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# Dance review: Oakland Ballet's cavalcade of 50 years

By Allan Ulrich Updated 3:26 pm, Sunday, May 24, 2015



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Emily Kerr and Taurean Green dance the premiere of Betsy Erickson's "A Moment — a Lifetime."



No director can sum up the history of a ballet company in a little over two hours, but **Graham Lustig** came close Saturday afternoon at the Paramount. 

A host of Bay Area dance luminaries filled the auditorium, signaling that the company in the past was a significant presence on the arts scene. With this gala, Lustig clearly hopes that the future will be equally as bright.

"Five Decades of Dance" was a classy undertaking. Lustig's concise welcome was the only speech of the day. Rare photographs and vintage costumes were on display throughout the Paramount.

Onstage, the 17 numbers followed each other smoothly. On the minus side, most of the revivals were performed without their original decor and, except in two places, recorded music was the order of the day.

Lustig's masterstroke was dividing the past and present of the troupe. Founding artistic director **Ronn Guidi**, whose bow occasioned an outpouring of affection from the audience, built the company's reputation on the resurrection of historical material, much but not all of it deriving from Sergei Diaghilev's **Ballet Russes**, and we got some carefully coached bits from that repertoire.

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Nostalgia worked its insidious magic. **Lydia McRae** evoked a bygone era with her bounding hostes from **Bronislava Nijinska's** "Les Biches," **Daphne Lee** and Tyler Rhoads captivated in the Can Can from **Léonide Massine's** "La Boutique Fantasque" (and what a delight to see the original **André Derain** backdrop again). **Evan Flood** tried hard to bring pathos to **Mikhail Fokine's** Petrouchka, accompanied by the Patience Gordon's ballerina. Guest Gabriel Williams offered a riveting "Billy the Kid" solo. Sharon Wiener and **Taurean Green** brought a sweet romantic quality to a pas de deu from Guidi's "**The Secret Garden**," set to Elgar's "Nimrod" Variation.

But too many of the excerpts suffered from being yanked out of context. Though staged by Ronn Guidi's original pair, the duet from "Le Train Bleu" was too cute by half. **Michael Crawford's** Golden Slave needed more sinuosity to deal with **Alysa Chang's** Zobeide. The one complete ballet from that era, Nijinsky's "L'Après-midi d'un faune," prompted audience gasps for the radiant **Leor Bakst**. **Matthew Roberts** is on his way to capturing the erotic cravings of the title character. **Emily Kerr** was a credible chief nymph.

But it wasn't until the second half that Lustig's 14 dancers came into their own. The six commissions and two revivals said much for their versatility and much for the choreographers' musicality. **Amy Seiwert** went to Vivaldi for "Before It Begins," a merry quintet that tested the dancers' chops in its rapid combinations. **Michael Lowe's** impressive "Horse Head Strings" borrowed from Mongolian music and costuming and focused on a turbulent solo for Flood clad in shiny pajamas. **Betsy Erickson** returned to choreographing with "A Moment — A Lifetime," an unambiguously passionate pas de deux for Kerr and Taurean Green.

With Matthew Roberts, Kerr returned for an untitled premiere by **Robert Moses**, who choreographs against the grain of the serene Satie music (played live by Roy Bogas) with a

competitive pas de deux in which the balance of power is always changing. Lustig's premiere, "Luminaire," is a murky abstraction for nine that looks best when the women break free of the group and deliver delicate solos.

The revival of **Carlos Carvajal's** 1974 "Green" (to the score by **Toru Takemitsu**) resurrected a compelling and weighty trio for Crawford (terrific back muscles) who falls into a symmetrical trio for Gordon and McRae. **Alonzo King's** fierce 1999 "Love Dogs" (music: Poulenc) found McRae and Crawford shifting weight and transitioning into precarious lifts.

Another merry and busy piece by Val Caniparoli completed the program. The music for "Das Ballett" is Leopold Mozart's "Toy Symphony" and all those mechanical toots and whistles inspire a cockeyed number that demands advanced technical resources. The six performers made the work their own: They are the future of the Oakland Ballet. And that future looked bright on Saturday.

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

Oakland Ballet Company presents "East Bay Dances": 3 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., Sunday, May 24. **Ode Johnson Performing Arts Center, Laney College**, 800 Fallon St., Oakland. \$15-\$20. [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com) and at the door.

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