

The Washington Post

Dance review

Southern dancers step up at Kennedy Center's 'Ballet Across America'

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Saturday, June 19, 2010

There's a Southern thing going on at the Kennedy Center's [Ballet Across America](#) series this week. It's a fascinating thing, too. Following the success of North Carolina Dance Theatre's bluegrass romp on the [opening-night program](#), Ballet Memphis told us something quieter, more troubling but just as vibrantly alive with Trey McIntyre's "In Dreams," performed Thursday night at the Opera House.

"In Dreams," choreographed in 2007, is a small work: two men and three women dressed in black, a tribute to Roy Orbison, to whose songs they dance. The lighting is low and intimate, as in some nighttime haunt. The dancing is clear, expansive and uncluttered. Orbison's magnificent voice fills in the rest of the picture, flooding the stage, washing over the seats with his distinctive emotional fullness. It delivers the potent surprise that North Carolina's pairing of bluegrass and ballet did. Orbison and ballet: Who'd have imagined that one could refresh the other, and both would emerge tinged with even deeper feeling?

McIntyre distorts ballet steps for emotional effect, substituting broken angles and flat feet where you expect long lines, but he preserves a silky, stylized elegance, even in the sudden collapses and shudders. There was an especially poignant duet to "Crying," danced by Steven McMahan and Jane Rehm, where falling backward was the silent response to Orbison's anguish. Rehm melts into McMahan's arms as if her bones had dissolved; later, when McMahan throws himself backward into empty space, it's as if an undertow has seized him.

The two other works on the program were large-scale and more traditional: Ballet Arizona performed Artistic Director Ib Andersen's "Diversions," accompanied by Benjamin Britten's Diversions for Piano (Left Hand) and Orchestra, Op. 21. "Diversions," which premiered in March, is a piece for 20 dancers that hewed closely to the musical contours. (Why left hand? Because Britten wrote it for a pianist who'd lost his right one in World War I. And that, right there, is the warmest human thing about it.)

Pacific Northwest Ballet closed with "3 Movements," Benjamin Millepied's 2008 work for 16 dancers, which uses Steve Reich's Three Movements for Orchestra. No surprises here: Though the musical scores are vastly different, the choices don't diverge from ballet norms, nor did the choreography.

The pronounced detachment of Andersen's dancers, as well as his steps, brought to mind diluted Balanchine with a bit of Jerome Robbins tossed in. (Not surprising, given Andersen's dance career with New York City Ballet.) This was a straightforward response of visual patterns to the music, and if you love the Britten, it may have been satisfying. I found it less so.

Millepied's piece was as relentless as Andersen's was measured. With half the cast and every other step removed, there might be a ballet there. There was certainly energy and drive, the kind of scattered eagerness of interns on Capitol Hill, which is what the dancers resembled -- the women in tidy summer shifts, the men in belted trousers and ties.

Both works missed an opportunity to leave a lasting mark in this regional showcase, where, after all, we'll have seen nine troupes by the time it concludes on Sunday. Where "Divisions" and "3 Movements" were designed to impress, and showed off the technical strengths of each company, they didn't speak to what's unique about themselves and where they come from. "In Dreams" did.

Particularly now, Memphians are living the ragged emotions to which Orbison gave voice. Ballet may be an art of refinement and privilege, but it exists in the everyday, and one can't help but make connections between stage and reality. For me, the connection between "In Dreams" and life fused into a single line of understanding -- Tennessee, struggling in the recession; the deep South, devastated by the BP disaster in the gulf. The ache and darkness Ballet Memphis put onstage was more than a dance, it was an echo of human experience.