



Culture Club

Decisions, Decisions

The Milwaukee Ballet's "Winter Series" at the Pabst. *BY PAUL KOSIDOWSKI 2/14/2014*



From the Milwaukee Ballet's "Talk to me." (photo by Mark Frohna)

When Gabrielle Lamb was looking for a song to anchor the mix-tape soundtrack for her new dance, *HappenStance*, which received its premiere at the Milwaukee Ballet's "Winter Series" concert last night, she landed on a slow, pensive version of "My Favorite Things." Entirely appropriate, it seems, for a dance that is an exploration of the process of decision-making. (OK, Maria, those are "a few" of your favorite things, but which is your *most* favorite. How about a Top Ten list.)

But the song fit Lamb's richly textured dance for another reason—the sense of wonder and child's play that infuses her vocabulary. In this piece—and in *Manifold*, which was performed as part of the MB's Genesis Choreographic Competition last year—there's a wide-eyed sense of invention and discovery in almost every gesture and detail. In one signature move, dancers recline on the floor and point to one spot on the floor, then to another: this or that, this or that? In fact, I don't think I've ever seen a dance in which the movements of individual fingers figure so prominently. Dancers point and hands ripple and flex, becoming cockscombs or jellyfish-like appendages.

There's a butterfly-flutter-to-tsunami sense of cause-and-effect in these very personal musings. A small gesture will build, take over a single body, then spread to a group that masses together and forms into a substantial edifice. But throughout there's a mood of curiosity and exploration. Appropriately, the curtain doesn't come down on a final "Ta-Da!" moment, but on an image of a thought in development. While Justin Genna stands to the side, dancers move randomly but methodically around the stage space, like impulses in a neural network, an idea in process.

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There's a similar sense of exploration in Luca Veggetti's *Scene/Six*. A tribute to the ideas of Russian abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, the title perhaps refers to his mixed media spectacle, "The Yellow Sound," a "stage composition" in six scenes. But you only need a passing familiarity with Kandinsky to get what Veggetti is after. Set to music by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, it's a beautiful attempt to imaging the painter's abstract forms in time and three-dimensional space. As such, it treats the dancers bodies as the raw "stuff" of form, not as psychological beings or parts of a dance tradition. So the moves are fresh, the partnering is unorthodox and defiantly imaginative. And the results are striking—meditative, inquisitive, beautifully composed.

With Lamb's *HappenStance* still fresh in my mind, Timothy O'Donnell's *Talk to Me* seemed like an exercise in decision-making gone wrong. O'Donnell, one of the MB's choreographers-in-residence, has a high-energy, jazzy and dramatic style that can be a great showcase for the company's technical skill and spirit. And *Talk to Me* certainly was that, full of snappy, how-did-he/she-do-that moves and sexy partnering. But O'Donnell also wants to "make a point" about the nature of communication, and he does so by starting the piece with Rachel Malehorn in a snappy business suit, delivering a mock-infomercial-style lecture. Malehorn makes the most out of it, accentuating the clichéd body language of motivational speakers into a little ballet of huckster *politesse*. But when she makes her third visit, this time winding through the Pabst Theater audience, the shtick has overstayed its welcome. Repetitive talk vs. electrifying dance? Should be an easy decision.

O'Donnell was more effective with the surprise opening act, an appearance by the Milwaukee Ballet II company. The piece he set on these dancers had energy, pizzazz and gleeful athleticism—a great vehicle to show off the talents of the young apprentice dancers.

"Winter Series" plays at the Pabst Theater through Sunday.

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