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Oakland Ballet Company
Paramount Theater
Oakland, CA

November 3, 2017

"Luna Mexicana" Program

Nahui-Ehekatl: *Blessing Ceremony*, Oakland Ballet Company: *Chaconne*, Ballet Folklórico Mexico Danza: *Viva la Vida! ...*, Mariachi Mexicanísimo: *various*, Oakland Ballet Company: *Luna Mexicana*

Bryn Namavari

For the second year, Oakland Ballet presented its "Luna Mexicana" program at the Paramount Theater in downtown Oakland. The show brought a cabaret feel to the 'traditional' setting of the Paramount, and in many ways was a lively street festival transported to the stage. While it is hard to put a finger on exactly what this show is other than to say it is a "revue," the audience showed a truly amazing appreciation for the programming and stood out as one of the most exuberant groups to attend a performance in the locale. The entire evening was enveloped in a sense of pageantry: a *mélange* of traditions, exhibition and celebration. Many audience members embraced the spirit of the night arriving in fancy dress including painted faces, vibrant floral headdresses and even full-length gowns.



(<http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp->

content/uploads/2017/11/Oakland.Maxwell-Simoes-Emily-Kerr-Sharon-Kung-Leilani-Neal-Coral-Martin.Graham-Lustigs.Luna-Mexicana.Photo-by-Steven-Teixeira._Oakland-Ballet_2017-e1510337509711.jpg)

Oakland Ballet Company dancers
(l-r) Maxwell Simoes, Emily Kerr,
Sharon Kung, Leilani Neal, and Coral Martin
in Graham Lustig's "Luna Mexicana"
Photo by Steven Teixeira

The program's repertoire expressed a love for romantic ballet while maintaining a focus on more traditional Mexican folk culture. Opening the show was the Aztec ensemble Nahui-Ehekatl ('Wind Sun', or the Second Sun from the Five Suns described in the creation myth of the Aztec and other Nahua peoples). Performing a *Blessing Ceremony*, the troop was adorned in absolutely stunning costuming head-to-toe, including plumed headdresses, animal skulls, masks, elaborate make-up, and brightly colored, graphic-patterned shields, collars and breast plates. Four drummers accompanied the choreography (by Hugo Cil, Juan Gonzalez, Jose Estava, Eloisa Madrigal, Marisol Soliz, Alex Garcia, Rocio Ramirez, Mayra Hernandez), while a number of male dancers blew conch shells at regular intervals and all the company added a tumult of rhythmic stomping 'rain' with their Ayoyotes (ankle rattles made from a set of hard shells from the ayayote or chachavote tree).

The second piece of the evening brought a comparatively more classical ballet ambiance with *Chaconne*, a solo performed by Oakland Ballet's Ramona Kelley. Accompanied live by violinist Terrie Baune, this minimalist piece was a stark and more somber/European homage to the themes of the evening. The J.S. Bach score and simple black costuming set against a monochrome turquoise lighting scheme brought laser focus to the restrained and subdued musicality of the choreography. Jose Limon's choreography feels respectful, but perhaps not equal in passion and inspiration as the lauds and honors heaped upon Bach's piece, *Chaconne from Partita #2 in D Minor for Unaccompanied Violin*, which has been hailed by violinist Joshua Bell as "not only one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It's a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect." Baune played the piece with not only technical adeptness, but exceptional spirit.



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Oakland.Ramona-Kelley.Terrie-Baune-violin.Jose-Limons-Chaconne.2.Photo-by-Steven-Teixeira._Oakland-Ballet_November-2017-e1510364324713.jpg)

Oakland Ballet Company dancer Ramona Kelley,
with Terrie Baune on violin,
in Jose Limon's "Chaconne"
Photo by Steven Teixeira

Oscillating back toward more boisterous merrymaking and stylized drama, the third compilation of pieces, *¡Viva la Vida!...*, a "Revolucion Suite" created by Amalia Danza and adapted by Martin Romero, centers around a series of mini-narratives on themes of 'love, war, passion, envy, and death', and of the men, women and children who lost their lives and whose spirits rise again to join the living in a series of nine vignettes. The second vignette saw a row of headstones on the stage, and as if from beneath muted shrouds a group of children rose: the audience caught its breath, and then erupted in cheers and applause. The viewers reveled in the synchronized large group choreography, the often humorous moments interwoven throughout, the spirited machete fights, and the multitude of characters that made their appearances. Drawing on a sense of kinship and ancestry, the choreography had a charming vernacular feel. The costuming was over-the-top in the best possible way, including devils in buckhide chaps, elaborate calacas (masks) and calaveras (skull) face painting, twirling multi-colored skirts, and what can only be described as 'bad-ass' women with rifles.



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Oakland.Ramona-Kelley.Graham-Lustig.Photo-Steven-Teixeira.-as-LunaLuna-Mexicana_Luna_Oakland-Ballet_2017-e1510337229241.jpg)

Oakland Ballet Company dancer Ramona Kelley
in Graham Lustig's "Luna Mexicana"
Photo by Steven Teixeira

Breaking up the dance performances, Mariachi Mexicanismo stole the entire show. Each of the ensemble's members proved to be multi-talented, playing either violin, trumpet, guitar, guitarron or vihuela and singing in stunning, clear voices. In their matching black jackets with emblazoned sleeves, pants with gold tuxedo-stripe embellishments and taupe sombreros, their polished traditional outfits only helped highlight their incredible voices, professionalism, and deft playing.



(http://criticaldance.org/wpnew/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Oakland.Emily-Kerr-and-Richard-Link.Graham-Lustigs-Luna-Mexicana.Photo-by-Steven-Teixeira._Bride-and-Groom_Oakland-Ballet_2017-e1510337388330.jpg)

Oakland Ballet Company dancers Emily Kerr and Richard Link
in Graham Lustig's "Luna Mexicana"
Photo by Steven Teixeira

The closing piece brought Oakland Ballet back to the stage with Kelley as Luna (and undoubtedly the standout of the cast) in Artistic Director Graham Lustig's *Luna Mexicana*. While embodying the essence of the rest of the evening and Lustig's nod to the origins and traditions of Dia De Los Muertos, overall, the piece unfortunately lacked the purity of the other pieces, and therefore the power of the rest of the program. The music 'mash-up' compilation disjointed the whole and, lacking fluidity, made the choreography feel a bit forced. Lustig's skeletons seemed undecided whether they were awkward and comical, or graceful. Landis Dixon appeared miscast as the Deer Solo: his statuesque frame lacking the slightness and nimble agility one would generally associate with a deer. The costuming and set, however, were strong points and included an elaborate ofrenda (an altar honoring the deceased often decorated with calaveras, Aztec marigolds, photos of deceased loved ones, candles and offerings of food) enhanced with large, brightly-colored projections across the back of the stage. Despite its few technical flaws, the piece was a fitting close to the show, ending the night with the full cast and a lively Hat Dance.

The night’s enchanting sense of community, collaboration and folksy exuberance was infectious. What the evening may have lacked in overall ‘professional’ dance dynamism it made up for in enthusiasm, exuberance and highly-spirited festival atmosphere. In the setting of the Paramount, with its gilded ornamentation, gold mirrors, and art deco adornments, there was a palpable sense of giddy delight – as if being transported to another place and time.

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