

The Australian Ballet in New York City

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The Australian Ballet, founded in 1962, is by international standards a relatively youthful company. Since 1965 the group has been performing around the world, and on its current tour of the United States has received considerable critical acclaim. Beginning with a series of performances at New York City's City Center, the company is presenting the works of four young Australian choreographers, reflecting a commitment to promoting the endeavors of a fresh generation of artists.

The Friday evening program consisted of three works, two by Australians and one by a well-known contemporary choreographer. The program provided the audience with an opportunity to view a range of styles, in terms of movement, composition and theme. While the dancers' technical adeptness carried the pieces with ease and genuine sensitivity, my reaction to the individual works was mixed.

The opening piece, *In the Middle Somewhat Elevated*, premiered in 1987, in a performance by the Paris Opera Ballet. It was choreographed by William Forsythe, current director of the Ballett Frankfurt, whose other well-known works include *Artifact* (1984), *Limb's Theorem* (1991) and *The Loss of Small Detail* (1991). These form part of the repertoire of major companies such as the New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet and the Royal Ballet.

In the Middle Somewhat Elevated weaves an array of shifting spatial patterns. Nine dancers, costumed in simple green leotards and tights, are set against a bare stage illuminated by a plain wash of light that fills the entire space. Forsythe integrates an unusual placing of quartets with duets, solo figures with trios and duets with duets into a stylized vocabulary of movement. Sharp, angular footwork and leg extensions are combined both with more supple upper torso movements, and with movements as intense as the footwork. Buoyant, tight jumps, pointed lunges, turns and hip swirls alternate with the dancers simply walking through the space. Groups of dancers in the far right and left extremities of the stage, who would normally be considered “off-stage,” challenge notions that a performance space has rigid boundaries.

The movement quality is tense and evocative, while the simple costumes and set design strip away excess

adornments, allowing the audience to see the body as a pure instrument. The dynamic, however, changes little throughout, flattening the work as a whole. The score by Thom Willems, which consists of a din of electronic sounds, interspersed with bursts of synthesized climaxes, is used somewhat unimaginatively. Particularly towards the end, the synchronization of the “elevated” moments—large leaps and fiery jumps—with the music, render them predictable. Because of Forsythe's excessive concentration on spatial arrangements, the work lacks a certain cohesion.

The next ballet on the program was choreographed by Stephen Baynes, a resident choreographer with the Australian Ballet since 1995, who has recently been commissioned by several Australian dance companies to create new works. *At the Edge of Night* (1997) was a welcome break from Forsythe's piece. Set to seven Rachmaninov preludes between Opus 23 and 32, it proved to be a rich and warm exploration of human interactions and emotions, revolving around themes of love, distance, loneliness and youthful excitement.

The set comprises a series of structures or “flats”, representing entrances to a room. In the center stands a chair under a square of light. The shadowy, yellow lighting and flowing, earth-tone dancers' dresses envelop the stage, transforming the mood in the entire theater.

In the opening and closing sections, a lone woman is counterposed to a group, in which the dancers are paired into couples. While the solo female also finds a male companion, dancing in unison with the other couples, her positioning in relation to the group communicates a sense of separation and isolation. A duet between this dancer and her partner, comprising one of the middle sections, is dynamic and sensitive. Leaning over in her chair, the couple begins a dance of tense willfulness towards one another. At one point, the woman stands on top of the chair, with her partner supporting her as the wooden legs tip over on their side and spin. The moment is completely free from awkwardness. But the end, where the male leaves and the woman turns back to watch his departure, is a little clichéd.

Another duet transmits a different feeling. Two lovers, a man and a woman, are caught in a moment of intense and

unexpected intimacy. The ballet develops around a series of interactions where the woman runs and the man chases, finally catching her. While the sequencing is a bit overdone, the turns that spill to the floor, light lifts and pulls away from one another lend a genuine sweetness to the dance. The use of rolls and curves in the upper body, not part of the normal classical vocabulary, is a dynamic addition to more conventional leg and foot work, rooted in the set steps and positions of ballet.

In my opinion, Baynes' thematic choices fall a bit short. His portrayal of male/female relations is somewhat hackneyed, particularly in the second duet. The woman is flighty and flirtatious, the man persistent. She eventually relents, as we knew she always intended to do. In both duets the final passionate embrace is overdramatic. Such themes are often seen in ballet, and in this case, they were not developed in a more textured or complex manner. Nevertheless, given what Baynes chose to explore, his choreography was evocative and the dancers' performance made it a pleasure to watch.

The evening's closing work, *Rites* (1997) was the result of a joint effort on the part of the Australian Ballet and the Bangarra Dance Theater. Created by Stephen Page, principal choreographer with the Bangarra Dance Theater since 1991, its aesthetic impetus lies in Australian Aboriginal dance forms. The vocabulary of these forms consists of a range of movements involving flexed knees and feet, crouched body positions and pulsating arm movements, mimicking animal movements as well as reflecting aspects of the tempo and conditions of primitive nomadic life.

Page used this vocabulary to explore the elemental components—Earth, Wind, Fire, Water—of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. There was a strong tie between Stravinsky's discordant notes and the angularity of the choreography.

The dance is divided into four sections. The stage is covered throughout with a light dirt, giving it an otherworldly quality. At the back is a V-shaped platform raised above the floor. This imposing structure is veiled behind a scrim—a piece of black material that is rather opaque, but still see-through. The scrim creates the sensation of an almost empyrean distance separating what lies behind from what is in front. The ledge is occupied by different figures bathed in their own wash of shadowy light. They seem to embody the element being depicted, in dance, on the other side. The ballet continually returns to an interplay between the dancers and the figure behind the scrim.

The first section, *Earth*, starts with the dancers, wearing dark, ruddy-colored costumes, clumped in a mass on the floor. A figure with body paint rises in the light above the squirming bodies. Smoke fills the stage. The bodies begin to move on and out from the floor, squatting, arms shifting.

Sensual upper body movements accompany kicks, swings and jumps.

In *Fire*, a male dancer, after performing a duet with the “guru” Djakapurra Munyarryun, goes through a type of initiation rite that ends in a sacrificial offering of his body to the sky. *Water* begins with a transfixing sequence of dancers, their bodies in white paint, moving forward in waves, stepping through and over each other. They dance with steaming cauldrons placed in circular patterns on the stage. There is a cleansing ritual towards the end.

I was impressed with how well the Australian Ballet dancers were able to shed the rigidity inherent in classical training and free up the use of their bodies. In general, though, the choreography did little to further a more sophisticated exploration of the ballet's chosen theme. Neither the movement vocabulary nor the performance quality altered much from section to section, even though *Rites* traversed different natural elements. Tempos shifted but the dynamic did not. There was an overarching emphasis on heaviness and fluidity.

Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, with its immense texture and emotionality, seemed ill suited to the choreography. The music dominated the dance, which was unable to develop with the famous score in a symbiotic manner.

Moreover, the way in which the primitiveness running through the piece was dealt with seemed to reinforce stereotypical conceptions about tribalism and native life. The steaming cauldrons, the smoke, the “guru” walking with a cane, the mystical figures behind the scrim, depicted little that was original or challenging about the spiritual domain or social existence of Australia's native population. The choreographer's stated aim was to create a work that debunked “preconceptions about indigenous peoples,” but *Rites* seemed to appeal to many well-established assumptions.

The Australian Ballet deserves a good deal of credit for providing the opportunity for a new generation of choreographers to enter what is a rather exclusive world. The limitations in their work, their reliance on conventional tools to express what are complex ideas and emotions, reflect not merely individual weaknesses, but trends that predominate in many areas of contemporary dance. All three choreographers whose works were presented in this program have definite talents that will hopefully develop and mature.



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