

the DANCE i n s i d e r

Out of the Fog, 3-19: Story-time Chapter & book from Farrell & SF Ballet



San Francisco Ballet in George Balanchine's "Serenade." Photo ©Erik Tomasson and courtesy San Francisco Ballet.

By Aimée Ts'ao
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SAN FRANCISCO -- I was more than a bit skeptical when I arrived at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley for "The Balanchine Couple," a program performed by the Suzanne Farrell Ballet. I couldn't imagine an entire evening of nothing but pas de deux. Violinists nonpareil Itzak Perlman and Pinchas Zuckerman can pull off a program composed of only violin duos (I caught them in 1978) but somehow I just didn't believe it possible in this case, especially when all the pieces were by the same choreographer. It turns out that I was both right and wrong.

The program, which I saw October 24, is essentially a lecture/demonstration, though to hear Farrell speak about the choreography and how much she learned from working with Balanchine is totally engaging. We see a broad range of styles,

from romantic to ultra-modern, because one of Farrell's objectives is to reveal how each pas de deux creates its own "world" and how different they are from each other. Yet, it is hard to sustain an evening, let alone have the energy grow in an illuminating arc, when (with the exception of 'The Unanswered Question' from "Ivesiana") there are just two dancers on stage. Perhaps if the partnerships had all been as riveting as Danilova and Franklin, Fonteyn and Nureyev, or Sibley and Dowell, we would have been carried away and experienced the immense joy that comes from witnessing extraordinary artists. As it is, we leave having nibbled at some delicious appetizers and go home wondering what happened to the main course.

To be fair, the Suzanne Farrell Ballet does have some truly talented dancers. Kendra Mitchell and Ian Grosh are particularly fine in "La Sonambula" and "Chaconne." Momchil Mladenov is an exceptional partner, showing off his ballerina effortlessly, and is a strong, expressive dancer on his own.

Rooted Balanchine, phantom Wheeldon

The opposite of the Farrell program arrived three and a half months later on Thursday, February 11, with San Francisco Ballet's Balanchine program, featuring three large ensemble ballets: "Serenade," for five principals, four soloists and 17 corps de ballet members; "Stravinsky Violin Concerto," for two principal couples plus 16 dancers; and "Theme and Variations," with one principal couple against a corps de ballet of 24. In contrast to "The Balanchine Couple" this programming shows the pas de deux in context, not just as a deracinated dance for two. It is one thing to choreograph a stand alone pas de deux that is totally self-contained, and another to make a pas de deux as an integral part of choreographic architecture. A short story compared to a chapter of a novel is one way to think of it. While the Farrell Ballet presented random chapters from many sources, with the SF Ballet we get to read the entire books.

"Serenade" is such an ingenious masterpiece that it almost doesn't matter how well or badly it is performed; the choreography eloquently speaks for itself despite any interference from the dancers. San Francisco Ballet gives it a technically pristine edge while failing to give it much emotional color. The rather subdued atmosphere is broken by Lorna Feijoo's vibrant rendering of the "Russian Girl." When Feijoo first came to SFB in 1999, she was one of half a dozen dancers who could instantly capture your eye. Her passionate spark and technical prowess often kindled a bonfire. Now she seems a lone flame as the others (Yuri Possokhov, Joanna Berman, and Muriel Maffre, to mention a few) have retired or moved on. (Another, Tina LeBlanc, retired just last year, so her absence has yet to sink in.) Personally, I would love to see an out of control forest fire raging from wing to wing, orchestra pit to the fly space as the corps de ballet ignites, though not in this ballet.

"Stravinsky Violin Concerto" comes next, followed by "Theme and Variations." I would have preferred reversing the program order completely, starting with the very classical 'Theme' and closing with the transcendent "Serenade," so I could

float out of the theater. The dancers again are striving so hard for perfection of step and position that they forget to dance, to explore the nuances of movement and music, to sing the melodies inherent in the choreography. The technical achievement, however, needs to be coupled with the same level of artistry in order for the company to come alive and engage the audience on more than one level. But that involves taking risks and obviously the dancers are not encouraged to put themselves on the line and push for even more important goals.



San Francisco Ballet in Christopher Wheeldon's "Ghosts." Photo ©Erik Tomasson and courtesy San Francisco Ballet.

Two days earlier, on February 9, Christopher Wheeldon premiered his "Ghosts," to a score by C.F. Kip Winger. The crowd loved this very atmospheric ballet. In the dim light, dressed in beautiful costumes, the dancers move fluidly, giving a lot of kinesthetic satisfaction. What "Ghosts" lacks is a *raison d'être* and an overarching choreographic structure. Without a compelling narrative, and it is Wheeldon's prerogative not to have one, it is all the more pressing an issue to create a clearly defined form for an abstract dance.

Wheeldon joined New York City Ballet in 1993 as a dancer, began choreographing for it in 1997, and retired from the stage in 2000 to concentrate on dance-making, serving as City Ballet's resident choreographer until 2008. After 15 years of Balanchine immersion, as well as a lot of exposure to Jerome Robbins, I would have expected more to have rubbed off on him. Not stylistically, but in terms of craft. Was he sitting in the back of the class daydreaming or passing notes? Maybe he played hooky a lot or just was a know-it-all.

Regardless, he did not read those chapters on Balanchine or take the opportunity for serious study in a veritable hot house of choreographic wealth. Perhaps he was handed too much too soon, and crowned the new wonder boy without having put in the years of apprenticeship necessary in the training for a master in his art.