

The Future of Ballet: It's a Complicated Beast with Many Heads

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Hallelujah Junction. Photo credit: Paul Kolnik

If the 19th century spawned lavish story ballets about ethereal creatures and tragic love, and the 20th century stripped away artifice in favor of sleek lines and formal patterns, then what can ballet expect from the 21st century?

New York City Ballet offers its take in *21st Century Movement*, a quadruple bill of contemporary ballets that is part of the company's winter season at Lincoln Center. On the program are works by Finnish choreographer Jorma Elo, NYCB artistic director Peter Martins, former NYCB dancer Melissa Barak, and former NYCB resident choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, who formed his own company, the much-talked-about Morphoses, in 2007.

If this program's mixed bag tells us anything, it's that attempting to categorize movement is often a futile endeavor — not that that stops us from trying. In fact, "contemporary ballet" is a particularly contentious label these days: Is it a blend of modern and ballet? Could it be hip-hop performed in pointe shoes? Does cross-breeding ballet with other genres necessarily dilute the form, or read as a critique of it?

Most seem to agree that contemporary ballet borrows heavily from modern dance forms but is nonetheless rooted firmly in a classical vocabulary. Of course, that still leaves a lot of room for individual interpretation. So it should come as no surprise that a couple of pieces on NYCB's program, which was touted as a roundup of "some of today's most contemporary choreography," didn't jibe with our idea of contemporary ballet.

One of these, Martins' *Hallelujah Junction* (2001), felt more like neoclassical Balanchine, with its shifting geometric formations and dancers clad in simple black and white. This isn't a bad thing by any means; it just seemed to reference an established tradition rather than imagine something new.

Barak, the youngest choreographer on the program, took old-school to the extreme with her new ballet, *A Simple Symphony*, which had its world premiere Tuesday night. Surprised laughs could be heard in the audience when the curtain went up to reveal dancers decked out in full ballerina regalia, from the pink tutus with satin bodices to the rhinestones glittering in their hair. We were half expecting them to tear off the tutus and launch into an ironic comment on traditional ballet, but no — this was traditional ballet, complete with a royal court-like hierarchy of corps, soloists and principals.

As critic Deborah Jowitt notes in a thoughtful essay included in the Playbill, it's probably far too early to tell what might eventually be considered emblematic of ballet in this century. But the two choreographers whose works bookended Tuesday night's program are undoubtedly destined to make their mark on it. Elo's frenetic yet fluid *Slice to Sharp* kicked off the evening and was the clear audience favorite. And Wheeldon's *Mercurial Manoeuvres*, which somehow manages to be both dreamlike and vaguely military, also captivated the crowd.

Elo's style in particular conjures a futuristic feeling. His dances feel like they're taking place in some dark, post-apocalyptic world, where humans are partly mechanical and capable of impossibly high-tech movements. Elo's choreography is constantly deconstructing the body with undulations, jerks and twitches, then piecing it back together in pristine classical shapes. His partnering is intricate and quirky – a lifted knee nudges another dancer's elbow to initiate a movement, or a woman in arabesque grasps her partner's head for support. In another section, a woman is spun like a compass, her outstretched leg inscribing an arc on the stage.

The lighting was very dim, the costumes were unadorned and there was no storyline. And yet the piece didn't seem to lack feeling. The absence of extraneous elements leaves our minds free to focus on the movements, whose rapid-fire stream of information is more than we can possibly absorb in a single viewing.

While the *New York Times* sniffed that Elo's work was "trying the hardest to look modern," we simply think he is the one choreographer in the bunch who delivered something truly distinctive and forward-thinking. And if his work feels a bit dark and scary and strange, well, that's pretty much in line with how this century has started off. (Lauri Stallings, whose wonderfully odd citizen premiered during American Ballet Theatre's fall 2008 City Center season, is another choreographer working in this vein.)

In the meantime, purists shouldn't worry that contemporary ballet will stray too far from its classical roots, because the kind of virtuosic dancing that contemporary choreographers like Elo demand simply isn't possible without strong classical technique. Moving forward with ballet isn't about destroying tradition but building on it in order to allow it to say something new.

NYCB's final three performances of *21st Century Movement* will take place February 26 and 28. In the meantime, those seeking a contemporary fix should definitely check out Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, which is at The Joyce Theater through Sunday. Elo is on the program, as well as works by contemporary ballet godfather William Forsythe, Helen Pickett and Itzik Galili.

Christopher Wheeldon Jorma Elo New York City Ballet Peter Martins