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Oakland Ballet review: Oakland connections

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Published 4:12 pm, Sunday, May 18, 2014

"Oaklandesque" is not an adjective in common usage, but if Graham Lustig has his way, this admission of the singularity of the city across the bay should soon find a place in the vocabulary of dance practitioners and dance audiences.

For last weekend's spring concert by the Oakland Ballet Company, artistic director Lustig hit upon the idea of producing a series of four premieres, involving choreographers, dancers or musicians with some connection to the neighborhood, all to be performed by members of his troupe. As seen Saturday evening at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, this quest for diversity was appealing and occasionally rousing, even if classical ballet (which these youngsters should be primarily performing, rather than street dance, funk or postmodernism) was only sporadically in evidence.

Ballet did surface in Molissa Fenley's "Redwood Park," the Mills College-based modernist's first group piece for men (Emily Karr subbed for one of the guys Saturday). Fenley's ferocity of attack, so prominent in her solo dances, is here supplanted by a kind of formalist serenity, as the dancers (Vincent Chavez, Evan Flood, Marte Madera and Matthew Roberts) fanned out, arms reaching, legs cleaving the air. Fenley is careful about transitions as Karr finesses her way through a series of passés and glissades.

Evidently, Fenley (like many modernists) first set "Redwood Park" on her own troupe. She was guided throughout by Joan Jeanrenaud's percussion score, performed beguilingly by Nava Dunkleman and Anna Wray. The movement patterns remained pristine till the end, and the dancers seemed stretched in all the right ways.

Another Mills faculty member, Sonya Delwaide, whipped up a confection called "Rocky Road" (an ice cream flavor devised in this city), inspired by the recordings of famed jazz pianist and former Oakland resident Earl "Fatha" Hines. This slick entertainment revels in squiggly unisons and a series of duets that form like magic and then drift into oblivion. Evan Flood courts Sharon Wehner in a perky duet, which charms you into submission.

Delwaide also created an episode for two members of Axis, Oakland's renowned mixed abilities dance company. Invite Sonshérée Giles and Joel Brown to any party, and the temperature will inevitably rise. The pair lent a kind of jazzy unpredictability to "Rocky Road"; Delwaide's style is a bit too academic to capture Hines' improvisatory elan.

Spontaneity is not one of Robert Moses' problems in "TIP," an acronym for "Thumpin' and Plunkin," a phrase coined by bass guitarist Larry Graham. The dancers begin facing upstage and then the piece flies off in a series of explosive duets and trios, marked by daring lifts and intense floor work, with a sensational coda by Roberts to wrap it up. It's all fine, but you can't help feeling that Moses does not push these dancers quite as much as he drives the members of his own company.

The street met the ballet studio in the finale, Lustig's "Turfland," which enlisted the services of Garion "Noh-Justice" Morgan and Rayshawn "Looney" Thompson, members of the urban dance troupe Turf Feinz, who specialize in an indigenous kind of movement.

The pair's dark glasses and verbalizations yielded to a goofy spectacle in which, among other events, women in tutus were lifted high above the crowd. Samuel Renaissance's alluring paintings of Oakland adorned the stage, but the motion-capture stuff is so yesterday.

At Lustig's invitation, the performance continued on the street, where dancing and community spirit reigned. An apt conclusion to the Oakland Ballet Company's 49th season and a healthy sign that there will be a 50th.

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