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Flash Reviews

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Out of the Fog, 11-15: Curatorial Chaos
Lyon Opera Ballet: Long on Bach, Short on Basics

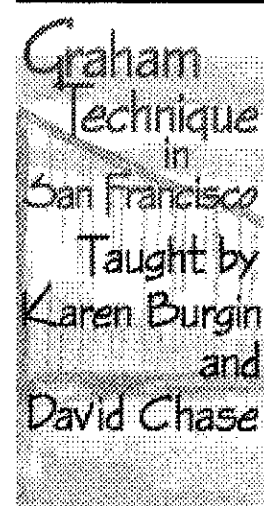
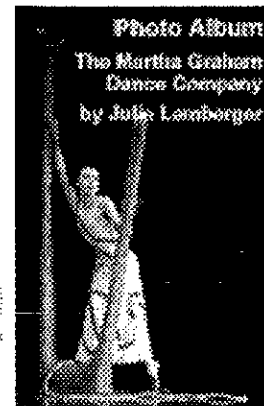
By [Aimee Ts'ao](#)
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BERKELEY, California -- Imagine sitting on the wooded bank of a stream, the dappled sunlight catching the silver scales of a trout as it leaps out of the water. It is a perfect moment when all your senses are suddenly stimulated in a harmonious way. Now transport yourself to another scene. You walk into a crowded supermarket and peer into the freezer compartment at vacuum-sealed plastic packages of farmed fish.

My experience of seeing a performance of the Batsheva Dance Company, then two nights later viewing the Lyon Opera Ballet was equally jarring. I use the analogy not because I want to liken dance companies to fish, fresh or frozen, but because after a totally satisfying experience with [Batsheva](#) I find myself analyzing why Lyon's dance company left me less than full on many levels. I can't help but ask whether the context of each performance and the thoughts behind both the choreographers' and artistic directors' artistic choices had anything to do with it.

I had great expectations. The Lyon program, presented by Cal Performances, was announced as showing works of three of Europe's leading choreographers, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Sasha Waltz and Maguy Marin. Coincidentally they are all women, a fact that says a lot about how far we have come in gender equality in recent history.

I had seen work by all three, including Waltz's ["Insideout"](#) in

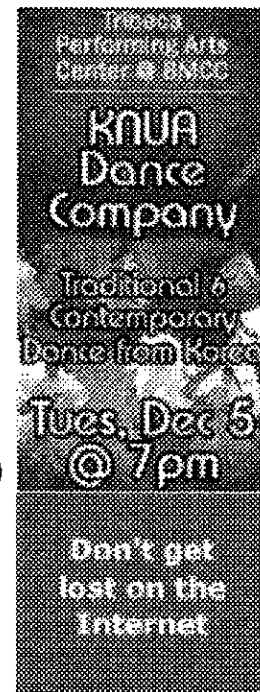


Berlin, and figured that I would have at the very least an interesting evening. I had also seen the Lyon Opera Ballet perform Angelin Preljocaj's "Romeo & Juliet" here more than a decade ago, and in Marin's "Cendrillon" and a mixed bill in 2002, so I wasn't completely in the dark about what the company was or was not capable of doing.

The first disappointment comes before the curtain even rises at Zellerbach Hall on Saturday, October 28. Waltz's "Fantasie," created for the Lyon Opera Ballet (LOB) in February, will not be performed "due to injury," we're told, and in its place will be William Forsythe's "Steptext." The first red flag goes up: why aren't there sufficient understudies to cover the injured dancer(s) given that the company has 29 members and the piece requires a cast of eight? And why a ballet by an American male choreographer instead of another one by a European female?

Opening the program is De Keersmaeker's "Die Grosse Fuge," to Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge, Op. 133" for string quartet. While the technically accomplished dancers, seven men and one woman, attack the steps with everything they've got, the choreographer fails to give them more than a blow by blow rendition of the music. The half dozen short movement phrases, repeated over and over, soon grow tiresome as they don't seem to be leading anywhere. The sequences of steps should illuminate the structure of the music, not merely mimic it in a superficial way. Though the LOB began performing this piece earlier this year, it was created on De Keersmaeker's own company, Rosas, in 1992, 14 years ago! I would have hoped that she could have created a new work using the LOB dancers as inspiration, but barring that possibility, set a recent pre-existing one on them, or at the very least revived an older piece of higher quality.

After a pause comes Forsythe's "Steptext." As it was a last-minute substitution, no details were provided. A quick Internet search provides some basic details: created in 1985, the work utilizes J.S. Bach's "Chaconne in d minor" as recorded by violinist Nathan Milstein. Because neither the program nor the press kit says who is dancing what -- the program doesn't even include brief artist biographies (usually standard at Cal Performance dance offerings) -- I cannot single out any dancers by name. This lack of basic respect by the company for its dancers by not crediting their work I find especially odious. They are all listed on the company title page. However, that doesn't help me to highlight exceptional performances among the casts. (The next day I spoke with the Cal Performances press office in an attempt to see if it could obtain the cast lists from LOB. I also asked if the missing information was the result of not meeting



the printer's deadline. No, I was told, the company deliberately wanted the program the way it was. I was flabbergasted as this omission is not the standard for any company, European or American.)

Three men and a woman inhabit a typically Forsythian staging from the mid-80s: harsh lighting, often directed into the audience's eyes, stop and start music and lights, choreography that feels more like imitation Balanchine than anything else. This is certainly more interesting than the previous piece -- it does go somewhere -- but the poor dancers look under-rehearsed, nothing blatantly obvious, just not as sure-footed and expressive as I am sure they are capable of. They all pull off some really good moments; what is missing is a sense that they are working toward the common goal of consistently communicating in their inter-relationships with each other and with the audience. Perhaps my disappointment is greater because I had seen San Francisco Ballet's revival of Forsythe's "Artifact Suite" this past spring and absolutely loved it. Even very good choreographers don't make masterpieces every time. The cream will eventually rise to the top, but what is left at the bottom has a definite shelf life and dated work leaves a particularly flat aftertaste.

Marin's "Groosland" closes the evening. Created on the Dutch National Ballet in 1989, this humorous and even touching dance's gimmick is the costumes -- fat suits for the entire cast of 20. In the first half the performers are clothed in blue house frocks and black wigs for the women and small bowler hats and blue knee-length pants held up by suspenders over undershirts for the men, all very French working class. Later, after an enamored couple takes off everything in the course of a pas de deux, everyone else strips down to their naked fat suits as well. It is striking that some of the dancers manage to convey the body language of obesity, and like some genuinely overweight individuals are still light on their feet. Others move like dancers in fat suits, gracefully, but without the deeper understanding of what it feels like to haul around the added girth. While the whole dance was enjoyable, it could have been successfully pared down to half its size (so to speak) to prevent the joke from growing prematurely old.

I would have liked to have seen LOB perform some of Marin's other work that doesn't rely on over-the-top costuming, as her "Cendrillon" also employs. A few seasons ago she brought her own company to the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater and showed an entirely different side of her work, so I know she does explore other realms. (For an example, see Paul Ben-Itzak's DI Flash of today on her classic "May B.")

Musically speaking, making us listen to two of Bach's Brandenburg concerti, numbers 1 and 2, after the Bach chaconne of "Steptext" is not very good programming. I love Bach, but a bit of moderation at a dance concert is in order, unless it is accompanying an evening-length work. (Ironically, as I write this, the first Brandenburg comes on the radio. Honest.)

The function of a repertory dance company, which is what the Lyon Opera Ballet is -- notwithstanding its name, this is not your mother's classical ballet company -- is to show a variety of choreographers' work spanning either a broad period of time, say the 19th and 20th centuries or a narrower one, just the late 20th and early 21st, and perhaps concentrating on ballet and/or modern/contemporary dance. The most important aspects of this overview need to be an intelligent curating of work, balancing the different styles of choreography, and ensuring authenticity in the movement execution. Once a defined structure is put in place, the dancers are able to give their best and evolve and mature in their skills both technically and artistically. Anything less shortchanges both the dancers and the audience.

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