

Review: Tulsa Ballet performances combine artistry, athleticism

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Consider Tulsa Ballet's first mixed-bill program of the 2013-2014 season as a prime example of how eloquent a wordless art form can be.

Of course ballet can tell a story - that's one of the prime elements of classical ballet from the beginning. But even dances that have no conventional narrative are often able to touch the heart and trouble the mind as directly and as effectively as any other art form.

The company presented three works, two of which are familiar to local audiences, the third an Oklahoma premiere.

The new piece is Jorma Elo's "One/End/One," set to the Violin Concerto No. 4 by Mozart. Like other works by Elo that I've seen, it is very fast, very tricky classical ballet steps and combinations presented at warp speed, and interspersed with quirky bits of impish humor.

In a way, the piece is kind of a homage and a satire of neo-classical ballet. The formality, the tightly controlled grace that one sees in ballets by people such as Balanchine is, in Elo's work, upended by goofy gestures, movements that look for a moment as if the dancers are trying to imitate pigeons as they walk, mimed slaps and elbows to the ribs.

And yet, this is an athletically demanding ballet - the speed at which the dancers must execute this densely packed choreography is wicked. And the centerpiece pas de deux, danced Friday night by Youhee Son and Joshua A. Stayton, was less a romantic interlude as it was a demonstration of trust and strength, with its intricate, unusual lifts and the pretzel-like shapes into which the partners would contort themselves. In all, it was quite exhilarating to watch, and something I'd like to see Tulsa Ballet do again soon.

Which is what Tulsa Ballet did with Adam Hougland's "The Rite of Spring," which the company first performed at the start of last season. This weekend's encore performance is in honor of the 100th anniversary of the ballet's original premiere, which caused something of a riot when audiences were confronted by Igor Stravinsky's dissonant, percussive score and Vaslav Nijinsky's unusual choreography.

Hougland uses Stravinsky's score, and his choreography shares one quality with the original, in that the force of the movement is downward (as opposed to classical

ballet's upward emphasis). But the rest of the piece is quite original, and retains its visceral power. This is the third time I've seen this work performed, and it remains as powerful as ever.

Set in a stark, industrial place of brick pillars and pipes, "Rite of Spring" plays out as an Orwellian nightmare - images of madness and repression, of forced conformity, of existential despair, out of which one is chosen to meet a grim fate.

It's more akin to "The Lottery" than Nijinsky's pagan ritual: The Chosen One (Son, with Beatrice Sebelin taking the role on Saturday) is chosen almost at random, because of a slight step out of line.

Son, in her debut in this role, is excellent. At first glance she looks tiny, delicate, easily broken; yet she invests the character's final moments with ferocious energy and passion.

Paul Taylor's "Company B" might appear to be the odd-man-out in this trio - a ballet set to songs recorded by the Andrews Sisters, that incorporates elements of the jazz and swing dance styles popular in the World War II era.

But it's a much darker piece, as the joyous jitterbugging is punctuated by images of war and death - nothing graphic, but undeniable - that makes the gaiety of the songs and the dances more frenetic. In that way, it shares something in common with "Rite of Spring" - both are pieces about people dancing as if their lives and sanity depended on it.

On the surface, however, "Company B" can be enjoyed simply as a raucous celebration of Taylor's distinctly American, muscular style of ballet.

Jiyan Dai tore through the solo in "Tico-Tico" with great skill, while Johnathan Ramirez Mejia combined comedy and physical daring in the "Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny Oh" number. Shu Kinouchi barrelled through "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" with a devil-may-care attitude, while Sebelin was very good in the sadly romantic "I Can Dream, Can't I?" Erin Pritchard toyed with a willing ensemble of admirers in "Rum and Coca-Cola," and Tulsa Ballet II member Jennifer Grace and senior soloist Ovidu Iancu brought real poignancy to the duet "There Will Never Be Another You."



Hyonjun Rhee (right) and Youhee Son rehearse, at the Tulsa Ballet, on Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2013. CORY YOUNG/Tulsa World