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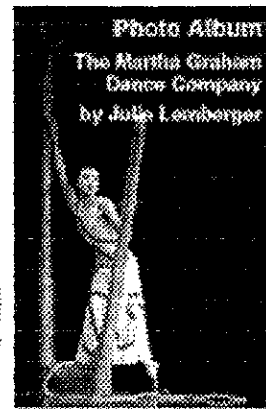
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Flash Review, 5-10: Swain Song
SF Ballet Bids Adieu to Possokhov, Legate & Brandenhoff

By [Aimee Ts'ao](#)
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SAN FRANCISCO – On Friday, at the War Memorial Opera House, a very enthusiastic crowd honored three of San Francisco Ballet's dancers as they are poised to retire from the company. When I first heard that none of the dancers were receiving individual tributes for the dozen or more years of contribution to the growth of the company, I was quite annoyed. But after attending this evening with its truly warm and appreciative reception, I feel that it was at least as rewarding on many levels as the farewell performances for SFB principals [Joanna Berman](#) or [Christopher Stowell](#) of recent years. For one thing, you didn't need to sit through any ballets or sections of longer works waiting for one of the honorees to perform. Every piece featured at least one of them and two of them appeared together in two of the six pieces, allowing us to see the camaraderie and artistic interplay between these dancers. This format certainly guaranteed that the energy on stage and the rapport with the audience continued to build throughout the evening.

The performance opens with artistic director Helgi Tomasson making the briefest possible introduction, basically naming the



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three dancers, Yuri Possokhov and Stephen Legate, both principals, and Peter Brandenhoff, a soloist, thanking them for their many years with the company, and saying let's get on with the show. The first piece is Jerome Robbins's "In the Night," danced to four Chopin Nocturnes, with Rachel Viselli and Legate, Muriel Maffre and Damian Smith, and Lorena Feijoo and Possokhov as the three couples. Legate once again demonstrates his elegant lines, exceptionally beautiful port de bras and tender attentiveness to his partner, which are the hallmarks of his career in the leading classical roles. Possokhov revels in revealing the various emotional sides of his intertwining with Feijoo, no stranger herself to that element of performing. Most poignant is the final section as the couples take their leave, their imminent departure resonating with real life.

After the intermission Possokhov astounds us in "Revelation," choreographed by Motoko Hirayama to John Williams's theme from the film "Schindler's List." His razor-sharp delineation of the emotional extremes, from nihilistic indifference to the desperation of a man struggling to escape both literal and metaphorical prisons is matched only by his intense physicality and technical virtuosity.

"Solo," by Hans van Manen to the music of J.S. Bach is really three solos as well as some group interactions. Performed by Brandenhoff, Legate and their colleague, Pascal Molat, it is one of those dances that is both a high energy crowd-pleaser and a terrific piece of choreography. Brandenhoff shines in his humorous approach to the playful competitiveness, while Legate suavely saunters through it in his wonderfully understated way.

The balcony pas de deux from Tomasson's "Romeo & Juliet" to the Prokofiev score lets us see yet another facet of Possokhov's artistry. Partnering Yuan Yuan Tan, he now shows us the innocence, purity and exuberance of first love as opposed to the complexity and ambivalence he presented in "In the Night." Then Legate has his chance to pull out another side in Lar Lubovitch's "My Funny Valentine" from "Smile with my Heart" as he dances with the inimitable Tina LeBlanc. The romantic cavalier becomes a modern day lover, still attentive, but with the formal and well-mannered devotion replaced by intimate emotional engagement.

The last pas de deux is "Summer" from Christopher Wheeldon's

"Quaternary," to Arvo Part's piano composition, "Fur Alina." Possokhov and Maffre are superb, both individually and as a team. I had seen them the night before in Wheeldon's "Continuum," where they proved once again that great dancing can give the illusion that you are watching great choreography. In both pieces they are not simply executing the steps but fluidly link each movement to the next, while simultaneously sculpting phrases for the broader picture. (Maffre is dancing one more season; I am not looking forward to her retirement, as it will leave an enormous hole in the ranks.)

Then for the curtain calls. Lots of confetti and balloons. The supporting cast of the evening brings out flowers for the three stars. Legate's wife Evelyn Cisneros, former principal dancer at SFB, and son Ethan are there. And suddenly Joanna Berman is hugging Possokhov. It's quite moving to see how well-loved and respected this trio is by their fellow dancers. They will be missed. Fortunately Possokhov has been named the first choreographer-in-residence at SFB and will continue to create work for the company. Legate is going off to chiropractic school with a view to helping dancers in the future. Not unpredictably, one ending is just the beginning of the next phase in life as well as art.

Disclaimer: I purposely did not read Paul Ben-Itzak's advance piece on this evening so that I could view it with no preconceptions. Also, I am familiar with all three of the dancers offstage, as they all attended Svetlana Afanasieva's classes (which I took daily) quite regularly for a period of about two years, roughly 1995-97.

For more on Yuri Possokhov, Stephen Legate, and Peter Brandenhoff, see also Friday's Flash Photo Tribute; Aimee Ts'ao's Flash Reviews of "Maqritomania" and "Damned," both choreographed by Possokhov, as well as this Flash Review & Interview with the SFB star; and Ts'ao's and Paul Ben-Itzak's reviews of Brandenhoff in Helgi Tomasson & Possokhov's "Don Quixote." To read a recent interview with Legate and see a photograph of him dancing with Tina LeBlanc, click here.

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