

**Verb Ballets @ Cleveland Public Theatre** We got an early start on this past weekend's dance glut by catching Verb Ballets at Cleveland Public Theatre on Thursday night. During the curtain raiser speeches we quickly read the program notes ("Adventures in Dance Appreciation Lesson I [NOT] Understanding the Abstract") while Verb's Executive Director Margaret Carlson described the concert as a "laboratory" performance, an experiment. This proved to be overstated, as Verb was no less polished than usual, but in all four dances the choreographers took off in a direction that was somehow new to them.

The first dance, *Backlash* by Artistic Director Hernando Cortez, had not even begun when we noticed the set up for live saxophone and percussion. Live music for dance represents the fulfillment of an ambition only occasionally realized by Verb and nearly every other dance company from Cleveland to NYC.

The music for *Backlash*, *Verbtuosity* by Eric Ziolk, provided a clear rhythmic pulse in a fast slow fast format. Despite the traditional jazz instrumentation it didn't sound particularly like jazz to us so we asked Dr. Ziolk, who was present at the performance, to describe his piece: "Jazz influenced; nothing improvised." Not jazz precisely, but as Dr. Z said next, "A treat." This collaboration, which the parties involved have been hoping to achieve for some time, was finally made possible by funding from the Bascom Little Fund.

The dance, true to the aforementioned program note, proved to be an abstract composition without apparent narrative or other programmatic content, and thus was very different from anything we've seen from Cortez to date. "Pure abstraction," volunteered Cortez when we talked with him after the program. "It's alien to me."

Though abstract, however, the choreographic organization of *Backlash* was considerably more obvious than the organization of, say, the dribbled paintings of abstract painter Jackson Pollock. The dancing itself was very balletic - perhaps the most balletic thing we've seen Cortez do - with traditional ballet arm and leg coordination straight from the classroom, nice high sustained arabesques and second positions and closed fifths. While the other women wore soft shoes, one impressively statuesque dancer (we believe it was Danielle Brickman) provided both contrast and reference point by dancing en pointe. Talking with Cortez later, we said we'd seen some Balanchine-influenced jazziness thrown in with the dancers' hips pitched forward, back and to the side. Cortez agreed; "Of course."

We felt it was too bad there wasn't more light on the dancers, their costumes (shimmering silvery, yet simultaneously multicolored, iridescent trunks for the men and trunks and halter tops for the women credited to Studio Sangha and Gina Dudik), and the set (bolts of silvery similarly iridescent material hung down the cyclorama by Jordan Katz, Grafix Plastics). Cortez explained that the somewhat mysterious darkness was not necessarily an intentional effect. "Trad (Trad Burns, the lighting designer for the show) could have used 50 more instruments. He did put in a request, but (for financial reasons) we can only rent so much equipment."

How did we like this beautifully costumed though underlit abstract ballet with live music? Although turns were not particularly on, and the dance lacked that staple of ballet, sustained jumping passages, we could watch it repeatedly for the beautiful balletic lines the dancers make in the interesting patterns. Verb is primarily a modern company but Cortez has a very good background in ballet; he danced for Eliot Feld. Verb dancers have further benefited from the services of Guest Teacher Troy McCarty, who is unusually well prepared as a ballet teacher, having studied

ballet pedagogy at both the Maryinsky (Kirov) School in St. Petersburg, Russia and the School of the National Ballet of Cuba.

In short, we thought *Backlash* was yummy.

Company stalwart Mark Tomasic choreographed *Before the Time After* for himself and four women to a Bach concerto. It began with three of the women running downstage and light-heartedly allowing sand to sift through their fingers onto the stage apron. They then ran back upstage to get more sand, and repeated the process, adding another measure of movement each time like the song Twelve Days of Christmas. This didn't go on too long before the three were racing around the stage according to another formula, a curving game of follow the leader. One clearly discernable formula followed another throughout the dance, yet the result didn't come off as gimmicky but rather as strongly coherent.

The second, slow movement found the original threesome trying to catch a nap, artfully posed, as dancers napping onstage will appear. Enter a fourth woman, Anna Roberts, carried by Tomasic, apparently walking on air; she walked lightly over the napping dancers who eventually join in the theme. One might think an entire movement built around stylized walking would get boring, but Tomasic took it through many interesting variations. The audience found this slow movement so satisfying that they applauded it separately during the slightly too long pause that separated it from the final movement.

The third movement found the dancers with still more energy for this fast paced movement, and Tomasic with yet an abundance of ideas, which pretty much characterizes Tomasic as a choreographer. We've seen a number of his pieces for Dancing Wheels as well as Verb and we've felt every one of them was notably successful due to clear, discernable conception and an abundance of good ideas for movement.

Next up on the program was Troy McCarty's *Tango Non Gender*.

The world's fascination with tango has resulted in any number of concert presentations of this ballroom dance form. Sometimes it's ballroom dancers in a concert setting and sometimes it's dancers with training in a concert form, ballet or modern dance, adapting their skills to the ballroom form. Although many of these have been successful both artistically and commercially, it should be pointed out that concertizations of tango are not always a slam-dunk. We've seen any number of abortive attempts by ballet and modern dancers to hop on tango's coat tails.

A quick disclaimer here: McCarty has been our ballet teacher and our boss (we teach Pilates at his studios); yet, we do not feel this closeness affects our judgment, but rather gives us a unique insight into his abilities. We have already mentioned his credentials as a ballet teacher. As his students we are in a unique position to report that his classes have always proven relevant to ballet technique development while remaining choreographically interestingly and danceable.

As a choreographer McCarty also draws on a long and strong interest in tango. Tango involves distinct steps and skills, and unless concert trained choreographers and dancers have mastered those steps and skills AND found a way to transfer them from a ballroom to a stage, the result does not fulfill its promise. In our book, you cannot have a tango that promises to be "almost" a tango. It either succeeds as a tango or it isn't a tango at all. McCarty's thorough familiarity with tango vocabulary and partnering conventions joins in this dance with his honed choreographic sensibility. He puts what he knows about ballet to work in tango with satisfyingly

authentic results both in terms of steps and emotional resonance. His dance leaps across the potential pitfalls.

In the fourth and final dance of the evening Cortez again departed the beaten path to create what his program describes as "A Surrealist Manifesto," titled *Like Being Awake Sleeping and Hearing Seeing*. In this dance he apparently put some effort into evoking a surreal atmosphere, but mostly he seemed to focus on having fun using surrealist methods, taking his dancers through a loosely constructed, character-driven composition. Dream-like episodes in which the fancifully costumed dancers wafted about in character alternated with interludes of disco music and appropriately energetic and repetitive unison dancing. Mark Tomasic was, according to the program note, "The Modern Man" costumed in morning coat and sunglasses. Elizabeth Flynn wore a red yarn Raggedy Ann wig in an apparent parody of her own red hair; Cortez gave her movement reminiscent of Fokine's puppet ballet, *Petrouchka*. Danielle Brickman again caught our notice in white tights, a waistcoat and veiled hat as "The Mysterious Stranger."

Thursday night's capacity audience of Verb friends and family took Cortez "manifesto" in the playful spirit it was offered, clapping rhythmically with the disco music that accompanied its conclusion.

Verb performed from Thursday, October 20 through Sunday, October 23, 2005 in the Gordon Square Theatre, the final installment in this fall's Random Acts at CPT.

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