declined to make any sweeping statements about the characteristics of American ballet. But she encouraged Mr. Andersen, who was trained in Denmark and starred in New York before running the Arizona company, to speak on the subject.

One of his points was how technical standards in ballet have risen around the country since the 1980s, when he began to make guest appearances with various companies around America because few companies had stars of particular strength. Another was simply that whereas in Europe companies have budgets and government support and can present works with handsome scenery and costumes, “In America they can’t afford anything.” In consequence, he said, European ballet tends to be about several aspects of theatrical production.

But in America, he said, “It’s all about choreography,” He quickly added: “I don’t mind that. I think it’s nice to see dancing.”

I do too. The evening’s three ballets — “In Dreams” (2007) by Trey McIntyre, “Divisions” (2010) by Mr. Andersen and “3 Movements” (2008) by Benjamin Millepied — were indeed all about choreography, at a high level of accomplishment. Since New York has seen relatively little work by Mr. McIntyre and less by Mr. Andersen, it was particularly good to have this opportunity to watch their contrasting offerings.

“In Dreams” is set to Roy Orbison songs. Since Orbison recorded his first album in Memphis, he is part of the musical tradition that Ms. Pugh hopes to tap for her company. Calling him “the

[Plácido Domingo](#) of country music,” she likened his singing to “the sound of the human heart breaking.”

Part of the interest of Mr. McIntyre’s work is that it catches fragments of that heartbreak while never trying to illustrate the songs’ words literally. The lyrics say one thing, the dance says another, but they stay in close connection both in mood and in details of phrasing. And so he negotiates the difficulty of choreographing to music so generally appealing that it might easily overwhelm most dances.

Though “In Dreams” makes its dancers look good, it’s not concerned with technical skill. It starts with, and often returns to, a striking formation whereby its five dancers travel, softly and close together, around the stage: this has a dreamlike quality. Then the way one or more dancers separate themselves from the group makes them seem characters in (or dreamers of) the dream. Even when they’re looking out front, they appear to be sightless.

A passage of footwork may suddenly tie in to a figure in the musical accompaniment, a sudden lift may catch a salient note in Orbison’s singing, a dancer may arch back on a closing chord, but much of the choreography floats around the music. In solos, duets and trios, different images of need emerge; but even though the duets are intense, it’s as if they’re happening in the traumatized unconscious. “In Dreams” — which I imagine would make more impact in a smaller theater — is distinctive, touching, and ambiguous.