



Review

Ballet Arizona Raises The Barre

With *Director's Choice*

by Kenneth LaFave

The fractal, the funny and the faux-epic shared pride of place on the “Director’s Choice” program presented by Ballet Arizona last night at Phoenix’s Orpheum Theatre. The performance, which repeats today and tomorrow, showcases the company’s astounding growth in a trio of recent ballets by three of the globe’s best living choreographers, one of whom happens to be Ballet Arizona’s artistic director.

Of these three makers of dance, the best regarded globally is Alejandro Cerrudo, a very young and already widely celebrated choreographer whose ballets are in high demand. Cerrudo’s *Second to Last* was a study in fractals – self-repeating, detailed patterns – to the apt music of American minimalist Philip Glass and the more layered minimalism of his European contemporary, Arvo Part.

Minimalist music, already a thing of yesterday, might be said to have consisted of the stripping away of music until only sound was left – an action that paradoxically created traces of a new and very different music.

Similarly, Cerrudo’s choreography for *Second to Last* seems to strip dance itself away until only movement remains, leaving in place a new and very different sort of dance, one that is fractal not only in the sense of repeated patterns, but in the more exact sense of being “the same close up as far away.” The three couples deployed by Cerrudo in his exploration of seemingly organic movement (without evident reference to any vocabulary of steps) did not create any sense of depth, but appeared instead to exist in a kind of dimensional limbo. One had the feeling they’d have looked the same from any angle.

The three male-female (but essentially gender-neutral couples were expertly cast to complement one another, and in turn the other couples: Tzu-Chia Huang and Junxiong Zhao; Raychel Weiner and Myles Lavalley; Amber Lewis and Joseph Cavanaugh.

Contrast Cerrudo’s post-modern style with the ballet-grounded work of company artistic director Ib Andersen. Andersen’s *Diversions*, danced last night with commitment and verve by his company of 10-plus years, comes closest of any Andersen ballets I have seen to emulating the form and style of George Balanchine, whose last major hire as director of his fabled New York City Ballet was... Ib

Andersen. In it, music is more than a series of beats; it is a pulsing mistress whose ebb and flow require ceaseless attention. For instance, the supported lifts early in the ballet came, not at high points in the music's melody, but with the surge of crescendos, an effect reminiscent of Balanchine in *Divertimento No. 15*.

The music was Benjamin Britten's eponymous score, a concerto for piano, left hand, originally composed a pianist whose right hand was blown off in battle during World War I. This is faux-epic music – it announces itself as Tchaikovsky and turns out to be a kinder, gentler Bartok. Andersen mated this self-diverging sensibility perfectly with steps that portended broad gestures but ended up drawing the viewer's attention to the turn of a head or the stretch of an arm. Four couples danced out four levels of sexual relation (another nod to Balanchine), ranging from cold to lukewarm to warm and warmer. Natalia Magnicaballi, regal and magnetic as always, received her partnering from Astrit Zejnati as one might accept gifts from a hopeless suitor. Amber Lewis and Shea Johnson ratcheted things up to more-or-less equal stature, while Jillian Barrell and Nayon Iovino increased the intimacy. It remained for Tzu-Chia Huang and Junxiong Zhao to lift the theme of relationship to a heightened emotional peak. And speaking of heights, Andersen's choreography for the accompanying ensemble took to the air and seemed to stay there.

Ballet is probably not supposed to be as much fun as choreographer Alexei Ratmansky's uproarious take on Saint-Saens' already hilarious *Carnival of the Animals*, but I won't tell anybody if you don't. The program opener burst with humor, and that is no mean feat in dance or any other art form. ("Dying is easy," the great actor Edwin Booth famously said with his last breath. "Comedy is hard.") Ratmansky has conceived of the animals in Saint-Saens' zoo as dancing equivalents of hens, horses, turtles, etc., and the result is a ballet that effortlessly culls laughter without stooping to the obvious. It was clear that the dancers of Ballet Arizona enjoyed this romp, which must have offered them a break in the usual lineup of serious fare. Shea Johnson's prideful lion, Paola Hartley's winsomely dominating hen, and Kenna Draxton's woeful send-up of a swan were conveyed with impressive enthusiasm.

And have we mentioned Amber Lewis? Yes, twice before. (You thought that was a rhetorical question, didn't you?) This spinning top of technical mastery and artistic flexibility was featured in all three ballets, and her energy never flagged. She stole the show in *Carnival of the Animals*, dancing an Elephant whose very ungainliness was her grace.

Photos by Rosalie O'Connor.

Top: Ballet Arizona dancers in *Carnival of the Animals*.

Below, left: Jillian Barrell and Nayon Iovino in *Diversions*.

Below, right: Tzu-Chia Huang and Junxiong Zhao in *Second to Last*.



Ballet Arizona Presents
Director's Choice
At The Orpheum Theatre
Friday, March 29 at 7:30pm
Saturday, March 30 at 2:00pm & 7:30pm
Sunday, March 31 at 1:00pm
www.balletaz.org
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