



The Oakland Ballet's Gregory DeSantis (left) and Christopher Moulton in Amy Seiwert's "Les Biches."
Photo: David DeSilva, Oakland Ballet

Oakland Ballet review: Revivals vary

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Nostalgia isn't what it used to be - except at the Oakland Ballet Company.

This longtime pillar of dance in the East Bay has, under choreographer Graham Lustig, gone through a rebirth the past few years. Last weekend, at the Malonga Casquelord Center for the Arts, Lustig realized a long cherished and much postponed dream for the troupe, "Diaghilev Imagery," a mixed bill program inspired by the legendary impresario Sergei Diaghilev and the works created for his legendary Ballets Russes.

What we got Friday evening were dances prompted by Bronislava Nijinska's "Les Biches" (Amy Seiwert) and Michel Fokine's "Spectre de la

Rose" (Robert Moses), as well as Lustig's 2011 version of "Pulcinella."

The irony of the whole affair is that, under former artistic director Ronn Guidi, Oakland produced brilliant, reputation-making revivals of "Les Biches" and "Spectre," and nothing in the two new works, both by creditable choreographers, could efface or supplant memories of the original. However, because Léonide Massine's original 1920 choreography for "Pulcinella" has not survived, Lustig wielded more artistic license than the others and devised a sprightly and swiftly moving narrative, often at one with the Stravinsky score, heard here in complete form.

Massine's revival of the stock commedia dell'arte characters and the composer's borrowings from Pergolesi generate a knockabout comedy, which in Lustig's version focuses entirely on Puccinella's amorous activities. To make sure that we did not lose track of who's cheating on whom behind all the masks and the multiple cases of mistaken identities, a supertitled running synopsis flashed from the top of the proscenium.

Lustig takes credit for designing the snazzy 17th century costumes, all in black and white, and he has coached his young, 10-member cast to fuse character and technique. Gregory DeSantis' quicksilver technique enlivened Pulcinella; Bryon Ketron and Vincent Chavez radiated kinetic wit as two unwanted suitors. Ana Robles, Sharon Wehner and Ramana Kelley brought flirtatious zest to the women in their lives.

Nijinska's sophisticated attitude about the social mores of her age, the delicate Marie Laurencin decor of the original and Poulenc's enchanting score made "Les Biches" (1924) one of the most perfect of the Diaghilev creations. Here was a world of feeling and desire in a South of France

house party, and the mood, teasing and ambiguous about sexuality, seemed to define an era.

Seiwert has reduced all this to a crude, frenetic, mate-swapping, contemporary farce, abridging the Poulenc music and aiming for easy laughs. From the original scenario, she borrows the two women who discover that they attract each other, the hostess with a pearl necklace and an unexpected visitor (The Girl Not in Blue, an allusion to the Nijinska character) who fascinates the guys.

Sharon Wehner (in orange) on pointe made much of the angular movement scheme. But as the choreography of the original swam before my eyes, I realized how banal this updating was.

Moses, one of this community's leading modernists, fared poorly in his "Bloom" duet. Frequent arm movements and much rolling around the floor could not compare with Fokine's classic sexual fantasy. Chavez and Kelley tried hard to bring a measure of sensuality to this misbegotten effort.

Allan Ulrich is The San Francisco Chronicle's dance correspondent.

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