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BalletX's fall series, running through Sunday, debuted last night at the Wilma Theatre

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BalletX's fall series debuted last night at the Wilma Theatre with three world premieres from three distinct voices in the choreographic world: Adam Barruch's "If The Heart Runs," Gabrielle Lamb's "Heedful Needful," and Matthew Neenan's "There I Was." Neenan's the co-founder and Co-Artistic Director of BalletX, now in its seventh season, but Barruch and Lamb could be considered guest choreographers for this season and their work was especially brilliant last night.

Broken up into a two-piece pre-intermission first act, Barruch's "If The Heart Runs" and Lamb's "Heedful Needful" were stunningly visual, emotionally heavy but not ostentatiously dramatic, and executed flawlessly, both by the dancers and from a production standpoint. There wasn't a ton of continuity throughout the night — there was not a significant thematic or aesthetic overarching narrative from curtain to curtain. But the first act gave the audience the strongest and clearest sense of what the choreographers were attempting to communicate.

In "If The Heart Runs," the full company was employed, and the lighting by Drew Billiau and costuming by Reid Bartelme perfectly complemented the company's ten stellar performers. Barruch's statement of intent is simple, to the point, and an effective tool for an audience to pull out of the performance all that it can:

"If the heart run" explores the interior landscapes of interpersonal relationship and the dichotomous natures of humanity: from the primal sensuality of our origins, to the profusion of thought which disconnects us from the source."

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The entirety of that quote may get a little esoteric, but what's not is the palpable dynamic between dancers in this introduction to the fall season. The dancers interact with great sensual intrigue; pulling, touching, holding and handling each other with extraordinary attention paid to a relationship's elements of emotion, power, conflict and comfort. Some lifts and spins feel as if they'd fit right into an honest-to-goodness domestic dispute – we wouldn't go so far as to say the piece addresses legitimate violence, but there is often, in relationships and in life, those

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times when emotional energy elevates to a point where the execution of restraint and control are paramount. The act's excellent costuming put the dancers in garments that reflect minimalism and function. They looked like a combination of scrubs, karate uniforms, active wear and formal suiting. Their colors, ranging from greys and blacks to purples and burgundies, drew an appropriate allusion to bruising, battered skin, bones and blood. Formulating an actualized narrative or story from the dancing doesn't feel necessary, but the outstanding execution drew attention to the dramatized notions of love and lust within interpersonal dynamics. Extra attention is paid to the struggle to maintain an identity in a couple, especially when notions of desire, dependence, resentment and jealousy come into play.

Lamb's use of Phillip Glass was excellent. Using "Etude #6" and "Orphee's Return" by the iconic ambient and minimalist electronic noise artist, and Colleen's "In the Train with No Light," "Your Heart is So Loud," "Happiness Nuggets," and "Carry Cot," the glitchy, eerie soundtrack was perfect bedding for Lamb's exploration of connect and disconnect within families. Bartelme's costuming didn't feel as inspired as it did in "If The Heart Runs," but Billiau's lighting continued to awe. The sets for the first act were minimal to zero, all we focus on is the dancer's movements, their expression, and their appearance. And when the stage's matte grey floors were bathed in lights, often in beautiful sepias and families of red with the assistance of just the right amount of fog, a stark and stunning visual was created that allows the eyes to settle nicely on the performances. Only six dancers were used in this piece, which worked, because the tongue-in-cheek notion of a family portrait was toyed with a handful of times in the piece. Lamb, in written form, addresses a newfound interest in genealogy and seeking power in the future grounded by knowledge of the past. As Lamb wrote:



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"I began to imagine that I contained all these hundreds of people inside myself (as, in a sense, I do). If each of us embodies the forgotten multitudes whose combined DNA we carry, then a simple conversation between two people becomes a complex congregation of millions. No wonder it is difficult to make oneself understood."



Or, to take that a little further, it's no wonder it's so hard to make a connection with our family, or even our lovers and friends. The sense of isolation and confusion, both when a part of and outside of a family, was expertly expressed in Lamb's choreography through one primarily lost and confused dancer and a five-piece family that sought to include and exclude her throughout the act.

Unfortunately, the gripping power of the first two acts was a little lost after the intermission. One of the company's dancers also performed with a guitar in this, the final act of the night. The costumes were the dancers' own (street clothes), and every company member was present while Colby Damon's original acoustic compositions floated and directed the dancers' seemingly improvised choreography. The proof of the piece's slight disconnect between controlled movement and music-propelled improvisation lies within the choreographer's own words:

"I began choreographing with no initial concept, basing the progression of the piece mostly on the dancer's chemistry and testing out a fairly diverse and random set of music choices."

The final act did eventually use two established recordings: Devendra Banhart's "Dogs They Make up The Dark" and Tom Waits' "Road to Peace." Unfortunately for me, while some audience members applauded at the first few grumbly, mumbly utterances by Waits, I feared things would take a dark and sudden downward dive. And they did. "Road to Peace" is extremely political, citing Israel, Palestine, war, Jesus and the rejection thereof, and it didn't seem like the piece knew how to handle all these heavy topics through dance. There was one particularly striking moment

from Richard Villaverde in this act, though, a beautiful duet with flavors of flamenco and the display of his outstanding flexibility and strength.

Overall, though, the night was a beautiful night of modernized and contemporary ballet. Something as simple as tweaked lighting, understated costume design, minimal staging, and casually-choreographed but technically brilliant dance is a sight that every fan of the arts should see. Ballet is alive and well in Philadelphia and BalletX serves up their own stylized version of the timeless but often dismissed-as-stuffy art form. The first time I took in BalletX, with "Beautiful Decay," I wasn't as impressed. But the work of Barruch and Lamb has me committed as a longtime devotee of BalletX's mission and product.

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