

**Verb Ballets @ CPH FusionFest 5/11** Theater and dance is sometimes about flying in the face of our expectations and sometimes it is about satisfying our expectations. Verb's program at Cleveland Play House's Bolton Theater last Friday and Saturday set out to do the latter. Each piece presented stock characters / personas, archetypal situations / tropes. Inspired by Surrealism though the evening was, Verb's choreographer and artistic director Hernando Cortez gave the audience signposts to point them through the long, strange trip, while exercising a restrained visual palette more typical of classicism.

In the first piece, "Like Being Awake Sleeping and Hearing Seeing" (Cortez 2005), the program note designates, among others, The Bride, The Young Girl (of volatile emotions; danced by Anna Roberts), The Modern Man (something of a cad; danced by Mark Tomasic). Are we to understand that he takes advantage of her? Or does she take advantage of him? If the dancing wasn't enough for you, there's that to think about.

The evening's second piece, "Unquiet Minds," cast the dancers as Commedia dell'Arte characters. Even without knowing very much about that segment of historical pop culture, it was easy to understand who the characters were and how they functioned in the piece. We're told that "Unquiet Minds" was originally developed on ABT II. Cortez' pastiche of classical movement and zany but tight stage business must have fit the abilities of a bunch of young ballet dancers to a T. This is the second reworking of this piece that we've seen on Verb; the first made us want to see more and in this version Cortez and his dancers provide a satisfying fulfillment of the premise.

"Ocean Depths," the evening's final piece, a world premiere by Cortez, is a story ballet without sets, performed with largely contemporary movement. A princess meets peril, has interesting adventures among strangers, meets prince and falls in love. A great battle is fought, but all miraculously ends well amidst great rejoicing.

All three dances were interesting - and challenging - for their dearth of realistic sets and props. Costume, lighting, music and especially movement provided all the necessary cues. As always with Cortez, the idea, premise or concept is there to provide a structure on which to build beautiful, interesting movement.

"Like Being Awake" begins with minimal movement, the dancers holding largely static poses in weird red and blue light, but soon settles into an active groove with a fast-slow-fast-slow-fast suite of what we'd describe as disco music – drum machine and synthesized strings – by Sasha and John Digweed. We used to dread modern dance that tried to use percussion, staccato, syncopation. Average modern dancers in days of old could not sustain the tempo, went up when they should have gone down, couldn't match the syncopated beats; but Cortez has plenty of steps that fit the beat and the dancers have no trouble with veritable line dances of high-energy movement.

Cortez' abundance of movement ideas carries into the slow sections of "Like Being Awake," which were dominated by the women's groups. An assortment of full-skirted costumes credited to Studio Sangha, Christine LaPerna, Edward Sylvia and Gina Dudik seemed to set the stage for a consideration of women's lives, women's emotions. We say this despite Cortez' original program note in which he insists "I let my mind run wild." An editing process is clearly underway; this piece is becoming less of a sketchbook of non-sequiturs.

"Unquiet Minds" benefits considerably from its costumes by Christine LaPerna, contemporary updates that make reference, but minimally, to traditional Commedia costumes. Brian Murphy's Arlecchino (Harlequin) costume has a single (identifiable) diamond. Ashley Cohen's Pulcinella costume is identifiable by the pointy hat; no humpback, no potbelly (though one is suggested, however, by a billowy empire-waisted shirt), and no walk like a chicken.

Cortez sets "Unquiet Minds" to selected piano music by Francis Poulenc, which provided welcome relief from the thump of the drum machine.

One of us watched "Ocean Depths" without having read the synopsis and still found it easy on the eyes, the gold light and white costumes, the abundance of unison movement to Richard D. Rinehart's music. Rinehart names Stravinsky and Nine Inch Nails as compositional influences, but "Ocean Depths" is more like another of his influences, Ravel, in a flowing program music mode. The synthesized sound wasn't too bad, though to our ears one man playing all the parts on a synthesizer keyboard sounded more like an electronic organ than a small orchestra. One wonders what the piano version of the score would have sounded like played live by Michael Schneider as originally planned. Unfortunately, due to considerations we were not privy to, Schneider was relegated to playing interesting but unidentified music over audience chatter during intermissions.

Verb dancer Sydney Ignacio is one of three brothers. The oldest brother runs a folk dance group in the Philippines. Middle brother Jason's amazing abilities as a contemporary dancer are already well known to Cleveland audiences. Youngest brother Sydney's forte is classical dance, and in Ocean Depths Cortez gives him every opportunity to show his stuff in classical partnering, grand gestures, and bravura solo passages that sparked bursts of applause from the audience.

We enjoyed Ignacio's classical panache along with the rest of the audience but it made us a little sad. Cleveland is, after all, a town without a professional ballet company and now also without frequent opportunities to see touring professional ballet companies. To what extent can Ignacio and other company members with ballet skills – most notably, Danielle Brickman, Katie Gnagy, Brian Murphy, Mark Tomasic – sustain and develop classical technique and skills (pointe work springs to mind) without the support system afforded by a ballet company? (Nor, for that matter, can Verb offer any of its dancers health insurance or a living wage -- many of the dancers are holding down 2 additional jobs to make ends meet).

Well, we were in a pessimistic mood going into "Ocean Depths." Maybe it was the general age of the audience. Maybe it was because we had collared Cortez during the second intermission to get his gloss on the characters in Commedia dell'Arte land. He told us about his upcoming intensive at Stanford: "Motivating people, both dancers and audiences – leadership," he explained. "Marketing?" we asked. Marketing concert dance is particularly tough, and Cortez was pessimistic about the outlook. "We've had theater since the Greeks; theater will go on, but contemporary dance is really just since the last century," he said, implying that possibly the end of concert dance as we know it is nigh. When he went local we were able to give him affirmation: yes, there's good local work out there. How many people come out to see it?

Not enough.

'T was ever thus, young man. Keep dancing. When you can't dance anymore, choreograph and teach if you can. Make the best record of your work that you can on video and otherwise. Read the new Carolyn Brown memoir, "Chance and Circumstance: twenty years with Cage and Cunningham." And toughen up.

**Verb Ballets performed at Cleveland Play House's Bolton Theater on Friday and Saturday, May 11 and 12, 2007. Visit them online at <http://www.verbballets.org/>.**

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