



Staten Island Advance

Staten Island Ballet presents sunny romp

Rain forced Sunday's dance festival indoors at CSI, but it didn't dampen spirits

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No aspect of the battle of the sexes escaped exposure in the Staten Island Ballet's International New York Choreographers Festival this past weekend.

It's a timeless, irresistible theme, whether it is explored in classical toe-shoe-and-tutu-ballet or modern dance.

On Sunday night, the short, sunny romp ("Sheep Meadow") that opened the program nodded in two directions simultaneously, at the history of pastoral dances, and at stage and film choreographer Agnes DeMille, who once produced a comparable picnic scenario.

There was a promising work-in-progress called "Danse De Sol," plus a short musical insertion by composer/guitarist Ben Sher, a student debut and guest artists from two companies -- American Ballet Theater (ABT) and DanzeAiza, the modern company founded by Gabri Christa.

All this fit into a 100-minute program that went pretty well, although some pieces had more polish than others. Last week's monsoon caused an eleventh-hour venue switch, from the plaza of the Center for the Arts at the College of Staten Island to the Concert Hall indoors.

Aaron Nichols's "Sheep Meadow" opened the program with lighthearted intentions. The would-be Romeo of the piece is dumped finally, by all of the girls previously interested in him.

The mood darkened with Gabri Christa's "Oblivion," danced by Alysia Ramos and Nathan Trice, a well-matched pair of compact and powerful performers.

Christa kept them pasted together in a cycle of clasping and unclasping, entwining and disengaging. These people, like many of us, have a complicated relationship; watching them put it together only to pull it apart was mesmerizing.

Some of the evening's most fervent applause came when the tiny Ramos picked up the sturdy Trice and carried him off, reversing the standard roles. The score -- an electronic backdrop with a Pharoah Saunders solo line -- was done by Will Calhoun, a colleague of Christa's husband, guitarist Vernon Reid.

Pairings demanded the most attention throughout the program, although no female broke the roles so blithely as Ramos. Abril Anchondo and Royce Zachary were the sinuous protagonists of Frank Robert Johnson's "Encadenados" ("Chained").

ABT dancers Vitali Krauchenka and Anna Liceica were paired "Danse de Sol," performed to a well-heated Latin score by Ben Sher with choreography by company ballet master Benjamin Briones.

It was a lush, formal duet for the ABT guests, set within a piece that included dancers Jacqui Dean, Laura DiOrio, Kate Loh, Megan Philipp and Ursula Verduzco. The piece, which is still in formation, is shaping up nicely.

Sher has collaborated with SIB previously. But this time he nearly brought down the house with two intricate Latin guitar works -- a piece from the score of the film "Black Orpheus" and "Chico, Chico," the Carmen Miranda hit.

Although she doesn't make a big deal out of it, company founder Ellen Rubich Tharp takes pains to forge local collaborations. Both Sher and Christa are North Shore residents.

Tharp contributed a colorful harem ballet, simply called "Women," to the evening. She also choreographed a short pas de deux for two students, 12-year-old Taylor Amari and 15-year-old Matthew Mendelson, who danced it with great care.

Faithfulness -- on some level or other -- had the last word of the evening in a neo-classical piece called "I Will Always Love You," also by Benjamin Briones.

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