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December 5, 2013



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Milwaukee Ballet: Photo finish at the Genesis competition

February 8th, 2013 | By Tom Strini

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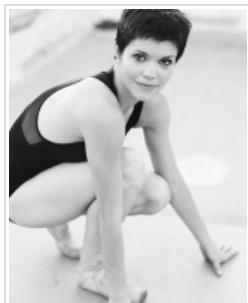
Nicole Teague and Timothy O'Donnell dance James Gregg's "Biorhythm," one of three works comprising the Milwaukee Ballet's Genesis competition. Photo credit Erik Ljung.

This just in: After Saturday's performance, the jurors declared Gabrielle Lamb the winner, with James Gregg second and Lauren Edson a close third. Thanks to Dennis Buehler, MBC's executive director, for passing along the news. On Monday, the Milwaukee Ballet announced that Edson had won the Audience Favorite award, determined by paper ballots cast after each of the four performances.

The dances made the dancers of the Milwaukee Ballet look good and vice versa Thursday night, at the company's biennial Genesis International Choreography Competition opener. The official jurors will be in the Pabst Theater Saturday night, but the fans crowded to the ballot boxes in the lobby after the Thursday show.

Lauren Edson, James Gregg and Gabrielle Lamb all made very good dances. They shared a fondness for fairly brief bits of music (all recorded), from varied sources but leaning toward post-Minimal and strains of pop and rock. Otherwise the dances had little in common and were markedly distinct, save for the requirements for four men and four women in each piece and length in the 20-minute range.

Edson's *I Hit the Ground* posits an ideal terpsichorean arcadia of girls in brief, pristine white tunics and shirtless boys in dark tights. Etienne Diaz, Alexandre Ferreira, Janel Meindersee, Lauren Pschirrer, Isaac Sharratt and Erica Wong maintained sober faces but moved as if for the rhythmic and athletic pleasure of it. In one striking sequence, Sharratt and Diaz linked arms to arrest the momentum of Ferreira and then use his own energy to lift him a little and support a few bounding steps. Sharp turns of direction, along



Lauren Edson

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- Thursday, 5 December, 2013
- Things Being What They Are
- Friday, 6 December, 2013
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MARC PETROCCO AND COURTNEY KRAMER PHOTO: JESSICA KAMINSKI

with a tendency to lead with the lower half of the body, canted the bodies into intriguing extreme angles. Edson is very canny with her geometry and compositional devices. I admire her numerous and ingenious ways of arranging canons and bringing the ensemble into them from mirror or unison.

The charged, complex relationship of David Hovhannisyian and Valerie Harmon pitched a wild card into this perfect, busy world. They pair off when Hovhannisyian is among the four guys who dance on to sweep Harmon out of a solo. After communal lifts and windings through complex geometry, Harmon lands with her prince. A man and a woman interweave their bodies, you have romance. And when those bodies bend and twine into extremes of motion, we read that as a complex if not troubled relationship, no matter the dancers' cool demeanor.

Edson made a pastorella, of sorts. Gregg's *Biorhythm* is thoroughly urban. We get this from the tight black costumes — especially those structured push-up corsets for the ladies — the industrial music, and the sharp, rhythmic attack and tightly bound movement. Eric Johnson, Courtney Kramer, Ryan Martin, Barry Molina, Timothy O'Donnell, Mayara Pineiro, Luz San Miguel and Nicole Teague might be in an underground disco just a few floors up from hell. In one telling moment, Martin came slithering like a Kimodo dragon out of the upstage darkness to come between Teague and Molina. (At least I think it was Teague and Molina; hard to tell with everyone's hair slicked back as it was.) They had been yearning toward each other in a pool of light at center stage, yearning expressed in just about the only pliant, poignant body language in *Biorhythm*.

Just as the music gets hottest and the dancing the dirtiest, a miracle happens. I won't say what, to preserve the surprise. But I will say that voters can decide whether it's glorious redemption — I see it that way — or creaky *deus ex machina*.

Edson and Gregg made dense and mostly tense dances. You had to work hard to keep up and see everything. In *Manifold*, Gabrielle Lamb gave her movement more room to breathe. That made not only the marvelous little gestures, which caused the dancers to appear to pass around invisible objects, but also the big floor patterns easier to grasp and remember. The gentler music, too, had a calming effect. I didn't know how much Edson and Gregg had riled me up until Lamb calmed me down.

Kara Bruzina, Mengjun Chen (who opened the piece with a strong solo), Susan Gartell, Justin Genna, Annia Hidalgo, Rachel Malehorn, Marc Petrocci and Petr Zahradnicek might have been curious, gentle beasts gathering around a watering hole in the first ensemble episode. They were utterly ingenuous as they moved low and feline or in perky, elevated struts. As the piece went on, they became more and more organized. Near the end, in tight-knit, repetitive, interlocked ensemble, they suggested a smooth-running machine in which all the living parts had amicable relations.

As I watched Lamb's piece and found its arc so compelling, I realized that *Biorhythm* and *I Hit the Ground*, though brimming with great movement invention, in the end lack such an arc. One nifty thing after another occurs, but they don't accumulate meaning and somehow culminate. Lamb, too, leaves a loose end — a dreamy downstage solo for Gartell after the others have disappeared in the enveloping upstage darkness. But as she kept dancing through the fade out, it felt mysterious, not merely puzzling.

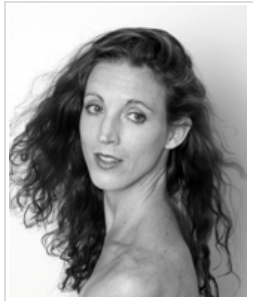
If I were a juror, I would advance Lamb for first place and put Edson and Gregg tied for second close behind. But do remember that context is everything (as [Josef Albers pointed out](#)). If two of the three pieces had been more in Lamb's range, I might have gone for more sizzle. Placement on the program mattered, too. If Lamb's *Manifold* had been first, I might have perceived the evening differently, in terms of ranking. But Thursday night was the way it was, so I voted as I did.

You might see it differently when you get to the Pabst Theater at 7:30 p.m. Friday or Saturday or 1:30 p.m. Sunday (Feb. 8-10). For tickets, call the Milwaukee Ballet ticket line, 414 902-2103.

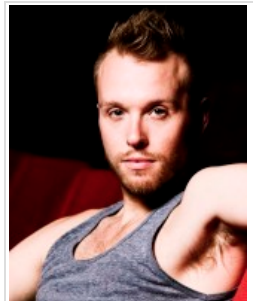
And a final note about Jason Fassl's lighting. He designed all three pieces on short deadline, and managed to create moods, gorgeous chiaroscuro effects, and light the bodies very well. A beautiful job under circumstances far from ideal.

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Gabrielle Lamb



James Gregg

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3 Responses to “Milwaukee Ballet: Photo finish at the Genesis competition”



Steven Shelton says:

February 11, 2013 at 2:35 pm

I am so happy to have seen Lamb win the competition. I think Lamb’s and Gregg;s works very few evenly matched, and I preferred Lamb’s simply because of the simplicity of the drama at the ending and the economy used throughout. I think Ms. Edson may have the brightest future of the three (I will be constructively critical), but because, as a man (and one who knows art and interpretation but had never seen a ballet previously), I realized in watching Edson’s work, had it been the work of a man, it would have been insulting, and that because it mattered that it was conducted by a woman, was an inferior set of work. BUT, I had a similar reaction to listening to Ani DiFranco’s first album (there is something about it that made me feel, as a male, I was not welcome to listen to it, and so I didn’t more than a couple times) versus something later, such as “Revelling and Reckoning,” which, in my opinion, in one of the top 5 albums of the decade, and maybe one of the top 30 albums of all time – maybe even top ten. So, I am so delighted to see Lamb the victor, if only because of economy to Gregg, and think, in 20 years, given what will not be an easy evolution but seems possible, Ms. Edson might be recognized as the strongest talent of the three. I thoroughly enjoyed it and very much want to visit more ballet. It is far superior to professional sport of every type.

[\[Reply\]](#)



Dennis Buehler says:

February 10, 2013 at 11:46 am

James placed second and Lauren a close third. Audience favorite will be tallied on Monday.

[\[Reply\]](#)



Dennis Buehler says:

February 10, 2013 at 11:44 am

Hello Tom,

Gabrielle was the announced winner following last evening’s performance.

[\[Reply\]](#)

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