



Reviews

Saturday, September 16, 2006

Verb Ballet a force of `Nature'

Verb Ballets: "Nature 2"

When: Opened at 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 15; repeats at 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 16.

Where: Cleveland Museum of Natural History, 1 Wade Oval Dr. Tickets: \$25 and \$40. (216) 231-1177.

By Tony Brown

Plain Dealer Theater Critic

Call me crazy (you wouldn't be the first), but I expected "Nature 2," Verb Ballets' second appearance in as many years at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, to have dancers cavorting amongst the dinosaur bones and stuffed mammals.

Now that would have been remarkable.

But even though the two-hour, five-piece concert instead took place within the museum's more predictable, high school-esque auditorium, the evening appeared to take flight at several moments of note.

First and foremost, the opening piece - "Chichester Psalms," choreographed by artistic director Hernando Cortez to still deliciously surprising music by Leonard Bernstein - embodies all that Verb is about: dance not as singular noun but as pluralistic action.

The dancers, six women and two men, sweep about the wide stage with their arms tucked behind them like wings. These are tie-dyed angels, we come to suspect as the piece builds layer upon layer of clouds under it, and they are rejoicing in their angelic way.

Second, there is Brian Murphy, a pillar of physical and aesthetic strength, and a veteran of both Cleveland-San Jose and the Ohio ballets who is making his debut as a full-time Verbster.

He simply dominates all four pieces in which he appears in, his calf muscles bulging and his all-encompassing arms embracing, and he doesn't flag a bit as the evening progresses.

All the pieces have something to recommend.

Cortez's "Shadows of Nes-min," inspired by the Egyptian Book of the Dead, offers an intriguing Martha Graham gesture, but it is difficult to keep one's eyes on the dancers and off the stage right piano-stroking of Michael Schneider, the only live music of the night.

Sydney Ignacio unfolds a study in South Pacific moves in "Ku'u Home," but the piece begins to feel like a National Geographic foray after a bit. (Brother Jason Ignacio dances Saturday night.)

The Verb premiere of Heinz Poll's "Andante Sostenuto," a pas de deux set to Felix Mendelssohn, is pretty

enough, and Murphy squires Anna Roberts around with infinite ease and grace.

And the world premiere of Cortez's "Wolfgang Strategies" imagines - appropriate to the coming autumn - the dancers as pastel-colored leaves swirling this way and that.

Cleveland's ubiquitous and vastly talented lighting designer Trad A Burns bathes everything in his colors and whites, and costumer Janet Bolick (who clothes four pieces) does much with little subtleties.

Verb Ballets may have kept itself within the institutional confines of an auditorium, but this museum-dance collaboration is a bona fide natural. Long may it evolve.

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