

AUDC's Season Finale at The Playhouse

All through Thursday evening's premiere program of Arts Umbrella Dance Company's Season Finale at the Vancouver Playhouse AUDC Artistic Director Artemis Gordon sat in the back row of the orchestra section in tight conclave with Ballet BC Artistic Director Emily Molnar. This of course makes sense given the close ties between the two organizations, with AUDC pre-professional program now officially serving as the training/feeder school for Ballet BC's apprentice program. Still, what was most interesting to me last night was to see how Molnar's programming choices and her determination to position Ballet BC aesthetically as a *contemporary* ballet company have clearly had a reciprocal influence on Gordon's repertory choices for this year's AUDC spring graduation program.

How else to explain Ballet BC Resident Choreographer Cayetano Soto leading off the evening with his *PAU CLARIS*, which puts the male and female members of AUDC's Senior Company in matching black jockey shorts and has them wag their fingers and thrust their hips cheekily to the strains of a Bach concerto? Or, following the second intermission (and continuing the Bach theme), the excerpts from Simone Orlando's *Doppeling*, first performed by Ballet BC in 2009, and which also features a pan-company costuming conceit in the dancers' matching bobbed wigs? Orlando's deconstructive approach to the gendered dimensions of classical ballet is echoed in the excerpts from Marie Chouinard's *bODY_reMIX/the GOLDBERG vARIATIONS* that were performed following the first intermission. Gordon didn't send the women dancers out on stage topless, as Chouinard did in her original staging of the piece; nevertheless, judging by some of the reactions around me it was clear that the iconoclastic Montreal choreographer's approach to point shoes in this piece came as a bit of a shock to some of the ballet moms and dads in the audience. Indeed, in so far as classical steps were part of this mixed bill, they mostly came in the two pieces performed by the apprentice company: Andrew Bartee's *Ballet Dance #6* and Monique Proença's *Alone in the bright lights of a shattered life*.

It wasn't an all Bach evening last night. Aszure Barton's *BUSK* is set to a pounding Israeli folk-rock score and featured relentlessly physical hip-hop inspired choreography, as well as an amazing concluding solo for stand-out dancer Zander Constant, whose incredibly fluid torso and long arm reach combined to breathtaking effect at several points. The fact that Barton's piece reminded me a bit of the work of Hofesh Schechter and Ohad Naharin is notable given that another Israeli choreographer, Sharon Eyal, is included in the Friday and Saturday programming. That incredible get no doubt had much to do with Molnar's inclusion of Eyal's *Bill* on Ballet BC's season-ending Program 3 earlier this month.

I also very much enjoyed the senior dancers in James Kudelka's salsa-drenched (and self-reflexively titled) *choreography*, David Raymond's gothic *Murmuration*, and excerpts from Crystal Pite's *Emergence*, which notably focused on that piece's solo studies and duets rather than its large group unison sections--and, in so doing, allowed one to see Pite's remarkable attention to detail in, for example, a dancer's arachnid-like spread of her arms behind her bent back. Likely the choice of excerpts from *Emergence* had something to do with Pite's concluding contribution to Season Finale,

The Paris Sessions, which together with Lesley Telford's *Only who is left*, was the highlight of the evening for me.

Continuing the method she employed with her award-winning *Polaris*, which she workshopped with Arts Umbrella, Modus Operandi and SFU student dancers before taking the piece to Sadler's Wells, Pite has been working with AUDC's Senior Company on studies for a commission from the Paris Opera Ballet. And judging from what we saw last night, this new work will also continue *Polaris*' experiments with scale, using upwards of forty dancers to redefine what group dancing looks like on stage. In Pite's hands, individual bodies don't blur into invisibility through homogenous unison; instead, they become part of a collective bodily unit, each contributing through precise spatial massings and intricately timed sequential micro-movements and ripples, tableaux and shapes that are visually arresting. Last night I saw a tidal wave, a whale spine, and so much more. And all, again like *Polaris*, undertaken with incredible sensitivity to the music--in this case a version of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (by Max Richter) unlike any I've heard.

Telford also knows how to mass dancers' bodies on stage. But if Pite's work here is about harmonious flow, Telford leans (quite literally) toward the off-axis. In *Only who is left*, she sends her dancers out in matching shimmery shifts and has them strut and preen and pose in a horizontal line like so many Atlases come to life from a Greek frieze. Later she'll clump the dancers together and have them jerk and stutter step their heels noisily into the floor as they move as a unit across the stage, the thoroughly ungraceful and off-beat movements providing a compelling counter-image to how dancers are expected to move and sound. The corralling or herding of bodies in Telford's work is compounded even further by the fact that at one point Constant appears with a bull horn; he mostly just whistles into it whimsically. But the device's appearance, especially when read alongside the epigraph Telford includes in the program, reminds one that as is so often the case these days when bodies gather together in public--and often in protest--there is almost always someone who wants to disperse them.

For now, however, let's just celebrate the fact that Telford and Pite have both decided to make Vancouver their dance homes, and that these two talented home-grown choreographers are sharing their gifts with the city's next generation of dancers.

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