

Oakland Ballet Company review: Witty and eclectic

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With a bill determined to divert, the Oakland Ballet Company returned to the boards Thursday evening at the wonderfully intimate Laney College Theater. The program has its ups and downs, but the latter don't take up much time, the 12 dancers are fresh and frisky, and the sheer eclecticism of the fare suggests that new Artistic Director Graham Lustig is open to all stylistic possibilities.

So there's hope, notably for female choreographers whom Lustig has pledged to nurture during his tenure. The evening's major premiere, Sonya Delwaide's "...," may leave the viewer as speechless as its creator's title. You might describe this opus by the transplanted Québécoise dancemaker as a hallucinatory physical comedy for six dancers, set mostly to eerie Mozart glass harmonica music and dominated by a chandelier out of "Ballet Imperial." Brandon Freeman, absolutely indispensable on Thursday, and Jacob Kreamer launch it all with a courtly exchange that degenerates into a rough tussle. Throughout, one finds Delwaide subverting codified social exchanges with a wink. An inventive waltz trio brimmed with kinetic wit.

Amy Seiwert made the case for upholding neoclassical ideals with a revised version of her splendid "Response to Change," in which Mason Bates' eventful score propels an octet of dancers through intimate encounters that test techniques to the limit. The breathless pace and Seiwert's high extensions and shifting balances occasionally brought the dancers to the brink of chaos.

Lustig introduced two widely contrasting essays. The pop effusion "Vista," which propelled 11 dancers in bathing suits through slouchy numbers (music: the Lounge Lizards), was the better bet, especially for its spirited delivery. But the premiere, "Wordswithinwords," was an indigestible stew that tosses Philip Glass' piano music, a Robert Duncan poem and floor maneuvers into the same pot. Orating and dancing, Freeman and Sharon Wehner did their best to make it work.

Oakland Ballet Company: Dances by Lustig, Delwaide, Seiwert. 3 and 8 p.m. today. Laney College Theater, 900 Fallon St., Oakland. \$15-\$38. (800) 838-3006. www.brownpapertickets.org.

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