



Ballet Memphis at The Joyce - A Glimpse of Graceland

by Ilona Wall
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Ballet Memphis offered a respectable program of commissioned works at their Joyce debut on April 3. The company is now in their 20th season and certainly has grounds to celebrate what they've become. With a varied program and capable dancers, they brought a mixture of tenacity and dignity to their opening night performance.

The evening began on a neo-classical with the challenging Trey McIntyre piece "The Naughty Boy!" set to the Mozart Violin Concerto in G. Brisk and clean cut, the ballet followed Cupid through her musings as she intertwined with four couples. Clever use of a single black drape, streamers representing Cupid's effective arrows, and costumes, combined to create a whimsical piece that was not a complete narrative, but suggestive enough to capture and hold one's attention. Kirsty Munn and Liz Prince designed costumes that draped the couples in ballet garb reminiscent of togas while Cupid, perkily danced by Dawn Fay, pranced around in a red-orange plaid jacket. Most enjoyable in "The Naughty Boy!," however, was its execution as all the dancers seemed in on the joke, constantly delighting in the tongue and cheek moments as well as the sweeping movement where dance soared above and conquered the need for narrative. The music was fast, and petite allegro (small quick jumps and footwork) dominated the movement quality. The dancers kept up, for the most part, with refreshing clarity and without losing the piece's humorous intent. The central pas de deux was particularly well-danced by Travis Bradley and the liquid and gracious Crystal Brothers. McIntyre's movement was sweeping and musical but contained moments of pause to allow particular instants to register. That accomplished, the movement changed direction completely, often including surprising moments of flexed feet, brief floor work, or turned in legs. Cupid even danced a jig or two. Some of these eye catching moments were more successful than others, but the dancers looked grounded and confident, and the piece was a pleasure to watch.

Julia Adam's "A Curtain of Green" was the middle piece in the three part opening night program. Completely opposite in mood from "The Naughty Boy!," Adam's work, inspired by a Eudora Welty story, was bleak, stark, and tense. The curtain opened on Dawn Fay sitting in a chair facing the back corner of the stage. As the sparse piano music began, she remained seated and gestured simply in time with the piano. Like the music by Philip Glass, the movement was short, sharp, and repetitive. A man in a suit, Steven McMahon, entered and danced in his own pool of light. Soon the two interacted without making eye contact, until McMahon ultimately ended face down on the floor. Fay

returned to her chair, but her gestures now had a purpose. Even as she changed the angle of her chair, Fay's looks and arm movements referred to his body, and the stark lighting and sparse movement were given a context. In the second section of the piece, the couple was joined by Kendall Bitt, Jr. As the three interacted they seemed to move through each other each in their own circle of torment, but they remained connected as Fay picked up elements of the other's movements. Although when the curtain fell the air was filled with the nagging sensation that some crucial element was missing, "A Curtain of Green" was nonetheless choreographically well conceived and certainly well executed, particularly by Fay, whose precision and musicality are absolutely essential to a role like this.

The evening closed with "Mercurial Balance," choreographed by Thaddeus Davis. The dancers were joined by two "poets," J'malo Torriel and Ed Brittenum whose spoken poetry overlapped with the predominantly hip-hop based music, and sometimes with each other. The poetry dealt with the nature of love and relationships, unfortunately from an unsophisticated masculine perspective. Although the piece was probably intended as a high energy crowd-pleaser, it was a pity to end the program with a work that was not as well crafted as the first two, especially as the movement was not a strongpoint for the majority of its dancers. The steps drew from eighties hip-hop moves right down to moments that looked shockingly like the "roger rabbit" and the "running man," but the meticulous symmetry didn't work with the style of the movement. There were highlights, however, and the dancers admirably gave it their all from start to finish, though some of the humor from "The Naughty Boy!" would have been a welcome addition to Davis's piece. In fact, it speaks highly of the performance that such a high standard was set at the beginning of the evening. Although that triumph was not all encompassing, this performance was an impressive start at the Joyce, and one hopes that Ballet Memphis will be welcomed back. The company has the makings of something lovely, and hopefully New York audiences will be able to watch as this company continues to bloom. Let this be one happy thought for Spring in New York.