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Oakland Ballet gamble has hits and misses

By Allan Ulrich Updated 1:40 pm, Monday, April 18, 2016



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Gregory DiSantis (left), Brent



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Graham Lustig, the artistic director of the **Oakland Ballet** Company, takes chances that you must admire, even if the results of his efforts fall short of the ideal. He is celebrating the troupe's 51st season with a program offering two world premieres and a West Coast premiere (Lustig's own "Stone of Hope"), all set to live choral music, performed by three local organizations. The package, "A Cappella — Our Bodies Sing," opened Thursday, April 14, at Oakland's **Malonga Casquelord Theater** and (another Lustig gamble) will tour next week.

Lustig has a habit of recruiting some of the Bay Area's finer independent dance talents to his cause, and he has done it again by commissioning the **Janice Garrett**-Charles Moulton team to create "Divining," which is simply too fine to vanish after the next two weeks. The music — vocal excerpts by 12th century composer **Hildegard von Bingen**, dispatched splendidly by Vajra Voices — was the most substantial of the evening and the only piece that seemed a parallel creation with the choreography.

The devotional nature of "Divining" emerged early in the reaching arms, clasped hands and descents to the floor and repeated hoisting of women. Garrett-Moulton structured the piece as a series of duets and trios, as dancers rush on and disperse. Key moments suggest transcendence. There's no mistaking the meaning of **Alysia Chang**'s kneeling and splayed fingers or the ritual passion of a duet for **Emily Kerr** and **Vincent Chavez**. Yet there's nothing lugubrious about "Divining": It really moves.

Most remarkable was the quality of the dancing; the piece seems to have galvanized the 12 dancers. And here Lustig had a surprise: He has hired Cuban-born **Rudy Candia**, one of the outstanding dancers from the defunct **Silicon Valley Ballet**. **Patty Ann Farrell** designed the mottled lighting. Christopher Dunn's costumes for the men — brown pants with very high waists — should be reconsidered if "Divining" is ever revived.

Val Caniparoli, one of the Bay Area's busiest choreographers, seemed to be channeling **Paul Taylor** in the opening number, "Beautiful Dreamer," accompanied by eight **Stephen Foster** songs. That is fine, if you have Paul Taylor dancers. Thursday, arms

juttled and circled, bodies rolled, unisons and canons prevailed. Tugs-of-war were prominent. But the tone varied uncertainly between sentimentality and irony.

Caniparoli seemed limited by the dancers' variable techniques, especially in the awkward lifts and slipping balances. Candia and Coral Martin did well in the title song, Brent Whitney made something of "Why No One to Love." The Berkeley Community Chamber Singers sounded unpolished, to say the least.

"Revelations Redux" might have been a more suitable title for "Stone of Hope." We had African American spirituals, rendered lustily onstage by Nona Brown and the Inspirational Music Collective. We had dancers, arms stretched, moving in masses; we had slides across the stage. None of it approached Alvin Ailey's intensity or choreographic pedigree.

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

Oakland Ballet Company: "A Cappella — Our Bodies Sing." Dances by Graham Lustig, Val Caniparoli, Janice Garrett and Charles Moulton. 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, April 16. Malonga Casquelord Center for the Arts, 1428 Alice St., Oakland. \$20-\$50. 8 p.m. Thursday, April 21. Brava Theater Center, 2781 24th St, S.F. \$20-\$50. 8 p.m. next Saturday, April 23. Reed L. Buffington Performing Arts Center, Chabot College, 25555 Hesperian Blvd., Hayward. (510) 893-3132. www.oaklandballet.com.

To see the Oakland Ballet in action: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrPTsVmXuHg&feature=youtu.be

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